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# Liberalism and the Dilemma of Cultures

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# LIBERALISM AND THE DILEMMA OF CULTURES

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
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in

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by

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For Afton

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## Abstract

In this project, through a closer examination of the controversies over Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003), Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003) and Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003), I seek to identify the elements of a defensible postcolonial vision. While postcolonialism is afflicted with many problematic assumptions, the exclusively liberal perspective which these authors seek to reaffirm in its place has its own plethora of defects. Ali, Hosseini and Nafisi merit a closer attention not only for their exposing some of the flawed views underlying postcolonialism but also for their demonstrating why an unqualified reversion to liberalism may not still be the best way of dealing with and understanding the non-Western world.

The liberal perspective employed by Ali, Hosseini and Nafisi is particularly good at illuminating the problems entailed by postcolonialism and multiculturalism. The political and culturally relativistic views espoused by the latter not only distort the realities of the cultures they purport to defend but also mystify and thus help perpetuate the plight of many who are oppressed under the reign of traditional cultures. In the criticisms elicited by these narratives, however, we can see why completely dismissing the cultural and political insights of postcolonialism in favor of an exclusively liberal perspective may not be advisable. Conceiving of human beings as autonomous individuals first and foremost, liberalism either reduces cultures to superficial differences or opposes them as oppressive burdens; with such premises, liberalism can help us understand neither the attachments people have to their ethnic and religious cultures nor the sacrifices they are ready to make for their sake. Liberalism can expose the negative consequences of cultural forms of nationalism but cannot help us understand the important collective motives of cultural survival and economic modernization which underpin nationalism. We cannot properly understand these sentiments, attachments and aspirations unless we have

recourse to the problematic concept of cultures promoted by postcolonialism. A viable postcolonial vision will thus acknowledge the superiority of liberalism as a political system, while criticizing its drawbacks as a universal and individualistic conception of human nature.

## Introduction

The superiority of liberalism and liberal cosmopolitanism has become almost self-evident to many people not only in liberal Western societies but also in other parts of the world. Liberalism respects the autonomy of individuals and grants them the necessary liberties to craft and pursue their vision of the good life and human flourishing. Thus it frees individuals from the restrictions imposed on them by their cultures and communities and allows them not only to critically examine them but also to transcend and transgress them if they see fit. Furthermore liberalism insists on the equality of all human beings irrespective of their gender, religion or ethnicity and advocates for tolerance for and understanding of members of minority cultures and ethnicities. Thus it departs from the ethnocentric bent of parochial cultures which inherently denigrate people from other cultural and ethnic communities.

Given this manifest superiority, it is no wonder that liberalism and liberal humanism have attracted so many adherents around the world, particularly among people who have lived in non-liberal societies. These people particularly appreciate the superiority of a political system that allows individuals to critically examine and even question their inherited cultural customs and traditions and does not discriminate among its citizens on the basis of ethnicity, religion or gender. The writers and novelists that I examine in this project, Monica Ali, Khaled Hosseini, and Azar Nafisi, demonstrate the superiority of liberalism and liberal humanism by depicting the oppressive restrictions and inequalities non-liberal structures entail for individuals and minorities. In their narratives, either fictional or autobiographical, they vividly portray non-liberal cultural and political environments in which individual freedoms are oppressed and minorities, ethnic or religious, are denied equal rights. For good ethical reasons, these narratives have been warmly received by their critical and public readers in the West. *The Kite Runner*

(2003) and *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003) have been best-seller hits and *Brick Lane* (2003) has earned its author Ali considerable critical acclaim.

Besides widespread endorsement, however, these narratives have also received harsh reactions from some of their readers, particularly in the academia. What makes this critical and negative reaction particularly baffling is that it is launched on ethical grounds. At first glance, this criticism does not seem to make much sense. How could a liberal critique of political and cultural environments that oppress individual freedoms and ethnic and religious minorities be criticized as unethical, insensitive and reductive? These narratives help us understand and sympathize with the plight of individuals whose liberties or equal status have been denied. They are exemplary instances of the liberal virtues of critical and ethical thinking which show the inhumane and oppressive consequences of non-liberal regimes erected in accordance with a particular ethnic or cultural identity.

However, on closer inspection, the relevance and importance of these critical and negative reactions becomes clearer and more understandable. These attacks derive from the less publicized and more obscure objections that have been leveled against liberalism itself. The widespread, almost global, appeal of liberalism has obscured from view some of its inadequacies and shortcomings as they have been noted by its critics. Above all, critics of liberalism have objected to its implicit conception of the self which they perceive as impossibly universal and individualistic. The liberal conception of human nature, its communitarian critics argue, tolerates cultures but does not understand them. By reserving a very superficial place for cultures, liberalism misunderstands the centrality of cultures to the constitution of individual identities.

And by insisting on the universality of human nature, it overlooks the genuine plurality of cultures and ways of life.<sup>1</sup>

In this project, I argue for a closer attention to the charges leveled against liberalism and liberal humanism. A more careful consideration of this skeptical angle on liberalism would help us not just have tolerance for other cultures but also better understand the workings of cultures themselves. Contrary to communitarian opponents of liberalism, however, throughout this study, I highlight the abuses and inhumanities insistence on parochial cultures has inspired and justified. I agree with Ali, Hosseini, and Nafisi that in many instances, cultures are invoked to justify the oppression of individual freedoms and cultural and ethnic minorities. However, I also insist on the virtues of adding understanding to our critiques and condemnations of cultures as the reservoirs of bigotry, intolerance, coercion and racism.

Contrary to many of the criticisms published against the narratives I examine, I don't seek to chastise the authors for not portraying a historical, or political or cultural situation in a way that they "should have." Rather I try to understand many of the inadequacies and defects with which they have been charged as consequences of their deployment of a liberal perspective. The shortcomings noted by some of the critics of these narratives are connected with the blind spots of liberal humanism itself. By adopting a liberal perspective, Ali, Hosseini and Nafisi reproduce a characteristically liberal critique that suffers from the fundamental shortcomings of the liberal and liberal humanist worldview.

Given the inhumane and oppressive purposes for which cultures have been invoked, it is no wonder that any acknowledgment of their importance should make us uneasy. However, ignoring

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<sup>1</sup> For communitarian critiques of liberalism, see the anthology edited by Micahel Sandel, *Liberalism and its Critics*. New York: New York University Press, 1984.

cultures, as liberalism seeks to do, does not make the problems, frictions and animosities they generate disappear. It might only serve to reinforce a one-sided liberal angle that by definition misunderstands cultures. Although it may sound counterintuitive, nevertheless it might be worth considering that understanding cultures might be the first step in helping us better cope with the inhumanities their clashes might cause. In fact, one of the main claims of the argument I advance in this project is that true recognition of centrality of cultures and their genuine plurality depends upon particular experiences that many of us have not undergone. The global primacy of liberalism has only reinforced our lack of awareness of the importance of cultures.

Acknowledging the importance and plurality of cultures thus helps us understand motivations and anxieties that are not properly appreciated by liberalism and liberal humanism. Thus understanding cultures may compliment and improve our search for more humane and peaceful ways of living together.

## I

Liberalism has consistently prided itself on tolerance. Contrary to religious, ethnic and national cultures that only promote the superiority of their own parochial systems and ethnocentrically deride others as inferior and degraded, liberalism insists on the universality of humanity and promotes the equality of people from other cultures and ethnicities. Instead of reaffirming the naturalness and superiority of parochial religious, ethnic and national cultural values, it insists on their contingent and constructed nature and limited and local scope. Instead of construing differences from our cultural norms as signs of inferiority and savagery, liberalism seeks to expand our tolerance for and understanding of them as equally human.

Trained only by our own cultures, liberal cosmopolitans argue, we are likely to be intolerant of other cultures; we are likely to deny the equal humanity of people who practice a different religion or belong to a different ethnicity. This is because we take the values and principles of our own cultural surroundings for granted and regard them as normative and natural for all human beings. Liberalism seeks to question this natural proclivity toward ethnocentrism. It wants us to recognize the underlying and equal humanity we share across our cultural and ethnic differences. By recognizing the equal and universal humanity of people from different cultures and ethnicities, we realize what we have in common with them. We will no longer be limited by the blind spots of our parochial cultures and better understand and respect what is truly human in both our cultures and those of others.

The liberal argument for tolerance and cosmopolitanism is clearly expressed by the philosopher Martha Nussbaum in *Cultivating Humanity*. Nussbaum defines cosmopolitan tolerance as the ideal of a world citizen “whose primary loyalty is to human beings the world over, and whose national, local, and varied group loyalties are considered distinctly secondary” (9). Elaborating on this ideal, which she singles out as the most important objective of a liberal education, Nussbaum says:

The invitation to consider ourselves citizens of the world is the invitation to become, to a certain extent, philosophical exiles from our own ways of life, seeing them from the vantage point of the outsider and asking the questions an outsider is likely to ask about their meaning and function. ... a stance of detachment from uncritical loyalty to one’s own ways promotes the kind of evaluation that is truly reason based. When we see in how many ways people can organize their lives we will recognize ... what is deep and what is shallow in our own ways, and will consider that “the only real community is one that embraces the world.” In other words, the true basis for human association is not the arbitrary or the merely habitual; it is that which we can defend as good for human beings.  
...

The accident of where one is born is just that, an accident; any human being might have been born in any nation. Recognizing this, we should not allow differences of nationality

or class or ethnic membership or even gender to erect barriers between us and our fellow human beings. We should recognize humanity—and its fundamental ingredients, reason and moral capacity—wherever it occurs, and give that community of humanity our first allegiance. . . .

One should always behave so as to treat with respect the dignity of reason and moral choice in every human being, no matter where that person was born, no matter what that person's rank or gender status may be. (58-59)

Here Nussbaum like many other cosmopolitan liberals argues that we should not take at face value the values and conventions of our particular cultures and ethnic groups; doing so would lead us to be intolerant of and bigoted toward other cultures and ethnicities. Instead we should recognize our culture and community as one among many others that exist in the world and understand the norms and values of our culture as “an outsider” may do. To an outsider, our culture would not appear “natural” and “normal.” Considering our culture, he/she would realize how we have naturalized and universalized our contingent and constructed norms and values. Once we realize the diversity of ways in which people have tried to “organize their lives,” we recognize what is truly human i.e. universal, in our culture and what is not.

In his famous essay, “Imaginary Homelands,” the Indian author and novelist Salman Rushdie makes a similar argument and explains how displacement from his original culture into England has enabled him like other exile writers to see the contingent and invented nature of cultures and cultural truths. Being “at one and the same time insiders and outsiders in this society [i.e. England],” displaced Indian writers, Rushdie argues, are granted “a kind of double perspective,” a “stereoscopic vision” (19). Unlike insiders of English society, Rushdie argues, exiles and displaced immigrants like himself do not take at face value and naturalize their identities as English. Looking at the English society from the “double perspective” of an outsider reveals its contingent and constructed nature. Existing on the margins of English society and away from

their own original cultures, displaced immigrants, Rushdie argues, realize “the provisional nature of all [cultural] truths and certainties” (12). In other words, existing in between two different cultures helps these exiles and immigrant authors realize both the multiplicity of cultures and their contingent and provisional nature. Displacement has enabled these individuals to realize, as Nussbaum puts it, “in how many different ways people can organize their lives” and consequently recognize “what is deep and what is shallow” in their own cultures (58).

This is an important insight with far-reaching ethical implications. It realizes the natural tendency in individuals to universalize the values of their parochial cultures and ethnic groups and dismiss any departure from those values as a mark of inferiority and subhumanity. It invites us to respect the humanity of those who are different from us and thus enlarges our inherited conception of humanity. We not only become aware of the existence of other cultures but also become respectful toward their members. Having become aware of such cultural differences, we realize what we share with other people as equal members of the universal human community. Besides its ethical virtues, liberal cosmopolitanism helps us transcend the narrow boundaries of our cultures and understand and respect what is truly human across cultures.

We can see these humanistic premises at work in one of the most notable texts in contemporary cultural studies i.e. Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. Said takes issue with Orientalism for two main reasons, one epistemological and the other ethical. By insisting on “an ontological and epistemological distinction” between the Orient and the Occident (2), Orientalism not only naturalizes cultural and civilizational identities but also promotes the dehumanization of the essentially different and uncivilized Orientals. Instead of showing the contingency of such cultural and civilizational divisions, Orientalism reinforces them and treats them as if they signified discrete essences (5). By insisting on the reality of cultural and civilizational boundaries

between the Orient and the Occident, Orientalism not only keeps Westerners from seeing the constructed and contingent nature of their own cultural identity but also promotes an ethnocentric denigration of the inferior and other Orientals. The fundamental question raised by Orientalism, Said argues, has to do with the ethical consequences of cultural classifications at work in discourses such as Orientalism.

Can one divide human reality, as indeed human reality seems to have genuinely divided, into clearly different cultures, histories, traditions, societies, even races, and survive the consequences humanly. By surviving the consequences humanly, I mean to ask whether there is any way of avoiding the hostility expressed by the division, say, of men into “us” (Westerners) and “they” (Orientals). (45)

Orientalists are condemned by Said because they unabashedly and ethnocentrically insist on the existence of such cultural and territorial boundaries. Insisting on such cultural and civilizational boundaries is unethical, Said argues, because it separates and divides human beings into a privileged “us” and an essentially different and often inferior “them.” Particular notions of identity, Said argues, are inherently dehumanizing because they require the denigration of other people and cultures as inferior and subhuman (332). Orientalists, Said maintains, deserve blame because instead of questioning such dehumanizing constructions of other cultures, they encouraged and reinforced them. In contrast to Orientalists, Said praises humanists who transcend the limitations, prejudices and exclusions of their own cultures and respect humanity wherever it occurs. He delineates the detached and universal humanist position which he recommends by citing a memorable passage from a twelfth-century monk from Saxony Hugo of St. Victor who says: “The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign land” (259). Said explains this quotation by stating that “the more one is able to leave one’s cultural home, the more easily is one able to judge it, and the whole world as well,

with the spiritual detachment and generosity necessary for true vision” (259). In these words, Said reiterates what Nussbaum and many other liberal humanists have defined as the ethical and epistemological superiority of liberalism.

And indeed in many Western countries liberal humanism and cosmopolitanism have given rise to free and egalitarian systems that don't discriminate among their citizens on the basis of religion and ethnicity and recognize and respect individual freedoms to choose and pursue their vision of the good life. By giving priority to rights over the good life, liberal societies have sought to establish conditions in which political and legal institutions are neutral and free from the ethnic and religious biases of a particular section of the population as much as possible.

Proponents of liberalism have rightly recognized the ubiquity and centrality of a homogeneous and dominant public culture in modern societies. As Will Kymlicka points out, “modernization involves the diffusion throughout a society of a common culture, including a standardized language, embodied in common economic, political, and educational institutions” (76). The existence of such a common societal culture is presupposed by modern states because of their need for “a mobile, educated, and literate work-force” (77). This ubiquitous and common public culture, liberals argue, should be stripped of particular markers of ethnic and cultural identity so that it can be acceptable to the diverse population of the society. In other words, ethnic and cultural forms of nationalism are objectionable, they argue, because they explicitly and exclusively promote the values and beliefs of one particular ethnicity or religion and thus are discriminatory against those parts of the population who have different views or come from different ethnicities or cultural backgrounds. This neutrality also allows the society to let its citizens choose and pursue their own life-plans without any fear or coercion. Describing the vision underlying political liberalism, the political philosopher Michael Sandel says:

It is a liberal vision, and like most liberal visions gives pride of place to justice, fairness, and individual rights. Its core thesis is this: a just society seeks not to promote any particular ends, but enables its citizens to pursue their own ends, consistent with a similar liberty for all; it therefore must govern by principles that do not presuppose any particular conception of the good. What justifies these regulative principles above all is not that they maximize the general welfare, or cultivate value, or otherwise promote the good, but rather that they conform to the concept of right, a moral category given prior to the good, and independent of it.

This liberalism says, in other words, that what makes a just society just is not the telos or purpose or end at which it aims, but precisely its refusal to choose in advance among competing purposes and ends. In its constitution and its laws, the just society seeks to provide a framework within which its citizen can pursue their own values and ends, consistent with a similar liberty for others.

The ideal I've described might be summed up in the claim that the right is prior to the good, and in two senses: the priority of the right means first, that individual rights cannot be sacrificed for the sake of the general good, and second, that the principles of justice that specify these rights cannot be premised on any particular vision the good life. (82)

The liberal political system described by Sandel here is the yardstick by which the authors and novelists I examine in this project measure the societies and cultural environments they depict in their narratives. Bangladesh and Iran as they are depicted by Ali and Nafisi respectively fail to measure up to this ideal because they don't respect individual freedoms, particularly for women. Afghanistan, as it is described by Hosseini, is ruled by Pashtun ethnocentrism and thus does not respect the equality of ethnic and religious minorities such as Hazaras. These narratives delineate with acuity the contradictions, inhumanities and massacres that have resulted from the reign of non-liberal political systems in these societies and thus endorse the superiority of political liberalism as it is enforced in Western societies. Reading these narratives, we realize why it is important to respect individual freedoms and why it is inhumane to erect openly ethnocentric political systems. As it becomes clear, the grave consequences of non-liberal political systems are not confined to women and minorities who seem to be their principal victims but permeate and distort the whole society. By denying justice to minorities and freedom to individuals, these

societies create conditions in which humane and normal relations among individuals and different ethnic and religious groups become almost impossible.

In this project, it is not the injustices, contradictions and massacres depicted by these authors and novelists that I subject to critical scrutiny. Through these authors, I try to show why these grave consequences seem to be inherent in non-liberal political systems. What I call into question, contrary to these authors and novelists, is the conception of the self on which political liberalism justifies itself. While the narratives I examine go to great lengths to bring into view all the inhumane and oppressive consequences of non-liberal political systems, they seem to have uncritically assumed the impossibly individualistic and universal conception of human nature on which liberalism is founded. The failure to scrutinize “the unencumbered self” upon which political liberalism justifies itself is not confined to these authors and, as communitarian critics of liberalism have pointed out, is rooted in liberalism itself. The person as it is imagined by liberalism, according to its communitarian critics, is an “unencumbered self”<sup>2</sup> who derives his true and unique identity from an inner human nature which he or she shares with mankind at large. The culture, territory, ethnicity and community in which this person finds himself or herself has little bearing on who he or she is. Liberalism not only attaches little importance to cultures but also actively opposes them as oppressive and restrictive of individual freedoms.

However as communitarian critics have pointed out, an individual is never an “unencumbered self.” He or she is always a particular person who is part of a larger territorial, cultural or ethnic community (Sandel 90). Furthermore, membership in these bounded communities is not peripheral but constitutive of who an individual is. Liberalism, communitarians argue, does not

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<sup>2</sup> Sandel 83.

properly and adequately acknowledge the central role of cultures and communities in individual identities. More often than not, it dismisses them as obstacles and restrictions hindering the free development of individual pursuits and visions. This is while human beings are by nature existentially dependent upon such bounded and limited communities and cultures. As one of the foremost advocates of the communitarian position Clifford Geertz argues,

Undirected by culture patterns—organized systems of significant symbols—man’s behavior would be virtually ungovernable, a mere chaos of pointless acts and exploding emotions, his experience virtually shapeless. Culture, the accumulated totality of such patterns, is not just an ornament of human existence but—the principal basis of its specificity—an essential condition for it. (*Interpretation of Cultures* 46)

There is no such thing as a human nature independent of culture. Men without culture ... would be unworkable monstrosities with very few useful instincts. ... We are, in sum, incomplete or unfinished animals who complete or finish ourselves through culture—and not through culture in general but through highly particular forms of it. (49)

Thus, communitarians argue, the “highly particular” and “bounded” cultures and communities which are lightly dismissed by liberalism as “mere accretions, distortions even, overlaying and obscuring what is truly human—the constant, the general, the universal—in man” are in fact constitutive of human identities and indispensable to the functioning of their desires (Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures* 35).

Understanding this, we may understand the incredible sacrifices individuals are ready to make for their particular cultures and communities. Taking national communities as an example of these bounded and limited cultures, in his book *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson tries to explain the mystery of the “attachment” people have to their nations and their readiness even to die for them (141). As Anderson says, people do not show similar attitudes to voluntary communities of which they might be a member such as “the Labor Party” or “the American Medical Association” (144). Ultimately, Anderson says, it is the sense of “fraternity” “conceived

as a deep, horizontal comradeship” derived from being born into the national community that makes it possible “for so many millions of people” to willingly die for their limited and imagined communities (7). However open and flexible, nations, as Anderson insists, are bounded and are thus never “coterminous with mankind” (7). It is this “privacy,” this “distinctiveness” that makes a nation a community for which people are ready to die.

Once we realize this, we also realize that what is worth dying for is also worth preserving. As I will discuss in my chapter on *Brick Lane*, understanding the importance of cultures for individuals will help us realize the efforts on the part of displaced immigrants and minorities to instill the values of their culture into their children and thus ensure its preservation. Liberalism by itself does not enable its committed adherents to understand and sympathize with such efforts. Liberalism is committed to individuals and their freedom of choice not to cultures. It may advocate tolerance for cultural minorities but it does not understand the need for their preservation. We can see these priorities very clearly in the article, “Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?” by the liberal political philosopher Susan Okin. In this article, Okin charges proponents of multiculturalism with support for cultures that inevitably limit and oppress the freedom of women. Multiculturalism, Okin argues, seeks to preserve and reproduce cultures and religions that have had “as one of their principal aims the control of women by men” (13). Considering their patriarchal and oppressive structures, Okin argues, one cannot see why the gradual disappearance and extinction of cultures and religions should not be welcome (22-23). Here I don’t want to question the important feminist argument that Okin puts forth in this article. I only want to highlight the negative perception of cultures built into liberal arguments like Okin’s. For Okin, like for many other liberals, cultures are by definition restrictive and oppressive of individual freedoms. Viewing cultures as a bundle of restrictions imposed on

individual freedoms, liberals cannot see why they should be preserved. Thus we can understand why the philosopher Charles Taylor regards liberalism as “inhospitable to difference” i.e. anything that departs from its individualistic conception of selfhood (248). As Taylor argues in “The Politics of Recognition,” individualistic and universal liberalism is inherently unfit to understand the demands made upon it by multiculturalism because it is by definition suspicious of “collective goals” (248). Liberalism erroneously views cultures to be personal and private affairs with little bearing on social and political issues. This is why it is baffled by immigrants’ and minorities’ collective desire to preserve their particular identity and campaign for its recognition in the society.

As I will argue in my chapter on *Brick Lane*, in dismissing the “fuss” made by immigrants over the loss of their culture, Ali displays a characteristic liberal attitude. To understand this fuss, we need to go beyond the individualistic and universal perception of human nature in liberalism. To understand immigrants and their preoccupation with their cultures, we need to see cultures as immigrants see them, not as burdens and prisons but as homes. Having undergone radical cultural dislocation, they, more than others, realize the important and constitutive role of cultures in shaping individual identities and desires. They understand that, unlike what many people think, outside cultures is not freedom but a debilitating homelessness. They realize that emotions and desires are not “the antithesis of social institutions but are social institutions themselves” (Herbert 259). In other words, cultural norms and conventions do not impede individual desires but are their condition of possibility. Through cultural displacement, immigrants discern what cultural anthropologists learn through fieldwork in faraway places, i.e. that “Culture, the accumulated totality of [social] patterns, is not just an ornament of human existence but—the principal basis of its specificity—an essential condition for it” (Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*

46). It is only through this radical change of attitude that we can sympathize with and understand the attempt by immigrants and minorities to preserve their culture. As Okin pointed out and *Brick Lane* shows, not all members of a culture are similarly interested in its preservation. However if we are to understand the importance many immigrants and minorities attach to preserving their cultures, it is imperative that we move beyond individualistic and universal liberalism.

Preservation of a distinctive ethnic and religious culture is also directly relevant to ethnic and religious nationalism in Afghanistan and Iran respectively. To understand the urgency many non-Western cultures and ethnicities feel to institutionalize themselves through the political and legal institutions of modern nation-states, we should remember that modern societies are in principle not favorable to multiculturalism and usually sustain only one dominant societal culture. As I pointed out earlier, the existence of such a common societal culture in modern states is presupposed by their need for “a mobile, educated, and literate work-force” (Kymlicka 77). Because of the need for communication across various regions and institutions, modern nation-states rely on the existence of a shared and unified language and societal culture that is transmitted and sustained through their ideological and coercive institutions such as the educational system and the police. Unless a culture becomes thus institutionalized, its chances of survival in the modern world are very low because sooner or later it will become irrelevant and thus feeble and extinct. Pashtun nationalism in Afghanistan and Shiite nationalism in Iran are efforts by these communities to preserve their distinctive cultures. Such cultural forms of nationalism, which are not merely confined to these cultures but are popular among many other ethnicities and cultures, are efforts aimed at keeping distinctive cultures relevant and thus helping them survive in the modern world.

Furthermore, nationalism is one of the major means by which many non-Western societies seek to develop themselves and catch up with the West. As Gregory Jusdanis points out in *The Necessary Nation*, nationalism has been appealing to different cultures “over the past two hundred years because it has permitted groups to maintain their differences while ensuring their survival in modernity” (7). The cultural and economic insecurities fuelling many forms of nationalism today may not be easily palpable to Westerners whose countries are already developed and whose cultures are not only established in their own countries but are also very popular in other parts of the world; but unless we realize the key relationship between nationalism and these cultural and economic insecurities, we will not be able to understand the lengths to which various non-Western cultures and ethnicities are ready to go to nationalize themselves.

However, as many liberal critics of nationalism have pointed out, built into nationalism is a dangerous myth that deems the bounded territory of the state to be the eternal and exclusive homeland of a particular ethnicity or culture. This fiction of cultural purity is lethal because it turns people who come from a different culture or ethnicity into outsiders or second-class citizens who are not only denied equal rights and protections by the state but also are susceptible to persecution and ethnic-cleansing. By politicizing cultures, nationalism hardens ethnic and cultural tensions and renders human and normal relations between different groups almost impossible. As far as minorities are concerned, nationalism could be even worse than colonialism because it not only promotes racism but also may call for their extermination.

Communitarian defenses of nationalism such as the one offered in Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* usually do not take into account the destructive consequences of its politicization of cultures. For instance, in his book, Anderson devotes a whole chapter to defending

nationalism against charges of racism; he argues that nationalism cannot be equated with racism because it is open to members of different races and ethnicities. Nationalism, according to Anderson, is about the sense of “self-sacrificing love” and fraternity that membership in the imagined community of nation produces not about hatred and racism. “In an age when it is so common for progressive, cosmopolitan intellectuals to insist on the near-pathological character of nationalism, its roots in fear and hatred of the Other, and its affinities with racism, it is useful to remind ourselves that nations inspire love, and often profoundly self-sacrificing love” (141). The national community, Anderson argues, is not “coterminous with mankind” (7) but is not entirely closed and impervious like race either. To a certain extent, this defense of nationalism against racism is plausible; national cultures are spatially and linguistically bounded not biologically and ethnically. But only highlighting the imagined and therefore open nature of the national community obscures from view the contentious political issues it generates. To understand this, we need to consider the important and pervasive role of states and state institutions in modern societies. At present, in many non-Western countries, states and state institutions are regarded as the only means by which the survival of a culture can be ensured. As Jusdanis asserts, contrary to what many cultural critics believe, cultures and cultural identities are not merely conceptual or narrative fabrications. In the modern world, the formation, consolidation and maintenance of cultural identities require their institutionalization in “a centralized, omniscient and omnipotent state [which] could infiltrate and affect the minutiae of daily life in ways inconceivable [otherwise]” (6). To survive and preserve itself, a culture needs to be embodied in the major institutions of the modern society such as the media, the educational system, the armed forces and the bureaucracy. These pervasive and powerful institutions help a culture propagate itself and keep itself relevant. And as soon as state institutions become openly

cultural and ethnic, cultural and ethnic differences that may not have been important in the past become matters of life and death. Membership in the wrong ethnicity may not only result in second-class citizenship but also in persecution and genocide.

By highlighting the important economic and cultural goals served by nationalism, I don't intend to overlook its violent and racist consequences. With Hosseini and Nafisi, I try to emphasize the inhumanities, cruelties and contradictions that ethnic and cultural nationalism has entailed in Afghanistan and Iran. However I think it is imperative that we adequately understand the cultural and economic insecurities that fuel many instances of nationalism in evidence today.

Foregrounding these important cultural and economic factors can help undermine some prevailing [but eventually simplistic] arguments that ascribe nationalism merely to excessively essentialistic and purist conceptions of cultural identity. Thus we will understand that in many cases nationalism is motivated by more mundane and human motives such as economic backwardness and cultural survival.

As I mentioned at the beginning, understanding cultures is different from tolerating them as liberalism claims to do. For liberalism has indeed turned cultures into pitiable objects of toleration. As Wendy Brown points out in *Regulating Aversion*, "it is a basic premise of liberal secularism and liberal universalism that neither culture nor religion are permitted to govern publicly; both are tolerated on the condition that they are privately and individually enjoyed" (21). As Brown explains, liberal toleration accorded to religions and cultures is not neutral and innocent. It implicitly denigrates them as "objects of tolerance" "marked as deviant, marginal, or undesirable" (14).

Contemporary liberal political and legal doctrine thus positions culture as its Other ... unless it is subordinated—that is, unless culture is literally "liberalized" through

privatization and individualization. ... Without liberalism, culture is conceived by liberals as oppressive and dangerous not only because of its disregard for individual rights and liberties ... but also because ... [of its] nonuniversal nature. ... Hence culture must be contained by liberalism, forced into a position in which it makes no political claim and is established as optional for individuals. Rather than a universe of organizing ideas, values, and modes of being together, culture must be shrunk to the status of a house that individuals may enter and exit. (21-22)

Liberalism has built into its normative conceptions of self that are not as neutral as liberals themselves believe. For liberalism, the normal person is an autonomous being who is defined less by his or her membership in a particular group or conformity with certain norms and conventions than by his or her autonomy and independence and his or her breaking of conventions and customs. As Saba Mahmood points out, as defined by liberalism, “human agency consists of acts that challenge social norms and not those that uphold them” (5). Having defined its normative self thus, liberalism views individuals who depart from this model as Other, as provisional and inferior objects of its tolerance. As Uday Mehta says, the cosmopolitanism of liberalism is a “cosmopolitanism of reason” that stigmatizes any experience departing from its core principles of “reason, freedom, and individuality” as inferior, backward, and lower (20, 21).

In many instances, toleration accorded by liberalism to cultures not only denigrates and stigmatizes them but also misunderstands and misdescribes their workings. Liberalism thus erects an evolutionary framework in which unfamiliar ways of life (those that are not in accordance with liberalism) are tolerated until they become liberalized or extinct, until adherents of these other ways of life come to their senses and assimilate to that of liberalism. Thus as Mehta says, liberalism aligns societies and cultures “that are in fact contemporaneous in their affective attachments, along a temporal grid that moves them ‘backward’ on account of their difference, so as to give a linear coherence to the idea of progress” (41). This is while these

diverse cultures, which are lightly dismissed by liberalism as provisional and backward relics of the past, are what endow their communities with meaning and “density” (41).

Moreover, by conceiving of cultures as private and individual affairs, liberalism misunderstands the workings of cultures. Cultures are built on a collective vision of the good life shared by a group of people and as such are never an individual and private affair. As John Gray says, liberal pluralism misunderstands the collective nature of cultures by understanding diversity merely as

a diversity of personal ideals whose place is in the realm of voluntary association. The background idea here is that of the autonomous individual selecting a particular style of life. This type of diversity resembles the diversity of ethnic cuisines that can be found in some cities. Like the choice of an ethnic restaurant, the adoption of a personal ideal occurs in private life. (13)

It is because of this built-in misunderstanding of cultures in liberalism that the American cultural critic Stanley Fish refers to liberal pluralism as “boutique multiculturalism.” By this satiric term, Fish seeks to highlight the superficial and reductive conception of cultures inherent in liberalism and liberal humanism. By using this term, Fish explains how liberalism reduces cultures to superficial and exotic ornaments adding color and variety to modern life.

But cultures are not private affairs. As Alasdair MacIntyre says, “We all approach our own circumstances as bearers of a particular social identity. I am someone’s son or daughter, someone else’s cousin or uncle; I am a citizen of this or that city, a member of this or that guild or profession; I belong to this clan, that tribe, this nation” (142). We are not only “defined by the communities we inhabit,” but also “implicated in the purposes and ends characteristic of those communities” (Sandel 6). As MacIntyre says, “what is good for me has to be good for one who inhabits these roles” (142). In other words, human conceptions of good life and interests are never individual affairs but collective and social ones. “The story” of our lives is “always

embedded in the story of those communities from which [we] derive [our] identity—whether family or city, tribe or nation, party or cause” (Sandel 6). These particular social and communal frameworks “situate us in the world” (6).

Understanding cultures, however, is not going to resolve the problems they pose regarding individual freedoms or minority rights. Almost all societies are irreducibly diverse, whether ethnically or culturally, and privileging any one culture or ethnicity is bound to entail restrictions on individual freedoms or injustices against ethnic minorities. Thus it would be ideal if we could have “liberal institutions” in every country so that “individuals and cultures [could] get along together without intruding on each other’s privacy, without meddling with each other’s conceptions of the good” (Richard Rorty, “Ethnocentrism” 209). I admit that after my prolonged critique of liberalism, acknowledging its “practical advantages” may sound contradictory. But I am not keen on repudiating this contradiction. In fact, I see this contradiction in one of the most important books on the idea of culture i.e. Geertz’s *The Interpretation of Cultures*. In the bulk of this book, Geertz questions the universal and individualistic conception of humanity advanced by Enlightenment and embodied by liberalism as meaningless and illusory. He also calls into question the superficial and private weight given by liberalism to cultures and explains how cultures are bound to manifest themselves in public and political affairs. As Geertz says, “Between the stream of events that make up political life and the web of beliefs that comprises a culture it is difficult to find a middle term” (311). And yet exploring the deadly consequences of the politicization of primordial i.e. cultural, attachments in newly established nations, in a self-contradictory move Geertz emphasizes the advantages of political liberalism whose epistemological conceptions he had subjected to an incisive critique. Geertz unabashedly

recommends the civil order and politics of liberal Western societies to “modernizing societies” and new nations outside the West. He explains the exemplary civil order in liberal societies thus:

In modern societies the lifting of [primordial] ties to the level of political supremacy—though it has, of course, occurred and continues to occur—has more and more come to be deplored as pathological. To an increasing degree national unity is maintained not by calls to blood and land but by a vague, intermittent, and routine allegiance to a civil state, supplemented to a greater or lesser extent by governmental use of police powers and ideological exhortation. The havoc, wreaked, both upon themselves and others, by those modern (or semimodern) states that did passionately seek to become primordial rather than civil political communities, as well as a growing realization of the practical advantages of a wider-ranging pattern of social integration than primordial ties can usually produce or even permit, have only strengthened the reluctance publically to advance race, language, religion, and the like as bases for the definition of a terminal community. (260)

Thus, what the new states—or their leaders—must somehow contrive to do as far as primordial attachments are concerned is not, as they have so often tried to do, wish them out of existence by belittling them or even denying their reality, but domesticate them. They must reconcile them with the unfolding civil order by divesting them of their legitimizing force with respect to governmental authority, by neutralizing the apparatus of the state in relationship to them, and by channeling discontent arising out of their dislocation into properly political rather than parapolitical forms of expression. (277)

In these words, Geertz enumerates the practical advantages of political liberalism over alternative systems that seek to use “the sovereign state as a positive instrument for the realization of collective aims” (258). While earlier Geertz had argued that culture and politics are inextricably intertwined and it is pointless to try “to find a middle term” between them, once he considers the violent and bloody consequences of the alternatives to political liberalism, he does not hesitate to recommend the domestication i.e. privatization, of cultures and erection of civil and liberal political institutions. Nevertheless, Geertz, unlike liberals, realizes how difficult it is to effect such a domestication because he knows that cultures are by definition collective and public not private. What Geertz does not explain is that in many non-Western countries, states cannot be culturally and ethnically neutral because they are regarded as the principal means by

which a particular religious or ethnic culture can be maintained. No matter what the excuse, the consequences of politicizing primordial cultures are usually as bloody, violent and dehumanizing as Geertz declares them to be.

## II

“How knowledge of cultures could be relevant and important to literary studies?” some readers might ask. Especially so, I argue. The importance and force of cultures constitutes one of the most neglected themes of modern literature. Modern fiction has been particularly successful in demonstrating the importance of individual authenticity and freedom. Many great instances of modern fiction try to show how the seeming uniformity of cultural norms and conventions can blind us to the diversity and uniqueness of individual dispositions. The demand for the recognition of individual choices and freedoms promoted by modern fiction is a successful achievement that cannot be overstated. However the binary opposition between individual desires and social norms on which the formulation of individual authenticity in modern fiction has been built keeps us from understanding the cultural constitution of individual identities and desires. By defining individual authenticity and agency as the manifestation of an inner human nature, modern fiction has reinforced a dismissive perception of social customs and norms as irrelevant, oppressive and alienating. By reminding us that cultural norms and conventions are constitutive of and indispensable to the formation and functioning of individual desires and identities, knowledge of the concept of cultures can help rectify some of the revered dogmas of the modern fiction of individualism and extend our understanding to the “variety of ways in which norms are lived and inhabited, aspired to, reached for, and consummated” (Mahmood 23). In other words, cultural norms and conventions are not to be understood merely as impositions by a restrictive and alienating society and thus there only to be subverted. By realizing the

importance of cultures, we can extend our sympathy beyond revolting and rebellious heroes and heroines to characters and experiences which cannot be understood merely in terms of a binary opposition between freedom and culture, subversion and oppression.

### III

As many cultural critics have argued, literature, particularly narrative fiction, has been well-equipped for and good at promoting humanism and humanistic values such as tolerance, understanding and individualism. From its inception, modern narrative fiction has tried with considerable success to display and enhance tolerance for the complexity of individuals and their lives. The heroes and heroines of modern fiction have been evaluated less in terms of their conformity with the customs and conventions of their societies than in terms of their individual integrity and authenticity; in fact, the individual integrity of fictional heroes and heroines is often defined against the alienating and deadening forces of social conformity. One of the recurring themes of modern fiction is the conflict between the individual and his or her social surroundings. The main conflict in these novels derives from the opposition between individuals, their desires, choices and the customs and norms of their society. Novels usually invite us to sympathize with their heroes or heroines as they struggle with the orthodox and restrictive norms and traditions of their society. In many novels, being true to oneself is usually at odds with conforming to the dictates of one's social surroundings. Many of these novels usually define agency and authenticity as opposition to, rebellion against, and subversion of inauthentic and socially imposed conventions and norms. This insistence on and promotion of individualism is why many cultural critics have identified modern fiction as one of the constitutive elements of the "culture of modernity" (Taylor, *Sources of the Self* 285-289). Novels have not only evoked

sympathy for their individualistic heroes and heroines but also have helped institutionalize individualism in modern societies.

In fact, one of the narratives I will examine in this project, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, offers an eloquent and sustained defense of modern fiction in terms of the cardinal humanistic values of individualism and tolerance. Nafisi finds in the individualistic themes of modern novels the seeds of modern and pluralistic democracies. By evoking tolerance for and understanding of the unorthodox and subversive choices and desires of their heroes and heroines, Nafisi argues, modern novels have helped institutionalize polyphonic democratic societies. The primary means by which they have achieved this is imaginative sympathy. In great works of narrative fiction, Nafisi argues, “imagination ... is equated with empathy;”

We can't experience all that others have gone through, but we can understand even the most monstrous individuals in works of fiction. A good novel is one that shows the complexity of individuals, and creates enough space for all these characters to have a voice; in this way a novel is called democratic. ... A great novel heightens your senses and prevents you from the self-righteousness that sees morality in fixed formulas about good and evil. (132, 133)

Empathizing with the subversive heroines and heroes of modern novels, we realize the importance of not seeing the “world in black and white” (132) and recognize the limitations of “fixed formulas about good and evil” (133). “It is only through literature,” Nafisi insists, “that one can put oneself in someone else's shoes and understand the other's different and contradictory sides and refrain from becoming too ruthless” (118). “A novel is not moral in the usual sense of the word,” Nafisi argues, “it can be called moral when it shakes us out of our stupor and makes us confront the absolutes we believe in” (129). Reading novels, in other words, helps us understand the artificiality and contingency of the standards of morality and propriety rendered absolute by our social surroundings. “Great works of the imagination were meant to

make you feel like a stranger in your own home. The best fiction always forced you to question what we took for granted. It questioned traditions and expectations when they seemed too immutable” (94). Imaginative and narrative fiction, in other words, frees us and helps us understand and respect experiences, aspirations and desires that are rendered invisible by our prevalent social conventions and traditions. Instead of repeating the condemnations of our society and culture, great works of imaginative literature invite us to empathize with and understand the diversity and uniqueness of individuals and their stories.

Explaining the origins of the novel as a genre, Nafisi says:

The novel, as a new narrative form, radically transformed basic concepts about the essential relationships between individuals thereby changing traditional attitudes towards people’s relationship to society, their tasks and duties. Nowhere is this developing change so apparent as in relations between men and women. Ever since Clarissa Harlowe and Sophia Western—two modest and seemingly obedient daughters—refused to marry men they did not love, they changed the course of narrative and laid open to question the most basic institutions of their times, beginning with marriage.

Daisy and Catherine have little in common, yet both defy the conventions of their time; both refuse to be dictated to. They come from a long line of defiant heroines, including Elizabeth Bennet, Catherine Earnshaw and Jane Eyre. These women create the main complications of the plot, through their refusal to comply. (194-195)

The nineteenth-century novel placed the individual, her happiness, her ordeals and her rights at the center of the story. Thus, marriage was its most important theme. From Richardson’s hapless Clarissa to Fielding’s shy and obedient Sophia to Elizabeth Bennet, women created the complications and tensions that moved the plots forward. They put at the center of our attention what Austen’s novels formulate: not the importance of marriage but the importance of heart and understanding in marriage; not the primacy of conventions but the breaking of conventions. These women, genteel and beautiful, are the rebels who say no to the choices made by silly mothers, incompetent fathers ... and the rigidly orthodox society. They risk ostracism and poverty to gain love and companionship, and to embrace that elusive goal at the heart of democracy: the right to choose. (307)

Here Nafisi stresses what many other historians of novel such as Ian Watt have argued for i.e. the centrality of individuals and individualism to modern fiction. In his classic *The Rise of The*

*Novel*, Watt explains individualism as the hallmark of the novel as a literary genre. Modern fiction, Watt declares, is to be distinguished from other genres by its commitment to “individual experience” (13). Watt argues that “the conditions for the existence of the novel” did not come to pass “until fairly recently” because the novel depends “on the rise of a society characterized by that vast complex of interdependent factors denoted by the term ‘individualism’” (60).

Explaining the “concept of individualism,” Watt says: “It posits a whole society mainly governed by the idea of every individual’s intrinsic independence both from other individuals and from that multifarious allegiance to past modes of thought and action denoted by the word ‘tradition’—a force that is always social, not individual” (60). Explaining this argument, Watt says that novels not only rose in modern societies that were becoming more and more individualistic but also were one of the principal ways by which the fledgling ideal of individualism was promoted. Making a similar argument, in his book *Beyond Culture*, Lionel Trilling argues how modern art including modern fiction is characterized by the belief that “a primary function of art and thought is to liberate the individual from the tyranny of his culture in the environmental sense and to permit him to stand beyond it in an autonomy of perception and judgment” (xiii). As Trilling says,

Any historian of the literature of the modern age [from the latter part of the eighteenth century to the present] will take virtually for granted the adversary intention, the actually subversive intention, that characterizes modern writing—he will perceive its clear purpose of detaching the reader from the habits of thought and feeling that the larger culture imposes, of giving him a ground and a vantage point from which to judge and condemn, and perhaps revise, the culture that produced him. (xii-xiii)

Here Trilling reiterates what Watt had said regarding the primacy of the individual experience in modern fiction. Trilling furthermore clarifies that the promotion of individualism in modern fiction often takes the form of opposition to and subversion of culture. Confirming this argument,

Jonathan Culler explains how “when novels are concerned with group identities, ... they frequently explore how the demands of group identity restrict individual possibilities” (112).

Nafisi is therefore right in stressing the primacy of individualism in modern fiction. As she argues “the complications and tensions” of many novels derive from the obstacles put up in the way of individual desires by their social surroundings. Although the heroes and heroines of these novels come from ordinary backgrounds, what makes them interesting and sympathetic is their insistence on their individual authenticity and integrity. As Nafisi explains, they are predominantly defiant individuals who “risk ostracism and poverty” to remain true to themselves and not give in to the alienating and oppressive dictates of their cultures and societies. By putting such individuals at the center of their plots, modern novels show not “the primacy of conventions but the breaking of conventions.” Their protagonists are worthy of respect because they refuse to “become like all the rest” (23), because they “depend to such a high degree on their own sense of integrity” (225). Through imaginative identification with these characters, we expand our understanding of and tolerance for individual eccentricities.

Authenticity and individuality constitute the principal themes of Ali’s debut novel *Brick Lane* as well. Described by some of its critics as “a multicultural bildungsroman,” the novel recounts and celebrates the growth of its female protagonist Nazneen from passivity and fatalism to self-assertive individualism and agency. In Ali’s novel too, authenticity and agency are defined against cultural norms and conventions which are deemed restrictive and alienating. To find her true identity, *Brick Lane* tries to show, Nazneen has to look into her inner self beyond the roles imposed on her by her culture and social surroundings. Given the fatalistic personality of Nazneen, the opposition between culture and freedom in *Brick Lane* takes a particularly dramatic and radical form. Culture is thus equated with an oppressive and overwhelming fate against

which the individual has to revolt; limiting and oppressive, culture keeps the individual from discovering and realizing her true self. By pairing Nazneen's story in England with that of her younger sister Hasina in Bangladesh, *Brick Lane* tries to show how dislocation from Bangladesh, the locus of her original culture, is advantageous to Nazneen's discovering and fulfilling her true identity. Displaced from Bangladesh, Nazneen is freed from the pressures and limitations its culture imposes on its members, particularly women, to find and pursue their true desires. As Michael Perfect says in his reading of *Brick Lane*, it celebrates immigration as freedom from culture, as an opportunity for the individual to achieve both "emancipation" and "agency" (119).

The imaginative identification between the reader and fictional characters enabled by novels not only enhances understanding for individual eccentricities but also humanizes people that are otherwise subject to much misunderstanding and prejudice. Novels help us achieve distance from the biases of our own particular cultures and see the equal moral worth and humanity of individuals from other cultures, races and ethnicities. This is why Watt argues that the term universal "is always to be found inscribed on the other side of the coin individualism" (89). In other words, by zooming in on the individual and his or her authenticity and growth, we disregard cultural, ethnic, class and gender differences that would otherwise keep us from empathizing with individuals different from us. Describing the task of the novelist, Joseph Conrad says:

He speaks to ... our sense of pity, and beauty, and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation—and to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts, to the solidarity in dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspiration, in illusions, in hope, in fear, which binds men to each other, which binds together all humanity—the dead to the living and the living to the unborn. (1887)

The binding power of novels, Conrad here implies, derives from their establishment of an imaginative empathy between readers and their characters who may be very different from them. Similarly the philosopher Richard Rorty ascribes the humanizing virtues of modern fiction to its detailed elaboration of both the “kinds of suffering being endured by people to whom we had previously not attended” and the “sorts of cruelty we ourselves are capable of” (*Contingency* xvi). Fiction, according to Rorty, is more powerful in overcoming cultural barriers because solidarity is not achieved by “inquiry” but by

imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers. Solidarity is not discovered by reflection but created. It is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people. Such increased sensitivity makes it more difficult to marginalize people different from ourselves by thinking “They do not feel as we would,” or “There must always be suffering, so why not let them suffer?” (xvi)

By putting us in the shoes of individuals from different cultures and ethnicities, Rorty maintains, novels help us see them as “one of us” rather than as “them” (*Contingency* xvi).

We can better understand the humanizing power of modern fiction when we realize the dynamics of intolerance. Explaining intolerance, Michael Ignatieff argues how it completely deemphasizes the individuality of the persons from the despised culture, ethnicity or race. As Ignatieff puts it,

The paradox of intolerance is that it customarily fixes on the group differences as salient and ignores individual difference. Indeed, in most forms of intolerance, the individuality of the person who is despised is all but ignored. Intolerant people are uninterested in the individuals who compose despised groups; in fact, they hardly see “them” as individuals at all. What matters is the constitution of a primal opposition between “them” and “us.” Individuality only complicates the picture, indeed makes prejudice more difficult to sustain, since it is at the individual level that empathy often subverts the primal group opposition. Intolerance, from this perspective, is a willed refusal to focus on individual difference, and a perverse insistence that individual identity be subsumed in the group. ... Toleration depends, critically, on being able to individualize oneself and others, to be able to “see” oneself and others—or to put it another way, to be able to focus on “major” difference, which is individual, and to relativize “minor” difference, which is collective. (63)

Intolerance, in other words, thrives in conditions that promote categorical divisions such as “us” and “them”; as members of particular cultures, we are by nature very prone to the ethnocentric aversion such categorical cultural distinctions generate. As the French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss says,

From birth and ... probably even before, the things and beings in our environment establish in each one of us an array of complex references forming a system—conduct, motivations, implicit judgments, which education then confirms by means of its reflexive view of the historical development of our civilization. We literally move along with this reference system, and the cultural systems established outside it are perceptible to us only through the distortions imprinted upon them by our system. Indeed it may even make us incapable of seeing those other systems. (12)

Influenced by our ethnocentric cultures, we are not even likely to perceive our biases against other cultures as “biases.” As Levi-Strauss says, viewed from the lens of our cultures, people from other cultures appear “to possess no values at all” (11). By focusing on the individual, narrative literature can help undermine our dehumanizing cultural prejudices and help us see the humanity of people from other cultures and ethnicities. This is why “the narrative imagination” becomes such an important part of the liberal and cosmopolitan education promoted by Nussbaum in *Cultivating Humanity*. Through our imaginative participation in the lives of the characters of a novel, we cross the boundaries of gender, class, nationality, religion and ethnicity and understand people and individuals that would otherwise remain subject to bias and misunderstanding.

Examining scores of reviews of *The Kite Runner* on Amazon.com, Timothy Aubry explains how the theme of the universality of humanity runs through many of them. Many of these reviewers, Aubry maintains, explain how their imaginative identification with the guilt-ridden protagonist of the novel, Amir, reaffirms the universality of mankind; one of the reviews Aubry cites as

characteristic of this insistence on universality reads, “[Hosseini] says, in effect, here is a story about people in my land of origin. Yes, they are people of Afghanistan, but they are simply people, too, who are much like us” (27). “Identification,” Aubry argues, “is frequently responsible for the interpretation of *The Kite Runner* as a universal narrative.” “Readers’ assertions of universality often seem to be the product of empathy energized dialectically by the tensions and contradictions that the readers are required to negotiate in their efforts to identify with characters who inhabit a culture that they find radically different from their own” (28). What makes many of these reviewers insist on the universality of the novel, in other words, is their recognition of the cultural differences that separate them from the protagonist of the novel. They insist on the universality of humanity because despite their differences from Amir, they have related to his intense affective and emotional experiences. Having examined these reviews, Aubry argues how the imaginative relationship prompted by narratives such as *The Kite Runner* can help defang the belligerence and hatred that is built into the prevailing rhetoric of the clash of civilizations between Islam and the West. Summarizing his findings, Aubry says:

Overall, the book has encouraged increased tolerance and sympathy for Muslims. ... a majority of reviews ... praise [the novel] for eschewing any strong political position. Frequently such comments suggest, if not a rejection of the United States’ war on terrorism, then a utopian yearning for an alternative, nonpolitical solution to current international conflicts—one predicated on humanistic, affective connections of compassion and identification. (27)

Thus by enabling an imaginative identification between its readership and its main character Amir, *The Kite Runner* illustrates the empathetic and humanizing effect that theorists of the novel have seen as inherent to the genre as a whole.

Considering these arguments, we can see why in his historical exploration of the concept of culture, Christopher Herbert insists on its fundamental incompatibility with narrative fiction.

“The main factor in this incompatibility,” Herbert argues, “is the novel’s overriding commitment, through its always central function of generating empathetic identification with imaginary characters, to the principle of individual personality and of the primacy of personal will” (258). By concerning themselves with individual integrity and authenticity, novels portray identities and desires as if they were independent of their social surroundings. Even when they portray “the social environment” in detail, they endow it “with overwhelmingly negative significance only: as static background to the narration of individual characters’ experience and as an oppressive, stultifying, inauthentic system of life, typically a system of prejudice and respectably hypocrisy, from which the hero and heroine must in some fashion free themselves in the name of personal values” (259). “Thus,” Herbert concludes, “in its dominant bias toward achieving ‘truth to individual experience,’ the novel is incorrigibly *psychological*” (258, emphasis in the original). In these novels, Herbert argues, “individuality is effectively defined ... as one’s capacity for resisting social pressures of conformity” (259). As Herbert argues, “to incorporate into fiction in any concerted, explicit way the ethnographic thesis ... would undo at its root the vital principle of novelistic imagination” (259).

As Herbert explains, modern literary theory and criticism has only reinforced the opposition between individual freedoms and cultural oppression. Many offshoots of cultural and literary studies, Herbert argues, view culture belligerently as a restrictive and oppressive ideology “whose paramount function” is either “to stifle the diversification and originality of desire” (59) or to rationalize unequal relations of power. For many participants in modern cultural studies, Herbert argues, “cultural representation” is only viewed as “a process of ‘symbolic violence’ aimed at securing vested interests” (59). Even in poststructuralist strains of cultural studies that acknowledge the important role played by cultural norms in shaping individual

identities, the traditional preoccupation with individual agency defined as resistance against dominant cultural structures is manifest. We can see this very clearly in the introduction to a popular cultural studies reader.<sup>3</sup>

From a theoretical point of view we need a subject who is at once culturally and historically constructed, yet from a political perspective, we would wish this subject to be capable of acting in some sense “autonomously,” not simply in conformity to dominant cultural norms and rules, or within the patterns that power inscribes. But this autonomous actor may not be defined as acting from some hidden well of innate “will” or consciousness that has somehow escaped cultural shaping and ordering. In fact, such an actor is not only possible but “normal,” for the simple reason that neither “culture” itself nor the regimes of power that are imbricated in cultural logics and experiences can ever be wholly consistent or totally determining. (72, qtd. in Asad, *Formations of the Secular*).

Viewing culture as system of meanings “in the service of power,” literary and cultural critics have understood their task to primarily consist in challenging its reproduction of relations of domination (Thompson 7).

While Herbert focuses merely on the negative aspects of this fixation on individual freedoms and desires in novels and literary criticism, I think it is important to note how the opposition between individual authenticity and cultural conventions helps erode some of the prejudices and animosities underpinned by cultures and establish the humanity of individuals across cultures. As I mentioned earlier, this is an important humanistic achievement for the novel as a genre that cannot be overstated. However, as Herbert implies in his criticism of the psychological nature of modern fiction, by their exclusive focus on individual personality, novels keep us from understanding how individual identities and desires are existentially dependent upon their bounded and particular cultural environments. The latter point, according to Herbert, is precisely the crux of the culture thesis which argues that “individual personality is parasitic upon

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<sup>3</sup> *Culture/ Power/ History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*. Ed. Nicholas Dirks, Geoff Eley and Sherry Ortner. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993.

standardized or stereotyped cultural patterns, [and] that emotions are not the antithesis of social institutions but are social institutions themselves” (259).

The preceding explanation, I hope, shows why students of literature cannot merely rely on novels or even the predominant forms of literary and cultural studies for that matter to understand the importance and genuine plurality of cultures. By highlighting the individualistic bent of modern fiction, I don't question its important truths and insights but merely want to emphasize how in opposing individual agency to social norms and conventions, it has, as Mahmood puts it beautifully, obscured from view the “variety of ways in which norms are lived and inhabited, aspired to, reached for, and consummated” (23). This important reminder, I argue, can help improve upon the humanizing effects of the novelistic imagination and extend our understanding to desires, aspirations and experiences that cannot be comprehended in terms of the polarity of oppression and subversion.

#### IV

What do I conclude from my reflections on the idea of cultures? Alluding to Geertz's book *The Interpretation of Cultures*, we can say that by proposing the idea of cultures, we are not overthrowing or recommending any particular political system but calling attention to experiences, desires and aspirations that are not comprehended by liberalism's individualistic and universal understanding of humanity. Becoming aware of the importance of cultures and their genuine plurality is likely to open our eyes to experiences, affects, anxieties and struggles that are otherwise ignored or elided. The global hegemony of liberalism as a universal and individualistic discourse is not of course irrelevant to the invisibility of these experiences and struggles. In neither celebrating nor condemning cultures, I depart from some postcolonial

arguments which seem to interpret the increasingly visible diversity of cultures in developed Western societies as a basis for a new global order of hybridity. These arguments seem to celebrate the current surge of economic globalization and the migrations they have involved as the rise of a new global order which is more colorful and exciting than the world of nation-states it has presumably replaced. We can see this enthusiastic perception of cultural diversity in Salman Rushdie's work. Defending his novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988) against its critics, Rushdie says:

Those who oppose the novel most vociferously today are of the opinion that intermingling with a different culture will inevitably weaken and ruin their own. I am of the opposite opinion. *The Satanic Verses* celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolutism of the Pure. Mélange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world. It is the great possibility that mass migration gives the world, and I have tried to embrace it. *The Satanic Verses* is for change-by-fusion, change –by-conjoining. It is a love-song to our mongrel selves. (“In Good Faith” 394)

Here Rushdie reiterates a recurrent argument in his work regarding the advantages of cultural hybridity and diversity. In one of his earlier novels, *Shame* (1983), Rushdie expressed this point through the metaphor of translation: “It is generally believed that something is always lost in translation; I cling to the notion ... that something can also be gained” (29). I don't deny the advantages that may accrue from a pluralistic lens that recognizes and rejoices in the mingling of different cultures, but I think it is the clashes and frictions between different cultures that we should watch for more than the benefits their mingling may generate. This is not just because cultures are all ethnocentric and cannot help disparaging and denigrating one another but more importantly because in many cases cultures become politicized; this is when various factions to a political conflict seek to advance their political objectives by tapping into the cultural prejudices of their masses.

I have already discussed nationalism as one of those cases that tends to result in the politicization of cultures with dehumanizing consequences for everyone involved particularly minorities. Now I want to dwell a little bit on a civilizational instance of the politicization of cultures i.e. the politicization of Islam in the West which is not unrelated to the controversy provoked by Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses*. As I will discuss throughout this project, currently in the West Islam is deeply politicized. What I mean by this is that the multitude of attacks on Islam and Muslims in the mass media and political organizations in the West is in many cases politically motivated. Stirring up the public opinion in the West against Islam and Muslims is viewed by certain factions to serve important political goals, some of which are domestic, but most of them have to do with political issues in the Middle East. This point has been conceded by many informed observers of the political scene in the West for several decades now. In *Covering Islam*, for example, Edward Said argues how opinion makers controlling the mass media in the West use Islam to cover up the contradictory and undemocratic aspects of the policies of America and its allies in the Middle East. In many cases, mass media in the West use Islam as a ploy for unsavory political purposes. In his book, *America and Political Islam*, Fawaz Gerges makes a similar point and argues that much of the anti-Islamic propaganda in America's public sphere is motivated by ongoing political concerns in the Middle East. As Gerges argues, there are "confrontationalist" factions in America and the West in general that try to advance their political goals in the Middle East by sharpening "public concern and fear about a new Islamic threat [in the post-Cold War era]. They sound the alarm in order to jolt US policy makers from their sleep and push them to contain the marching Islamist hordes" (25). Mass media, according to Gerges, is one of the principal means by which these factions try to stir up latent but entrenched cultural prejudices against Islam and Muslims as "undemocratic, barbaric and

primitive” (7). These factions use every opportunity to tarnish Islam and Muslims and blame them reductively for almost everything that is wrong in the world, both in the Muslim world and outside it. Such attacks on Islam have only increased after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 which further justified the proliferation of hackneyed stereotypes against Islam and Muslims. These attacks on Islam in the West, as *Brick Lane* shows, have only served to radicalize some of the members of the Muslim minority. Provoked both by the brazen and ubiquitous nature of these attacks on Islam and the undemocratic double standards of America and its allies in the Middle East, some of the Muslim immigrants in the West have become increasingly defensive about their Islamic identity and hostile against what appears to them as a belligerent and hypocritical West. Given the toxic and charged environment in which they live, the adoption of such a response by some members of the Muslim minority in the West is not surprising. Their single-minded adoption of Islam which they perceive to be under attack in the West is, while unfortunate, quite natural. It is an understandable reaction to living in a Manichean situation defined by the binary of West vs. Islam. There is one of those situations that according to Michael Walzer inevitably provoke parochial tribalism. Explaining the changes that occur when one’s cultural identity comes increasingly under attack, Walzer says:

Under conditions of security, I will acquire a more complex identity than the idea of tribalism suggests. I will identify myself with more than one tribe; I will be an American, a Jew, an Easterner, an intellectual, a professor. (216)

When my parochialism is threatened, then I am wholly, radically parochial: a Serb, a Pole, a Jew, and nothing else. (215)

As Ali’s novel shows, this is precisely what has happened to some Muslims in the West. The combination of anti-Islamic propaganda and undemocratic policies by West and its allies in the Middle East has prompted them to set aside every other dimension of their identities in favor of

Islam which they define defensively and aggressively against the West. The result is the unfortunate situation to which we bear witness today: racial profiling, surveillance and arbitrary arrest of Muslim minority on the one hand and anger and distrust on the other hand.

Here a brief explanation is in order regarding my selecting these particular narratives. *Brick Lane*, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and *The Kite Runner* attracted my attention because of the intense controversies they have provoked. Given the critical angle of these narratives on the Muslim settings they depict and the deeply politicized nature of Islam in the West at present, there is no doubt that some of the rancor in evidence in the criticisms launched against these narratives is purely defensive. However it is rash to write off all the criticisms generated by these narratives as the visceral reactions of a besieged Muslim minority. The debates sparked by these narratives are important not as examples of the politicized tug-of-war over Islam in the West but because of the light they cast on the general dispute over the merits of political and culturally relativistic perspectives such as postcolonialism and multiculturalism.

The increasing popularity of postcolonial arguments in Western academia has infuriated many Western and non-Western scholars and activists who have written extensively on the epistemological and ethical defects of postcolonial perspectives.<sup>4</sup> Opponents of postcolonialism have not only pointed to the global appeal of liberal values across different societies but also to the costs of the monolithic images of cultures promoted by postcolonial critics for less powerful and oppressed members of different cultures. Postcolonial arguments in defense of cultures, these critics have argued, not only distort the realities of many non-Western societies but also

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<sup>4</sup> Among notable attacks on postcolonialism and multiculturalism, one can mention: Terry Eagleton's *The Idea of Culture*, Susan Okin's "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?", Ernest Gellner's *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion* and Haideh Moghissi's *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism*.

help in the perpetuation of the predicament of many in those societies who are oppressed by their traditional cultures.

In the criticisms mounted against *Brick Lane*, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and *The Kite Runner*, however, we see why completely dismissing the cultural and political insights of postcolonialism may not be advisable. The charges levelled against these narratives are applicable to other interventions which have similarly sought to completely dismiss postcolonialism. While the latter is undoubtedly afflicted with many problematic assumptions, the exclusively liberal perspective which opponents of postcolonialism have sought to reaffirm in its place has its own plethora of defects. We can see these in the rather one-sided, distorted and historically impoverished account of the different societies, Bangladesh, Iran and Afghanistan respectively, presented in these narratives. The liberal perspective deployed by Ali, Hosseini and Nafisi has no positive terms for aspirations, experiences and priorities other than freedom and individuality. Conceiving of human beings as autonomous individuals first and foremost, liberalism either reduces cultures to superficial and colorful differences that add variety to its modernity or opposes them as burdens that oppress the freedom and authenticity of individuals. With such premises, liberalism can help us understand neither the attachments people have to their ethnic and religious cultures nor the sacrifices they are ready to make for their sake. Liberalism can expose the negative consequences of cultural forms of nationalism but cannot help us understand the important collective motives of cultural survival and economic modernization which underpin nationalism. We cannot properly understand these sentiments, attachments and aspirations unless we have recourse to the admittedly problematic concept of cultures promoted by postcolonialism.

Thus I conclude with what I said at the beginning that cultures and cultural identities whether ethnic, national or religious, particularly when they become politicized, are the reservoirs of much hatred, bigotry and animosity. Despite this, cultures are a constitutive part of who we are as human beings and thus are not likely to vanish by mere condemnations. In fact, understanding the importance and force of cultures is likely to make us aware of how difficult it is to overcome the biases and prejudices they have instilled in us as members of certain communities. In making this point, I am reminded of the argument set forth by Geertz in “Anti Anti-Relativism.” In that article, Geertz argues how the major point of cultural anthropology could be summarized in Montaigne’s saying that “each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice ... for we have no other criterion of reason than the example and idea of the opinions and customs of the country we live in” (264-265). While as I explained earlier, the ideal of liberal detachment conveys a similar point against ethnocentrism, it does not, like the concept of culture, emphasize how “the opinions and customs of the country we live in” are not irrelevant, tangential and unimportant but provide the constitutive context within which our individual identities and desires take form and function. Recognizing cultures, we are likely to better understand the genuine diversity of these bounded cultural contexts and pay closer attention to their shaping influence on human identities. Acknowledging the shaping role of cultures could also be the first step in coping with the prejudices, animosities and inhumanities they inspire both in the West and outside West.

## Chapter I

### Cultural Dislocation: Freedom or Anomie?

Monica Ali's debut novel *Brick Lane* (2003) has received considerable critical acclaim not only shortlisting her for the prestigious Man Booker Prize but also earning her a place in Granta's list of best of young British authors. It has been praised by various critics for its "unprecedented portrait of the Bangladeshi community in London's East End" and its depiction of "the injustices and dissatisfactions suffered" by that community (Hiddleston 57). This positive reception, however, is in sharp contrast to the negative criticisms Ali and her novel have received from some of her postcolonial readers. These critics reproach Ali not only for an allegedly stereotypical and denigrating depiction of Bangladesh but also for her reductive dismissal and oversimplification of Bengali immigrants' cultural concerns in England.

Postcolonial critics have objected that although it claims to represent the situation of Bangladeshi immigrants in England from an immigrant perspective, *Brick Lane* reaffirms an individualistic liberal perspective that is replete with reductive assumptions about the immigrant experience. Agreeing with this judgment, I will explore Ali's novel as an example of liberalism's inherent inability to take seriously the cultural problems evident in the situation of immigrants. The collective and cultural concerns of immigrants are part of the non-individualistic ways of living and human flourishing that, I argue, are not understood by liberalism. However I also want to point out that *Brick Lane*'s dismissive representation of the cultural concerns of immigrants may arise from legitimate fears that acknowledging cultural differences may reinforce essentialistic views about non-Western cultures and condone violations of individual rights and freedoms in the name of cultures; that acknowledging the existence of cultures and cultural differences may generate stereotypes that justify orthodox interpretations of particular cultures and thus result in

the perpetuation of the inequalities and injustices they may legitimate. Finally, I argue that the dispute between Ali and her postcolonial critics stems from a major ambiguity at the heart of liberalism. Liberalism has always had two radically different meanings: first, it signifies a political system for the universal realization of its preferred way of life, that of rational, autonomous individuals. In this sense, it presupposes a rational consensus on the best way of life, projecting its own conception of human flourishing on other discourses and narratives and construing any departure from it as backward, provisional and unenlightened. In the second sense, liberalism is resigned to the plurality of cultures and ways of life in which human beings can flourish and views its own ideal of the rational, autonomous individual as just one among many variations of the good life which cannot be hierarchized.

The clarification of this ambiguity may help defuse the abovementioned fears that acknowledging liberalism's philosophical shortcomings in understanding the cultural constitution of individuals and their inevitable public manifestations may result in the justification of intolerant and restrictive practices and political systems. Thus it becomes clear that the postcolonial attacks on liberalism mostly concern its arrogant presumption of its individualistic conception as unanimously the best, not on liberalism as a political system that recognizes that achieving a consensus on the its core values is not only impossible but may also be undesirable. Critiquing liberalism in the first sense should be accompanied by defending liberalism in the second pluralistic and political sense to neutralize fears that equate any critique of liberalism with justification for intolerant, purist and restrictive ideologies.

*Brick Lane* is set in a Bangladeshi community of immigrants in London and recounts the story of its female protagonist's growth from fatalism to autonomy and agency. The heroine of *Brick Lane*, Nazneen, is the wife of a much older Bengali immigrant in England, Chanu. Thanks to the fatalism instilled in her by her mother in rural Bangladesh, Nazneen has become overly passive and submissive. At eighteen, she is brought to England by Chanu through an arranged marriage in which she decides to have no say. Before long, Nazneen finds Chanu to be a quixotic figure who has been a complete failure in the realization of his economic dreams as an immigrant. However, for years, she passively endures her unhappy married life with Chanu. Her dissatisfaction leads her into an affair with the young middleman, Karim, who brings her garments to work on at home. Nazneen displays a similarly fatalistic attitude in her affair with Karim long after she has become skeptical of their compatibility. The turning point of the novel occurs when Nazneen decides not to go along with her husband Chanu to Bangladesh and stay in London with her two daughters. This is how the novel describes this dramatic change in Nazneen's personality.

What could not be changed must be borne. And since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne. This principle ruled her life. It was mantra, fettle, and challenge. So that, at the age of thirty-four, after she had been given three children and had one taken away, when she had a futile husband and had been fated a young and demanding lover, when for the first time she could not wait for the future to be revealed but had to make it for herself, she was as startled by her own agency as an infant who waves a clenched fist and strikes itself upon the eye. (5)

Having decided not to passively go along with Chanu to Bangladesh, Nazneen also ends her unsatisfactory relationship with Karim and becomes a partner with her friend Razia in a clothing business. The novel ends with Nazneen realizing one of her dreams in England: skating in a rink. In the last lines of the novel, we have Nazneen doubtfully ask Razia whether she can skate in a sari, and Razia's reply which says: "This is England, ... You can do whatever you like" (415).

The controversy provoked by the novel primarily has to do with its rather negative depiction of Bangladesh which many of its Bengali readers in England have found offensive and insulting. These objections have been reaffirmed by postcolonial critics who have not only criticized the novel for its employment of the liberal language of freedom and individualism in relating Nazneen's story of growth and assimilation in England but also for the overarching liberal perspective from which it dismissively represents the cultural concerns of immigrants.

Confirming the objections of the novel's Bengali readers, they have noted a relationship between the celebration of individualism and freedom in the story of Nazneen and the novel's negative depiction of Bangladesh. Chanu constantly invokes his romanticized image of Bangladesh to criticize their situation in England and argue for their return to Bangladesh. *Brick Lane* seems to counter Chanu's idealized Bangladesh by portraying a harsh and crudely stereotypical picture of Bangladesh in the letters sent to Nazneen by her younger sister Hasina from Bangladesh. The denigrating image of Bangladesh in these letters conforms to the worst stereotypes of the country as extremely poor and unfriendly to independent women. As Michael Perfect points out, this harsh picture of Bangladesh is key to Nazneen's all-important decision at the climax of the novel not to return to Bangladesh with her husband; a decision that marks the beginning of her change toward individualism and freedom as celebrated in the novel. Ali's critics argue that this rather crude and dismissive reaction to Chanu's idealized vision of Bangladesh is indicative of her overall misunderstanding of the cultural concerns of immigrants. By criticizing Ali's portrayal of Bangladesh as a poor, backward and restrictive society, postcolonial critics don't intend to validate the idealized vision of the country cherished by Chanu. Rather they object to the novel's dismissive rejection of the cultural needs and concerns of immigrants that underlie Chanu's obsession with his idealized Bangladesh; concerns and preoccupations that are often prejudged

and misunderstood by the rest of the society. Postcolonial critics also argue that the language of individualistic assimilation in which Ali couches Nazneen's growth generates misunderstandings of the inherently collective nature of immigrants' cultural identities and their efforts to maintain their different cultures in exile. This language of individualism and freedom oversimplifies the collective concerns and interests of minorities and immigrants. Celebrating the individualistic assimilation of the immigrant misunderstands a collective enterprise as an individual one.

## II

The postcolonial objections to the endorsement of liberal individualism and individualistic assimilation in *Brick Lane* call into question a prevailing conventional wisdom that equates liberalism with tolerance. As a universal philosophy, liberalism has prided itself on its insistence upon nondiscrimination and equality. It has contrasted itself with the negative tendency of parochial and particular cultures to prejudge and dehumanize others; the inclination in different cultures to apotheosize their own heroes and diabolize their enemies (Geertz, "Uses of Diversity" 74). Unlike conceptions of human nature derived from a particular culture, liberalism extends equality and humanity to all regardless of their culture and race. Thus the accusation of intolerance leveled against liberalism by some postcolonial critics may take some aback; this accusation may be particularly shocking when it is made on behalf of minorities who are already benefitting from liberal arguments against nondiscrimination.

However, on closer inspection, the dispute between liberals and their postcolonial critics becomes clearer and more understandable. The problem lies in the normative assumptions of liberalism about the human subject, an enlightened, rational individual who treats his/her cultural particularities as insignificant and strictly private. The universal human civilization envisioned by

liberalism is inhabited by such rational individuals who, regardless of their cultural and ethnic differences, have reached a consensus on the universal validity and superiority of the core values and principles of Enlightenment. As Uday Mehta argues, liberal cosmopolitanism is a “cosmopolitanism of reason” which tolerates different cultures because it views them to be insignificant and provisional. These different cultures are tolerated either because they are dismissed as superficial or because they are treated as ornamental relics of an unenlightened world which are bound to vanish when everyone comes to see the light of reason, its superiority and universal validity. Taking such a universal consensus for granted, liberals are at times troubled by the sight of non-Western immigrants and minorities refusing to treat their different cultures and identities as insignificant and completely private. Instead of letting go of them and adopting the universal values of Enlightenment, immigrants and minorities seem to cling to the parochial values derived from their cultures and involve them in the public and political sphere. Deeming their universal values of rationalism and individualism to be superior, liberals cannot understand why immigrants and minorities may want to collectively cling to their “inferior,” “superstitious,” or “unimportant” values and customs.

Postcolonial critics have seen in this liberal opposition to the cultural concerns of immigrants a coercive intolerance that derives from liberalism’s oversimplified conception of human nature that underestimates the importance of cultures to individuals, an importance that is particularly self-evident to many dislocated immigrants and minorities. Postcolonial critics have argued that liberal tolerance, the universal principle of nondiscrimination for which liberalism has become famous, is only extended to assimilated individuals from different cultures and is incapable of understanding cultures and cultural identities as inherently collective affairs not individual ones. Explaining this position, Charles Taylor says: “Universal individualistic liberalism ... is

inhospitable to difference ... [and] is suspicious of collective goals. ... It is inhospitable to difference because it can't accommodate what the members of distinct [cultures] really aspire to, which is survival" (248). Agreeing with this position, postcolonial critics not only campaign along with liberals against far-right and anti-immigrant racism but also against hardcore liberal arguments that insist on individualized assimilation and oppose the persistence in cultural particularity among immigrants and minorities. To comprehend the importance of particular cultures to individuals and the genuine plurality of cultures as they are perceived by immigrants and minorities, postcolonial critics argue, we need to discard universal premises about human nature no matter where they spring from i.e. either the ethnocentric universalizing tendencies of settled individuals or the universal premises of liberalism. In short, to understand the concerns of immigrants, to see the world from their eyes, postcolonial critics argue, we need to adopt a culturally relativistic perspective. The relativity of cultures is the discovery that there are indeed genuinely different ways of life which are not only incommensurable (cannot be hierarchized) but also essential in their particularity to the functioning and meaningfulness of individual emotions, desires and motivations. Expressing this postcolonial position, Clifford Geertz says: grasping the multiplicity of cultures requires "'understanding' in the sense of comprehension, perception, and insight" and not

"understanding" in the sense of agreement of opinion, union of sentiment, or commonality of commitment. ... The difficulty in this is enormous, as it has always been. Comprehending that which is, in some manner of form, alien to us and likely to remain so, without either smoothing it over with vacant murmurs of common humanity, disarming it with to-each-his own-indifferentism, or dismissing it as charming, lovely even, but inconsequent, is a skill we have arduously to learn, and having learnt it, always very imperfectly, to work continuously to keep alive; it is not a connatural capacity, like depth perception or the sense of balance, upon which we can complacently rely. ("Uses of Diversity" 87)

The adoption of any other perspective, postcolonial critics argue, will make us unable to understand what immigrants and minorities have discovered through experience.

In his oft-quoted essay, “Imaginary Homelands,” the Indian novelist, Salman Rushdie, explains the relativistic insight gained by immigrants through “cultural displacement.” Cultural displacement helps immigrants discover, Rushdie argues, “the provisional nature of all truths, all certainties” (12). Displaced from their own cultures and inserted into a different cultural environment, many immigrants realize the cultural nature of all truths and certainties. They realize that the values and principles of a people are not derived from a universal human nature but from the conventions and interrelations within a particular society and culture; thus they discover the centrality of particular conventions and norms to the force certain truths and values gain for individuals within a society. In this way, from experiencing cultural dislocation, immigrants come to discover both the plurality and relativity of cultures. As the American anthropologist Roy Wagner argues, people are not born with this insight. This discovery involves undergoing cultural displacement or what Wagner describes as culture shock. Before undergoing culture-shock, Wagner argues, we take our cultures for granted. Situated with people who have similar religious, linguistic and ethnic backgrounds, we take our culture for granted and do not appreciate to what extent it is centrally operating in our individual lives. We thus tend to have what Taylor describes as a monological or individualized conception of our individual identities. We believe our individual identities to lie somewhere in the depth of our interior consciousness, completely particular to ourselves and distinct from our social surroundings, waiting to be discovered. Thus we see an opposition between our individual authenticity and the “pressures toward outward conformity” exerted by our social surroundings. To realize ourselves and to be true to ourselves, we believe we need to go deeper into our inner selves and discover our true

identity there. This is a conception of individual identity that not only discourages us from looking outside ourselves for discovering our true identities but also, by definition, rules out any relationship between our original selves and our social surroundings. This tendency to see our true selves in opposition to our local cultural and social contexts is reinforced by the general inclination to universalize our cultural practices and beliefs, viewing them to be the only way normal human beings would live their lives. Thus taking our cultures for granted, we persist in seeing ourselves in opposition to our local cultures and see any conformity to our local cultures to be a diversion from our quest for individual originality. The condition of being surrounded by our particular culture makes us unable to understand what Taylor calls the “fundamentally dialogical character” of human life; the fact that individual identity is not something that takes place in isolation but within particular social environments in a dialogical process. Such inattentiveness to the importance and boundedness of our particular cultures changes when we move into settings with radically different cultures where people practice different religions, speak different languages and belong to different ethnic and racial groups. Through this cultural dislocation, we become keenly aware of our own cultural differences and how they have shaped who we are, our desires and our values. We realize how differences in cultures are seriously impeding our efforts and weakening our desire to relate to and function in our new surroundings. Suddenly it appears as if we are nothing without our cultures. Describing the disabling anomie caused by cultural dislocation, Edward Said says, “Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience” (“Reflections on Exile” 175). Said argues that the loneliness and anomie generated by cultural dislocation reveals to individuals the importance of belonging and rootedness. Exile more than any other experience, Said argues, demonstrates the truth of Simone Weil’s memorable

saying that “To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul” (qtd. in Said, “Reflections of Exile” 183).

Explaining the same point and process, Wagner says:

To a degree that we seldom realize, we depend upon the participation of others in our lives, and upon our own participation in the lives of others. Our success and effectiveness as persons is based upon this participation, and upon an ability to maintain a controlling competence in communicating with others. Culture shock is a loss of the self through the loss of these supports. (7)

It is this “loss of the self” through culture shock that, Wagner argues, results in the invention of culture as an objectified “entity” (9). Before this loss of the self through culture shock, the immigrant “had no culture” because he/she had taken it for granted, viewing “its assumptions ... to be self-evident” (Wagner 4). The invention of culture, as Wagner calls it, refers to the assumption of a particular totality that gives meaning and force to its component assumptions and values. Culture thus signifies the complex whole of customs, rituals and traditions that objectifies the particularity of the cultural system upon which the immigrant’s individual identity is felt to be existentially dependent. It is this insistence on the totality or wholeness of a particular culture that distinguishes the notion of cultures from more cliché understandings of the concept. As

Christopher Herbert says,

That a people is to be defined at least in part ... by its beliefs, morals, customs, and so forth is a commonplace; what [distinguishes the concept of cultures] ... is the presumption that this array of disparate-seeming elements of social life composes a significant whole, each factor of which is in some sense a corollary of, consubstantial with, implied by, immanent in, all the others. Culture as such is not, therefore, a society’s beliefs, customs, moral values, and so forth, added together: it is the wholeness that their coexistence somehow creates or makes manifest. ... The importance of [the concept of culture] ... is ... that it is here for the first time that “the social ... becomes a system, among whose parts connections, equivalences and interdependent aspects can be discovered” (4-5)

This situating a set of customs, rituals and beliefs within a particular totality is called, in the parlance of anthropology, ethnographic knowledge. As Geertz explains, ethnographic knowledge is distinctly different from knowledge of a culture possessed by its natives. Although it is true that natives know their culture better than anyone from another culture, they do not see the particularities of their culture within the totality which they form. Anthropologists justify their claim to ethnographic authority over a strange culture not by pretending that they are as familiar with the culture as its native inhabitants but precisely because they are not. Although they do extensive fieldwork to familiarize themselves with the particular contents of a certain culture, they do not want to see the customs, traditions and beliefs of that culture as its natives do, “spontaneously” and “unself-consciously,” but as the integrated and interrelated components of a particular cultural system; it is the presumption of totality that gives a particular resonance and significance to the component elements of particular cultural environment (“From the Native’s Point of View” 58). Dislocated from their cultures, immigrants similarly achieve what James Buzard has called “auto-ethnographic authority” over their culture. Auto-ethnographic authority is both a rehearsal and a reversal of the traditional ethnographic authority I described above. Immigrants attain auto-ethnographic authority not simply because, like their stationary and settled counterparts, they belong to a particular culture but because they have become separated from it and now see it as a particular system and totality. Auto-ethnographic authority is different from ethnographic authority in that, this time, the ethnographer is not a stranger anthropologist from a different culture, but a member of that culture situated outside it.

To attain such authority over the totality of one’s own culture helps one realize the significant degree to which his/her emotions, motivations and aspirations have been shaped and inspired by his/her participation or membership in his/her particular cultural surroundings. The discovery of

culture through culture shock thus effects a reversal of ordinary perceptions of self-identity and desire. Through cultural displacement, one realizes the primacy of social systems in giving meaning, force and coherence to individual desires, thus calling into question conventional binary oppositions between original, inner desires and social conformity, pressure and conventionality. As Herbert notes, one of the major consequences of discovering the concept of culture is the deconstruction of “dominant polarity of external control and instinctive desire” (45). Conceiving of desires as individual and instinctive, the individualistic conception of desire treats social customs and norms as mere conventionality artificially imposed upon individuals. The concept of culture, on the other hand, flattens the opposition between desire and social conventions and customs (Herbert 53). Culture is thus perceived not as “a system of controls imposed upon desire, but rather ... a system of desire” (51). It is the interconnections and conventions within a particular cultural totality that give meaning and significance to individual desires. Without these social and cultural norms, desires would become meaningless and impotent. Geertz puts the same point in this way:

Undirected by cultural patterns—organized systems of significant symbols—man’s behavior would be virtually ungovernable, a mere chaos of pointless acts and exploding emotions, his experience virtually shapeless. Culture, the accumulated totality of such patterns, is not just an ornament of human existence but – the principal basis of its specificity—an essential condition of it. (*Interpretation of Cultures* 46)

Without the assistance of cultural patterns [man] would be functionally incomplete, not merely a talented ape who had, like some unprivileged child, unfortunately been prevented from realizing his full potentialities, but a kind of formless monster with neither sense of direction nor power of self-control, a chaos of spasmodic impulses and vague emotions. Man depends upon symbols and symbol systems with a dependence so great as to be decisive for his creatural viability. (99)

The loss of self or anomie experienced by immigrants helps them view their particular cultures in this light, not as universal but as particular, not as just any culture, but the one particular culture in

which they feel at home, the one particular culture that they deem necessary to their humanity, and thus the only culture worth preserving for the following generations. The importance placed by immigrants upon preserving their particular cultures is due to the direct relationship they discover between that particular system and their individual and human identities.

The liberal notion of universality, while advocating tolerance for those who are different, can become an obstacle in understanding this desire for particularity among immigrants and minorities. As Saba Mahmood says, the normative subject as envisioned by liberalism is an individual characterized by an “innate desire for freedom” whose “agency primarily consists of acts that challenge social norms” (Mahmood 5). This liberal disdain for social conventionality is, for instance, manifest in the memorable proposition by Theodor Adorno: “It is part of morality not to be at home in one’s home” (39). At the heart of this argument is a typical liberal argument against reigning social conventions in a society which are seen as artificial and thus at odds with the authenticity of the individual and his/her morality. Identifying self-realization and fulfilment with such an individualistic perception of autonomy and agency, liberalism insists on the primacy of freedom, choice and individuality. Describing the normative liberal subject as “a subject of self-determining or self-expressive choice,” Taylor says:

This view understands human dignity to consist largely in autonomy, that is, in the ability of each person to determine for himself or herself a view of the good life. Dignity is associated less with any particular understanding of the good life, such that someone’s departure from this would detract from his or her own dignity, than with the power to consider and espouse for oneself some view or other. (*Philosophical Arguments* 245-246)

Predicated on such normative assumptions about the human subject, liberalism can become intolerant of immigrants’ and minorities’ collective desire to preserve their particular identity and campaign for its recognition in the society. What dislocation brings to light is the reverse of

Adorno's claim cited above: immigrants realize that it is not possible to feel at home anywhere outside home; that home is not everywhere but only a particular place, a particular cultural environment, outside of which is a sad and debilitating homelessness. Viewed from a normative liberal perspective, these different cultures are merely unimportant relics of a bygone time that are bound to vanish with the universalization of the Enlightenment. This is while, to immigrants and minorities, their particular cultures are not just relics and ornaments of the past but cultural systems that give human meaning and significance to their lives.

To illustrate this point, I will refer to Chinua Achebe's classic postcolonial novel *Things Fall Apart*. Though it is not set in the immigrant context with which we are concerned here, it clearly explains the dispute postcolonial critics have with their liberal counterparts. What Achebe tries to portray in that novel is the importance of particular social and cultural systems in giving meaning to and structuring individual emotions and motivations. While from a progressive and rational perspective, the strange way of life depicted in the novel may appear backward, primitive and worthless, Achebe's novel shows it to be key to structuring the lives of the individuals who inhabit it. While from a liberal perspective, the inhabitants of the primitive villages of Africa should have been happy to abandon their uncivilized ways of being for a more advanced and progressive lifestyle, Achebe tries to show the sense of loss and tragedy that the decline of a viable way of life causes in the individuals living it. To make this argument is not to romanticize primitivism, it is to remind individualistic liberals of the centrality of particular social contexts in which individual lives unfold. The main point Achebe is trying to convey in the novel is that individual lives cannot be understood without the cultural systems in which they are situated; that individual experiences, as Mehta says, "derive their meaning, their passionate and painted intensity from within the bounded, even if porous, spheres of familial, national, or other

narratives” (21). Easily dismissing different and strange cultural systems as backward, primitive and provisional, like the Commissioner does at the end of Achebe’s novel, may result in misunderstanding the human lives, sentiments and motivations organized by such cultural systems. While for the Commissioner the passing of a strange local culture in Africa may only be worth a chapter about “The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger,” for the people who lived that culture, it is a devastating and tragic loss, because it signified the particular way of life that had organized and structured their social and individual lives.

This is why the accusation of intolerance leveled against individualistic liberals should not be very surprising. As Mehta points out, liberalism’s commitment to certain universal principles and standards such as freedom and individuality has impelled it to reject any unfamiliar and different way of life and cultural system that is predicated on different values as backward, primitive and provisional. It aligns “societies that are in fact contemporaneous in their affective attachments, along a temporal grid that moves them ‘backward’ on account of their difference, so as to give a linear coherence to the idea of progress” (41). Thus while the language of liberalism is the language of familiarity and humanity, it is only familiarity and humanity of a particular kind. It is a hierarchical language of familiarity that “in a single glance and without having experienced any of it” compares and classifies different cultures and ways of life as superior and inferior, “backward and progressive, and higher and lower” (20). Understanding the good life only in terms of its rational and individualistic teleology, liberalism is thus inherently incapable of understanding the genuine plurality and incommensurability of cultures and ways of life. The individualistic stance of liberalism is particularly unacceptable to immigrants because, through displacement, they realize the illusory nature of any universal conception of human nature that disregards the centrality of particular cultures in giving meaning and shape to individual lives

within them. Individualistic notions of human subjectivity as advanced by universal liberalism are thus at odds with the discovery made by immigrants about the cultural nature of truths, about the existential dependence of meaningful and forceful individual experiences on the particular social and cultural environments in which they are situated.

With this explanation in mind, we can return to the dispute between postcolonial critics and Ali. Postcolonial critics of *Brick Lane* have pointed out that while it seems to represent the immigrant situation from an immigrant's point of view, it, in fact, replicates liberalism's inherent inability to understand and take seriously the cultural problems and preoccupations of immigrants. Ali thus reiterates the liberal move of construing any system and way of life that deviates from its standards of freedom and individuality as inferior, insignificant and provisional. While from one perspective, the celebration of an immigrant's individualistic assimilation into a liberal Western society is a welcome counterargument to the racist and exclusionary tactics of the far-right, postcolonial critics argue, it nevertheless reinforces the coercive assumptions of liberalism concerning the universality and superiority of its individualistic narrative of human nature. Here it is not suggested that Ali is obligated to represent the experiences of her characters in a certain way that is appropriate to the situation and perspective of immigrants. Rather it is pointed out that by having recourse to a liberal perspective, Ali and her novel fail to capture the cultural preoccupations of immigrants and instead reproduces a reductive account that only reconfirms the presuppositions of universal liberalism about human nature.

To say this is not to say that *Brick Lane* is blind to the cultural troubles of immigrants. Indeed, there are moments in the novel when the cultural preoccupations of immigrants seem to be taken seriously. One of these moments, for instance, occurs in the debate between Chanu and the wife

of his friend, Dr. Azad, over the cultural problems of immigrants. Chanu sparks the debate by dwelling on what he calls the tragedy of immigrants:

I'm talking about the clash between Western values and our own. I'm talking about the struggle to assimilate and the need to preserve one's identity and heritage. I'm talking about children who don't know what their identity is. I'm talking about the feelings of alienation engendered by a society where racism is prevalent. I'm talking about the terrific struggle to preserve one's sanity while striving to achieve the best for one's family. (88)

Mrs. Azad derisively rejects these claims as "crap" and goes on to say:

Why do you make it so complicated? Assimilation this, alienation that! Let me tell you a few simple facts. Fact: we live in a Western society. Fact: our children will act more and more like Westerners. Fact: that's no bad thing. My daughter is free to come and go. Do I wish I had enjoyed myself like her when I was young? Yes!

Listen, when I'm in Bangladesh I put on a sari and cover my head and all that. But here I go out to work. I work with white girls and I'm just one of them. If I want to come home and eat curry, that's my business. Some women spend ten, twenty years here and they sit in the kitchen grinding spices all day and learn only two words of English. They go around covered from head to toe, in their little walking prisons, and when someone calls to them in the street they are upset. The society is racist. The society is all wrong. Everything should change for them. They don't have to change one thing. That is the tragedy. (88-9)

Embedded in Mrs. Azad's comments are the reigning liberal premises about human nature according to which cultural differences are insignificant and social and cultural systems can be classified hierarchically from the most restrictive and backward to the most progressive and liberal. In the views expressed by Mrs. Azad, we see the clearest enunciation of the liberal conception of human nature; she conceives of cultures as superficial and colorful veneers that have no important relationship with the humanity and identity of individuals. This liberal perception of different cultures is tolerant toward them because it is convinced of their immateriality and of the superiority of its own notion of rational and autonomous individuals. It is this impossibly thin and superficial conception of cultures that makes Stanley Fish refer satirically to liberal tolerance for different cultures as "boutique multiculturalism." Liberals, Fish

argues, are boutique multiculturalists because they are convinced of the universality of their core values of individualism and freedom and regard cultures as exotic, tangential and colorful matters that are in essence irrelevant to individuals and their lives; liberals celebrate the proliferation of ethnic restaurants in their societies but dismiss anyone who might interpret the purview of cultures differently as fundamentalist and anti-modern. Thus, Fish argues, liberalism may acknowledge the existence of different cultures and may even advocate tolerance for the values of different cultures, but it reserves for them a superficial and shallow significance because it does not “see those values as truly ‘core’ but as overlays on a substratum of essential humanity. That is the true core, and the differences that mark us externally—differences in language, clothing, religious practices, race, gender, class and so on” are for liberalism insignificant and peripheral (Fish 57). These premises are inherent to many assimilationist arguments which, ignoring the importance of cultures for dislocated individuals, imagine the problem to be as straightforward as shedding one culture and donning another that is more advanced and liberal. What these arguments don’t realize is that it is not completely up to individual immigrants to shed their old culture and adopt the new one because cultures and cultural identities are not completely at the mercy of individual wills. One grows up or lives in a culture and thus that particular culture becomes an integral part of one’s individual identity, endowing his/her life with meaning and significance. This scene constitutes an exception from the novel’s overarching drift toward individualistic liberalism because of the unsympathetic light in which Mrs. Azad and her failing family life are characterized. The disapproving tone with which Mrs. Azad’s views are represented in *Brick Lane*, as postcolonial critics have argued, is at odds with its eventual reaffirmation of the same individualistic argument for assimilation.

Another significant instance of the notice taken by *Brick Lane* of “the tragedy of immigrants” is its depiction of the troubles of Bengali immigrants as a Muslim minority in a Western society. While all immigrant and minority communities are understandably sensitive about the prejudices of the majority culture against them, the Muslim minority in the West is particularly so because of the politicized nature of Islam in the West. By politicized, I mean that Islam in the West has become a political target either by those who resent the increasing presence of non-Christian i.e. Muslim immigrants in their countries or by those political elites and factions who seek more anti-Islamic foreign policies in the Middle East and around the world. In other words, political interests and conflicts, at home and in the Middle East, have intensified the need felt by some segments of the population in the West to demonize Islam and Muslims more than any other minority religion and culture at present. As Talal Asad says, “nothing that is published [in Europe] about Muslim beliefs and practices can ... be without political significance, not even in a work of fiction” (“Ethnography” 242). To illustrate the politicized nature of Islam in the West, Asad contrasts the response Rushdie’s controversial novel *The Satanic Verses* received from its Muslim and non-Muslim audience in Europe. While it was denounced angrily by many of its Muslim audience in the West for insulting their religion, Rushdie’s novel was given an “aggressively enthusiastic reception” by its Western audience who “joyfully recognized” in it their own derogatory conceptions of Islam and its prophet (“Ethnography” 249). The intensification of Islamophobia in the West that has resulted from the conflation of contemporary political and cultural conflicts between Islam and the West has made many Muslims there see themselves and their religion to be “under siege.” This perception lies at the root of much of the defensive anger they [Muslims], religious and secular, feel at the West (Najmabadi 75). The defensive and angry attitude displayed by the Muslim minority in the West clearly illustrates

Michael Walzer's argument regarding the centrality of particular contexts in determining the emphasis we give to different aspects of our cultural identities. As Walzer argues, "under conditions of security," we "acquire a more complex identity than the idea of tribalism suggests." We identify ourselves "with more than one tribe." When asked who we are, we might say that we are American, Jewish, Californians (216). But when our "parochialism is threatened, then" we become "wholly, radically parochial: a Serb, a Pole, a Jew, and nothing else" (215). The proliferation of Islamophobia in the West in the past several decades thus has only increased the inclination of Muslim immigrants there to deemphasize every other dimension of their cultural backgrounds and identify themselves as solely Muslim. Faced with ubiquitous attacks on Islam in the West, many immigrants from Muslim countries have defensively adopted Islam as the primary component of their identities.

Unfortunately many in the West refuse to take the political roots of the anger raging in the Muslim minority very seriously and continue to dismiss it either as the emotional reaction of Muslims to their lagging behind their historical rival West (Bernard Lewis) or as limited to a few radical (bad) Muslims. This is while, as *Brick Lane* shows, the Muslim anger against the West is more widespread (not just confined to a few radical, bad Muslims) and is clearly related to the West's biased perceptions of Islam and unjust handling of the ongoing political conflicts in the Middle East. *Brick Lane* captures the specific concerns underlying the Muslim minority's anger at the West through Nazneen's love affair with Karim who is politically active against the far-right anti-Islamic faction Lion Hearts. Thus we learn that as Muslims in the West, Bengali immigrants not only have to endure racist attacks on Islam as "the religion of hate and intolerance," but also bear witness to the infuriatingly one-sided media coverage of Western foreign policies in the Middle East. *Brick Lane* traces the intensity of anti-Western sentiments in Karim's political Islam

to the multitude of assaults on Islam in the West. Karim forms his Islamic activist group Bengal Tigers after they come under attack by the anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim group, Lion Hearts. By being exposed to the virulent anti-Islamic prejudices of Lion Hearts first, we understand that the anti-Western feelings that youth such as Karim espouse in their meetings do not arise from the scriptures of their religion but from particular acts of hostility and aggression against Islam and Muslims in England and around the world. In her reading of the novel, Jane Hiddleston praises Ali for demonstrating the role played by domestic anti-Islamic stereotypes and the political double standards of the West in the Middle East in politicizing Islam and Muslims against the West. As Hiddleston argues, representing the concerns of Muslims in the West in this light might be illuminating for readers who are steeped in essentialistic and ahistorical arguments that overlook the political grievances of the Muslim minority in the West and ascribe their anger at the West to their cultural incompatibility with Western modernity. This is how Hiddleston summarizes Ali's depiction of political Islam in the West:

Islam is currently seen by many in the West as a threat to civilization and democracy, and therefore as an incomprehensible and foreign other encapsulating all that Western society is not. ... Ali confronts these stereotypes, and presents the characters' anger not as a mythical, incomprehensible hatred of the West but as a desperate reaction to their unequal status in that society. The Islamic group's meetings, for example, are hardly driven by the promotion of a focused set of beliefs but comprise a series of chaotic ramblings, as different characters express varying ideas regarding the (shaky) future of the organization. The motives of the speakers seem to be less a resistance to "democracy" than the affirmation of some form of Muslim presence in a society that fails to recognize their rights. Debates about the attacks on the World Trade Center, or sanctions in Iraq, incite controversy and confusion rather than agreement for concrete action, and the participants express a general sense of injustice through contradictory arguments. This presentation of the evolution of the radical Islamist cause as an amalgamation of frustrations contradicts existing judgments that condemn those apparently inimical to democracy as a principle. ... It is Western hegemony and the marginalization of other cultures, rather than modernity itself, that sparks the anger of the Islamist campaigners. (Hiddleston 66)

To register the widespread nature of the frustration and anger of Muslims in the West, *Brick Lane* shows how the injustice and hypocrisy of the public attacks on Islam drives even Nazneen's mostly secular and a-religious husband Chanu to the public defense of Islam (206, 217).

Unfortunately the West's refusal to seriously address the political grievances of Muslims has plunged some of them from anger into violent acts of terror such as the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

These terrorist attacks, as Ali's novel shows, have only worsened the situation for Muslims in the West, subjecting them to more arbitrary arrests, police harassment, racial profiling and surveillance. The clear implication conveyed by Ali's novel about political Islam in the West seems to be that unless we come to grips with the role of domestic anti-Islamic prejudices and contradictory foreign policies in the politicization of Islam, we not only misunderstand the problems and enmities it has entailed but may also exacerbate them.

Despite these instances in *Brick Lane*, postcolonial critics note, Ali has the story of Nazneen conform almost completely to a conventional liberal narrative of individualism. By the end of the novel, Ali has Nazneen express her newly-found agency in the conventional liberal idiom of individual self-fashioning (*Brick Lane* 339). As Alistair Cormack points out, the overall trajectory of Nazneen's growth seems to reconfirm the "traditional Western Enlightenment argument about freedom." According to Ali, the dislocated immigrant subject is not any different from the "coherent bourgeois self," (Cormack 717) a "freely-choosing individual," "unencumbered" and "wholly detached" (Sandel, "Introduction" 5). Thus Ali seems to agree with her character Mrs. Azad about the universality and superiority of the liberal conception of individuals as autonomous and rational (Cormack 718). While there is nothing inherently wrong with using the language of liberal subjectivity for an immigrant, its employment reinforces the reductive premises of individualistic liberalism and the coercive intolerance it entails. Describing the self-consciousness

of an immigrant in the cliché formulation of liberal individualism, Cormack argues, obfuscates the cultural challenges of immigrants as they attempt to “negotiate inhabiting incommensurable worlds” (718). The rhetoric of freedom and individualism in which Ali’s heroine Nazneen articulates her growth and autonomy is thus not only at odds with immigrant experiences but also flattens the cultural complexities they involve to reconfirm the presuppositions of individualistic liberalism.

Even with regard to political activism, Ali has Nazneen adopt a characteristically liberal posture. At the end of the novel, we have Nazneen explicitly and rather disdainfully reject any desire for political and public activism, saying her days of activism belonged to the period “before [she] knew what she could do” (410). Thus she becomes a model immigrant Muslim who “lives and practices” her difference in a “depoliticized and private fashion” (Brown 46). To say this is not to justify all the political activities initiated on behalf of Islam in the West but to realize that, at present, Islam in the West is always already in the public and politicized. As Cormack says, Ali has Nazneen define her freedom distinctly in opposition to “any potential political activity in which she might be able to recognize herself. ... A true freedom that recognizes the entirety of Nazneen’s subjectivity would have to be conceived in the public realm as well as in the cloistered world of family and friendship.” Instead we have Nazneen “become a new manifestation of the sovereign bourgeois subject who ... becomes the owner, in a small way, of the means of production—she starts a clothing company with Razia—and a competitive individual in a market economy” (Cormack 713).

The predominance of a liberal outlook that oversimplifies cultural differences is, above all, manifest in Ali’s controversial depiction of Bangladesh in the letters sent by Nazneen’s younger sister Hasina. As Perfect says, Hasina’s story is one of “singular and unending misery”:

“Suffering seems to await Hasina at every juncture” (111). Furthermore, this unrelenting story of misery and suffering seems to be clearly linked to the setting in which it takes place i.e. Bangladesh. *Brick Lane* traces Hasina’s troubles to her penchant for freedom and autonomy in a society where they are not favored. Unlike Nazneen who is submissive and fatalistic, Hasina is assertive and rebellious. She enrages her family and is disowned by them for wanting a “love marriage.” The failure of this love marriage plunges Hasina into further troubles as a fallen woman in Dhaka, Bangladesh’s capital, where she goes from being a worker in a garment factory to prostitution. As readers of the novel have pointed out, there seems to be a deliberate contrast between the dark picture of Bangladesh in Hasina’s letters and the idealized one delineated in Chanu’s fantasies. The former seems to be a device for debunking the romanticized picture of Bangladesh cherished by Chanu as “the happiest nation on earth” (290). Chanu constantly invokes this perfectly idyllic picture of Bangladesh to persuade his family to return with him there. As Perfect points out, the novel seems to have incorporated the negative image of Bangladesh to question the empirical truth of Chanu’s romanticized picture of Bangladesh. While Bangladesh is represented as a society that relentlessly punishes Hasina for wanting independence and freedom, England for Nazneen becomes a society where she discovers and asserts her autonomy and freedom. This picture of Bangladesh as backward and harshly restrictive, Perfect argues, plays an important part in Nazneen’s all-important decision not to leave England for Bangladesh with her husband Chanu: “Nazneen’s decision not to return to Bangladesh is not made on account of the attractiveness of life in England so much as the fear of the sorts of horrors described by her sister” (115). Thus Hasina’s letters seem to bear out Razia’s argument to Nazneen that “If everything back home [in Bangladesh] is so damn wonderful, what are all these crazy people doing queuing up for a visa?” (359). By reiterating Perfect’s argument, I don’t want

to question the verisimilitude of the bleak picture of Bangladesh or the sad story of Hasina as it is depicted in Ali's novel. What I want to emphasize is Ali's liberal perspective that insists on classifying cultures and ways of life hierarchically based on its standards of freedom and individuality. While there is nothing wrong with the application of such a liberal standard, it obscures from view the insights concerning the plurality of cultures and the cultural construction of individual identities discovered by dislocated immigrants. I am not suggesting that Ali is obligated to conform to a certain perspective in depicting her characters and settings. What I argue, along with other postcolonial critics of the novel, is that by adopting a liberal perspective, she reenacts liberalism's inability to understand and take seriously the cultural troubles, experiences, and insights of immigrants.

To clarify this point, I will briefly refer to an interesting argument between Ernest Gellner and Talal Asad. In a famous essay entitled, "Concepts and Society," Gellner blames cultural relativism in anthropologists for producing what he regards as defective and wrong pictures of the societies and cultures they study. Gellner accuses relativistic anthropologists of distorting the situation in the non-Western cultural environments by putting them in an artificially positive light. Anthropologists, Gellner argues, refuse to portray indigenous practices and customs as irrational, false and absurd because it would make them appear ethnocentric and "ethnocentricity is a grave defect from the viewpoint of the standards of the anthropological community" (28). Gellner protests that while such relativistic depictions of non-Western societies may be "charitable," they are not accurate. Anthropologists, Gellner argues, should depict the societies and cultures they study as they measure by "the absolutist claims of enlightened Reason," (31) however offensive and negative the final picture may be. In his response to this argument, Asad argues that discarding cultural relativism and reproducing the picture of the other culture as it measures by

“the absolutist claims of enlightened Reason” only serves to reaffirm what liberals in the West already think to be the case without telling them anything about the culture in question. “The tolerance-engendering contextual” interpretations produced by anthropologists which Gellner pokes fun at, Asad argues, are an attempt at not just understanding a different way of life but also questioning our convictions regarding what should be universally valid for everyone, everywhere. In this way, anthropologists are carrying out the commendable service recommended by Walter Benjamin in his, “The Task of the Translator”:

Our translations, even the best ones, proceed from a wrong premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English. Our translators have a far greater reverence for the usage of their own language than for the spirit of the foreign works. ... The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign language. Particularly when translating from a language very remote from his own he must go back to the primal elements of language itself and penetrate to the point where work, image, and tone converge. He must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language. (qtd. Asad, “Concept of Cultural Translation” 157)

What gives various customs and practices their social force is not their conformity with the universal criteria of Enlightenment but the coherence they form together. Anthropologists refuse to depict the cultures they study as they appear in light of the absolutist claims of Reason because they want to convey some notion of the coherence that the cultures seem to possess (Asad, “Concept of Cultural Translation” 147). What might appear to be nothing but a set of backward customs and traditions from a universal liberal perspective may appear like a worthwhile culture, and not just any but the only one so valuable, to the people who live it. The universal standards of the Enlightenment may help us reject a priori any different vision of the good life as backward and inferior but they won’t help us understand the significance a particular culture possesses for its individuals.

The argument made by Asad against Gellner contains the thrust of the challenge made by Ali's postcolonial critics against her; that by adopting an individualistic and universal liberal perspective, she misunderstands and oversimplifies the cultural problems of immigrants. This is because, as I mentioned above, exile and dislocation call into question many conventional perceptions of self-contained and self-sufficient individuals with an inner original identity distinct from their social surroundings; perceptions that have morphed into the central dogmas of individualistic liberalism. To reaffirm the universality of liberal individualism is not only to become blind to the genuine plurality of cultures that cannot be reduced to any hierarchical classification but also to misunderstand the social and cultural character of our individual identities. Such considerations about the cultural troubles of immigrants help generate sympathy and understanding for their struggle to preserve their cultural heritage in a place where it is not practiced and their sadness at its erosion and loss in the face of the dominant culture. While to others Bangladesh and its culture may appear only as a backward and poor country with little if any culture and heritage worth preserving, for some Bengali immigrants if not for all, Bangladeshi culture might be the only culture worth preserving; a more sympathetic perspective would show that Bengali immigrants' preoccupation with and romanticization of their home culture is not just a consequence of their failure to attain respect and social mobility in England as Ali's novel suggests, but a clear indication of the social and cultural constitution of individual identities that individualistic liberalism has never been able to comprehend.

### III

In this section, I want to depart from the critical track laid out by postcolonial critics of *Brick Lane* and suggest reasons that may help us understand Ali's insistence on and reversion to a liberal perspective. I argue that such insistence on individualistic and universal liberalism may

arise from anxieties and fears that have always been entailed by the relativistic discourse of cultures. While the notion of the multiplicity of cultures may help foreclose hasty and dismissive judgments of ways of life that do not conform exactly to the liberal model of freedom and individualism, it also may result in essentialistic and fixed views of people from other cultures which can not only become dehumanizing in their own way but also pave the way for abuse and oppression of individuals within those cultures. In other words, while the discourse of plural and different cultures may help humanize ways of life that depart from the individualistic lifestyle promoted by liberalism, it may in turn legitimate problematic assumptions of homogeneity and essentialism about people of different cultures; this is the simplistic notion that, thanks to their distinctive culture, a particular group of people are essentially similar to one another and essentially different from people of other cultures; that freedom and autonomy are only appropriate for people of a certain culture and are inapplicable to people from other cultures. Even though advocates of the discourse of cultures and multiculturalism have gone to great lengths to forestall such essentialistic assumptions and the dangers following from them, the discourse of cultures is still plagued by such connotations. The predicament of the discourse of cultures, as James Clifford calls it, is its inherent essentialism. I argue that it is fears generated by such assumptions that seem to be inherent in the discourse of cultures that may drive many authors, novelists and critics to revert to and insist on individualistic liberalism even after they have noted its reductive premises.

In "Writing against Culture," the anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod ascribes the essentialistic connotations of cultural descriptions to the generalizations that are inevitable to the evocation of coherence, totality and distinctness in a particular culture.

When one generalizes ... [about a cultural] community, one tends to flatten out differences among them and to homogenize them. The appearance of an absence of internal differentiation makes it easier to conceive of a group of people as a discrete, bounded entity, like “the Nuer,” “the Balinese,” and “the Awlad ‘Ali Bedouin” who do this or that and believe such and such. The effort to produce [cultural] descriptions of people’s beliefs or actions tends to smooth over contradictions, conflicts of interest, and doubts and arguments, not to mention changing motivations and circumstances. The erasure of time and conflict makes what is inside the boundary set up by homogenization something essential and fixed. [The result is a picture of different cultures] as essentially different and discrete. (152-153)

While understanding different practices and beliefs as culture may help avoid judgments of primitive savagery and inhumanity, it also entails the danger of essentialism whose components “homogeneity, coherence, and timelessness” are pointed out by Abu-Lughod above (154). Such essentialistic and monolithic assumptions about different cultures are dangerous because they may lead us to new stereotypical molds that, while respectful of cultural difference, are blind to the irreducible individual differences that exist within any community. While members of a particular cultural community may have some common cultural denominators that differentiate them from members of other communities, no single overarching narrative can do justice to the diversity of the individual stories contained within any culture.

To relate this point to our discussion of *Brick Lane*, we can say that one of the major consequences of the assumption of plural and different cultures is the assumption that everyone within that culture has a similar investment in its reproduction. This is while within all cultures there are hierarchies of powers that privilege certain members and discriminate against others. The assumption of different and plural cultures promoted by the discourse of multiculturalism may thus only serve orthodox and prevalent interpretations within different cultures and work against those who feel oppressed by the status quo. This is the crux of the argument set forth by the liberal political philosopher Susan Okin in her essay “Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?”

As Okin cautions, arguments for cultures may “limit the capacities of women and girls” from non-Western cultures “to live with human dignity equal to that of men and boys, and to live as freely chosen lives as they can.” This is because there are “fairly clear disparities in power between the sexes” and it is usually “the more powerful, and male members” who “are in a position to determine and articulate the group’s beliefs, practices and interests” (12). To recognize non-liberal assumptions for other cultural communities, Okin argues, would result in blindness to and the perpetuation of the oppression of “less powerful members of such groups” who are often comprised of women.

These concerns about the individual rights and freedoms of “less powerful members of [non-Western] cultures” i.e. women, are evident both in Ali’s novel and more explicitly in her polemical attack on its critics. One of the major reasons for Nazneen’s discontent with her husband Chanu and her lover Karim is their objectification of her as the symbol of their authentic cultural identity which they are determined to maintain in exile. Nazneen realizes that both Chanu and Karim have cherished her less for who she is than for being “the real thing”: “a Bengali wife. A Bengali mother. An idea of home. An idea of himself that [they] found in her” (382). Thus *Brick Lane* tries to shed light on the pressures affecting women in immigrant non-Western communities who are at times seen as instrumental to the reproduction of an out-of-place ethnic cultural identity. Ali openly voices these concerns in the article “The Outrage Economy” which she published in reaction to her critics in *The Guardian*. Objecting to the attention paid by the media to the complaints of the Bengali community in England against her novel, Ali says,

It wasn’t the first time, and unfortunately it won’t be the last, that conservative middle-aged men were deemed by the press (and by the government) to be the arbiters of what is and what is not acceptable to a “community.” Privileging their voices in this way comes at a price. As Gupta of Southall Black Sisters has written, the price is paid by weaker groups within those societies, such as women, who find their voices drowned because of the

“stranglehold of culture, religion, and enforced mediation” by the so-called leaders. (421-422)

Here Ali attacks multiculturalism on the same grounds for which Okin had assaulted it; that it reinforces orthodox cultural views and weakens those who dissent from them. The marked defense of and insistence on liberalism in Ali’s novel thus may be seen as a reaction against the dangers inherent in the discourse of cultures and multiculturalism. These concerns are not limited to Ali. In her book, *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism*, Haideh Moghissi similarly warns against the alignment of multicultural feminism in the West with fundamentalism in Muslim-majority countries and urges a reversion to “the Enlightenment, universalism, and the project of modernity” (96). Very much like Ali and Okin, Moghissi founds her warnings on fears that taking the homogenous assumptions of the discourse of cultures literally may result in blindness to the oppression of the weaker members of various non-Western cultures:

In supporting the rights of minority cultures and indigenous traditions, we should ask ourselves: do we know with any precision whose cultures and whose rights to self-expression we are supporting? What are the social and political contexts and power relations behind particular forms of cultural expression? Who has assumed the authority for cultural representation in particular cases, and why? In raising these questions, it is of the utmost importance to remember that culture and “cultural difference” are not transhistorical entities. Neither are they homogenous. Each culture is criss-crossed by internal class, religious, ethnic and regional divisions. Cultures do not have a life of their own, unaffected by social, economic and political change, stressful internal and external forces, and highly differentiated structures of power and disempowerment. (59)

These are important concerns that must be taken into account any time we criticize liberalism for not understanding the plurality of cultures. However, what is unfortunate about such liberal critiques of cultures is that they may end up reaffirming reductively thin and impossibly individualistic conceptions of humanity that are at odds with the cultural experiences of immigrants. As Afsaneh Najmabadi points out, such understandable but eventually reductive reactions have become particularly dominant with regard to Islam and Muslim women in the

West. Many Muslims in the West find themselves confronted with a terrible dilemma: On the one hand, they want to discredit the ahistorical, reductive and dehumanizing representations of Islam and Muslims that are dominant in the West; on the other, they are afraid that by defending Islam and Muslims against Western Islamophobia, they may be inadvertently legitimating Islamic authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and south Asia which they seek to oppose. This is how Najmabadi puts this dilemma:

The current divisions among secular feminisms and religious Muslims produce a sense of incredulity toward any project that claims feminism but refuses anti-Islamism. I can speak as a feminist, but the minute I say something that indicates any empathy for Islamicate cultures, it is interpreted as a “defense of Islam,” thereby bringing my feminist credentials under scrutiny. The current division between Islam and anti-Islam demands contrary speaking positions: I must either speak as a Muslim woman or as a secular, anti-Islamic feminist. (76-77)

In short, the politicized nature of Islam in the West at present has impelled many scholars, authors and activists who work on issues related to women’s rights and feminism in Muslim countries to feel that they are faced with a stark binary opposition. They think that the choice facing them is one between defending Islamic fundamentalism and promoting individualistic and universal conceptions of Enlightenment. This is precisely the charge leveled against Ali by her postcolonial critics i.e. that her novel is dismissive of cultures. As I mentioned before, insistence on individualistic liberal arguments for assimilation, which seems to be one of the main points of Ali’s novel, involves its own coercive intolerance.

To better understand this intolerance, we may refer to the controversy over the banning of headscarves in public schools in France. As Joan Scott points out, some liberals in France have tried to justify their intolerance against female Muslim students wearing headscarves in public schools on the grounds of feminism and universal individualism. As Scott puts it:

Those who supported the ban conceived of it as a valiant action by the modern French state to rescue girls from the obscurity and oppression of traditional communities, thus opening their lives to knowledge and freedom, even if it meant expelling them from school. The contradiction—that legislation designed to provide choice ended up by denying it—was not perceived as such by the law’s champions. This was because of their faith in the superiority of their philosophy, their equation of it with universalism, progress and civilization. To justify imposing a law on these young women, the proponents of the ban had to identify them as victims who had been denied the right to choose by an oppressive, authoritarian community. (126)

Underlying the banning of headscarves is the assumption that enlightened female Muslims students would not choose to wear headscarves; that they must have adopted it by force; that adoption of headscarves by female Muslim students is a public manifestation of a particular cultural background that must be strictly privatized. The latter, as Scott points out, arises from the dominance of the Enlightenment conception of individuality in France which believes “autonomous individuals might hold religious beliefs, but these must be separable from their sense of self.” Thus even “the desire to wear” the headscarf is “illegitimate” because it signifies “a gesture of community attachment at odds with the independent nature of individuals” (134). Arguments to the contrary that many female Muslim students may have voluntarily decided to put on their headscarves, that wearing the headscarf is part of their Muslim identity and not a deliberate attempt at promoting their religion have consistently been blocked and rejected.

The lawmakers insisted that this could not logically be the case. By definition, the headscarf was an endorsement of submission, an abandonment of individuality, a declaration of one’s primary allegiance to communal standards and obligations. It was a flag of a different color and, as such, signaled disloyalty to the principles and values of the republic. (148-149)

As Scott points out, this insistence on the irreconcilability of Islam and the republic is built on the “caricatures” of both: “one a homogenous culture or community, the other a homogenous nation of individuals; one whose difference made its inclusion impossible, the other which recognized no

difference at all” (149). This is the kind of intolerance that excessive insistence on individualistic liberalism may result in and postcolonial critics have tried to warn against.

### III

In “The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man,” Geertz highlights simplicity as the hallmark of the Enlightenment view of man.

The Enlightenment view of man was ... that he was wholly of a piece with nature and shared in the general uniformity of composition which natural science ... had discovered there. There is, in brief, a human nature as regularly organized, as thoroughly invariant, and as marvelously simple as Newton’s universe. ... The great, vast variety of differences among men, in beliefs and values, in customs and institutions, both over time and from place to place, is essentially without significance in defining his nature. It consists of mere accretions, distortions even, overlaying and obscuring what is truly human—the constant, the general, the universal—in man. (*Interpretation of Cultures* 34-35)

The doubt cast upon the simple view of man in Enlightenment by the idea of cultures has certain advantages and disadvantages. The main disadvantages are that first it creates many uncertainties; we can no longer take the superiority and universality of the ideal of the rational individual freed from all cultural attachments for granted and thus we can no longer easily dismiss different ideals of human flourishing as inferior and provisional; the second disadvantage is that it may reinforce the position of the most prejudiced hardliners within different cultures. However these two main disadvantages also account for the main advantages of the discovery of cultures. Uncertainties derived from the skepticism that we already know what is best for everyone in the world might be better than a certainty that rejects anything unfamiliar as worthless, backward and irrational. Furthermore, ignoring and denying the existence of cultural prejudices that derive from the cultural nature of human identities, in the end, may not help very much in grappling with their grave and violent consequences. Perhaps a better starting point for dealing with the persistence of cultural prejudices would be the acknowledgment of their entrenched nature.

This is the gist of Geertz's argument against anti-relativists in his essay, "Anti Anti-Relativism." To argue against anti-relativism is not to endorse essentialistic pictures of different cultures that are at times set forth and defended in the name of cultural relativism. To argue against anti-relativism is to point out the excessive thinness of its individualistic picture of human nature. Individuals are never as "wholly detached" and "unencumbered" as Enlightenment and individualistic liberalism envisions them to be. "From the start," they are "situated, embedded in a history that locates [them] among others, and implicates [their] good in the good of the communities whose stories [they] share." These stories situate them "in the world and gives [their] lives their moral particularity" (Sandel, "Introduction" 9, 6). If relativism has any benefits, Geertz asserts, it is to warn us against our entrenched ethnocentric inclination to immediately reject ways of life that appear to be different from us as backward and uncivilized. It is valuable not because it confers on us indifference to the "unfamiliar" (they are different, we should leave them to themselves) but "humility" and "openness" (Mehta 21). To be against anti-relativistic is not to rationalize and condone the various inhumanities and inequalities that may occur within a different culture but to remember that "it is through the parochial that most of us experience and live life" (Mehta 27) and be alert against our own ethnocentric tendency to immediately call "barbarism whatever is not [our] own practice" (Montaigne qtd. Geertz, "Anti Anti-Relativism" 264-265).

Initially when I wanted to write this chapter, I wanted to end by recommending liberalism not on the universal intellectual grounds of Enlightenment but on practical and pragmatic grounds, very much like Richard Rorty: Liberalism as a political system that recognizes the plurality and incommensurability of different visions of the good life and has abandoned the quest for a universal consensus on its rational ideals. Rorty recommends liberalism not because of the

universal superiority of its intellectual ideals or its individualistic conceptions of human beings but simply because it has given up on the promotion of these ideals and recognizes that there might be people in the society who may not agree with the superiority and universal validity of these ideals. Here is how he defends his pragmatic vision of political liberalism which he calls “postmodernist liberalism”:

The advantage of postmodernist liberalism is that it recognizes that in recommending that ideal one is not recommending a philosophical outlook, a conception of human nature or of the meaning of human life, to representatives of other cultures. All we should do is point out the practical advantages of liberal institutions in allowing individuals and cultures to get along together without intruding on each other’s privacy, without meddling with each other’s conceptions of the good. We can suggest that UNESCO think about cultural diversity on a world scale in the way our ancestors in the seventeenth and eighteenth century thought about religious diversity on an Atlantic scale: as something to be simply ignored for purposes of designing political institutions. (“Ethnocentrism” 209)

However, I realized that simply ignoring cultures in “designing political institutions,” as Rorty puts it, may be simpler to achieve in Western countries which have neither the economic nor the cultural insecurities of non-Western countries; that in many non-Western countries, states are seen not only as the main tool for modernizing the country but also for preserving and promoting a particular national (sometimes religious) culture. Here I am not justifying the non-pluralistic and non-liberal political systems that exist in different parts of the world today. I am just trying to suggest why the realization of “merely political” state structures that are free from any biases against any particular section of a territory’s population is proving so difficult in many parts of the world. Otherwise I completely agree with the advantages of pluralistic and merely political state structures as they are recommended by Rorty. The reason I point this out is because of the grip this pragmatic argument has found on the imagination of many postcolonial authors and critics. Many postcolonial authors, like Rorty, have given up persuading others about superiority and universal validity of the Enlightenment conception of individuals and seem to believe in a

binary vision of states and countries: the privileged pole of this binary consists of countries in which various ways of life seem to be able to live together and the unprivileged pole consisting of countries in which such pluralism and diversity is not the case. This seems to be the main difference between Bangladesh and England as they are compared in Ali's novel; one allows independent women to freely pursue their choices and the other one apparently does not. There is little doubt that the picture of a pluralistic society in which people with different perceptions of the good life can live together and not interfere with one another is better than its alternative. However, what is elided in insisting on such an obvious binary is reflection on the important reasons why the materialization of such pluralistic states seems so difficult in various parts of the non-Western world which are plagued either by ethnic cleansing and apartheid or authoritarian regimes, secular or religious.

Recognizing the existence of plural cultures and their importance to individuals makes our picture of the world very complicated, so complicated in fact that we may be tempted to return to Enlightenment's simple and straightforward conception of human beings as rational individuals unsituated in and unaffected by any social and cultural particularities. We may do so, but doing that will not make cultural attachments and prejudices disappear neither in ourselves nor in others. Acknowledging the existence of various cultures and ways of being, on the other hand, may increase our chances of containing the grave injustices and massacres inspired by their local and international clashes in today's world.

## Chapter II Liberalism and Nationalism in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*

Launched soon after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the US war in Afghanistan against the Taliban was promoted in the US and other parts of the Western world as the liberation of the Afghan people, particularly Afghan women, from the repressive rule of the fundamentalist group the Taliban. The binary assumption on which such a promotional formulation of the war was based i.e. a civilized West vs. an uncivilized Muslim world, was not overlooked by the Muslim minority in the West who had already been subjected to the intensification of Islamophobic views in the wake of 9/11 attacks. Such a formulation of the war in Afghanistan was seen by many of these Muslim immigrants as another manifestation of the West's entrenched bigotry against Islam and Muslims. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, at present Islam in the West is deeply politicized. This politicization arises both from historical hostilities between Christianity and Islam and the current political conflicts in the Middle East. Islam in the West is thus targeted both by various far-right anti-immigrant factions who oppose the presence of Muslim immigrants in their countries and by the proponents of the conflicts in the Middle East who seek more anti-Islamic foreign policies by Western superpowers. Such conflation of political and cultural conflicts has intensified attacks on Islam in the West. Directly exposed to such attacks, immigrants from Muslim countries in the West have become understandably more suspicious of and angry at the West. The public promotion of the War in Afghanistan in terms of the cliché stereotype of liberating oppressed Muslim women from Islam further enraged many Muslims in the West. This anger could be seen even in academic articles and journals. For example, in "Feminism, the Taliban and the Politics of Counter-Insurgency," Saba Mahmood and Charles Hirschkind argue how the exclusive focus by America's media and political organizations on the oppression of women by the Taliban helped the American government cover up "the crucial role

the United States had played in creating the miserable conditions under which Afghan women were living” (340-341). “The twin figures of the Islamic fundamentalist and his female victim” (341) were explanation enough for everything that was wrong with a Muslim society like Afghanistan because “most Americans” already know Islam to be “generally oppressive of women” (347). Instead of seeing the oppression of women in Afghanistan in terms of an ahistorical Islamic fundamentalism and the Taliban, Mahmood and Hirschkind urge us to trace it to the destabilization and destruction of Afghanistan through its entanglement in the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the US. This argument recurs with much frequency in many other academic articles on the US war in Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> Thus while the media and various political organizations would try to promote the war by focusing only on the oppression of women under the fundamentalist Taliban, various academics and activists who were more informed about the politics of Afghanistan and Pakistan tried to counter the Islamophobic connotations of these stereotypical images by historicizing the rise of the Taliban in the Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union in Afghanistan.

The dispute over Islam provoked by the US war in Afghanistan is just an example of the intensely politicized nature of Islam in the West that I referred to above. Various organizations in the West have tried to tap into the entrenched stereotypes of Islam in the Western imagination both to deflect attention from their own contradictory policies and promote more anti-Islamic foreign policies; the Muslim minority in the West in turn tries to defend Islam against such ahistorical and stereotypical attacks, usually by attacking the West and blaming it for everything that goes wrong in Muslim countries. However reductive, these polemical exchanges for and against Islam in the

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<sup>1</sup> See for example, Mahmood Mamdani, “Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism” *American Anthropologist* 104. 3 (2002): 766-775, and Lila Abu-Lughod, “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and its Others” *American Anthropologist* 104. 3 (2002): 783-790, among others.

West are an important dimension of our present era and cannot be ignored. Nevertheless understanding the war in Afghanistan simply in terms of clashes between the West and Islam draws attention away from other ways in which the war in Afghanistan might have been perceived. Listening to the debate between opponents and proponents of this war in the West, we might think that indeed the war in Afghanistan is between Islam and the West, imagining Afghanistan as a homogenous nation of Muslims that is being attacked by the most powerful Western power, the US. By saying this I am not ruling out the importance of Islam for the people of Afghanistan nor repudiating the importance of the ongoing clashes between Islam and the West. I just want to point out how the interpretation of the war in Afghanistan in terms of Islam and the West prevents us from seeing the internal complexities and ethnic divisions in that country; once we put the civilizational conflict between Islam and the West aside, we realize that for many people in Afghanistan, particularly the non-Pashtuns, the Taliban not only represented a fundamentalist and inflexible version of Islam but also a brutal reassertion of Pashtun ethnocentrism that had been undermined during the civil war in early 90s.<sup>2</sup> Thus many people in Afghanistan despised and opposed the Taliban not just because of their strict Islamic fundamentalism but also for their unrelenting Pashtun ethnocentrism. These important aspects of the internal politics in Afghanistan are usually less emphasized in the dispute between the Muslim minority in the West and their Islamophobic opponents. To say this is not to undermine attempts by the Muslim minority to historicize the rise of the Taliban and expose the destructive role the US itself had played in the destabilization of Afghanistan and empowerment of fundamentalist groups in that country. The Muslim minority is responding to the multitude of attacks on Islam in

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<sup>2</sup> As Thomas Barfield says in his account of the Taliban years in Afghanistan, “For non-Pashtuns, the Taliban were just turbaned chauvinists seeking to regain a Pashtun political hegemony that they had lost curding the Soviet war” (263). See Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. Princeton: Princeton U P, 2010.

a non-Muslim West. However, if we are to properly understand the cultural and political situation in countries like Afghanistan, we need to go beyond the binary of Islam and the West that is dominant in debates over Islam in the West. For many people in Afghanistan, like in many other Muslim majority countries, domestic ethnic, linguistic and sectarian concerns are as important as the political hostilities between Islam and the West around the world, if not more so. We should bear in mind that Muslims in Muslim majority countries do not have the identity concerns about Islam that Muslims living in non-Muslim Western countries have. They see themselves less in terms of an opposition between Islam and the West and more in terms of their ethnic and national identities and concerns. Since they live in Muslim countries, they can afford to take Islam for granted and thus they worry more about their ethnic and national identities than Islam which is an integral part of their lives.

One of the biggest advantages of Khaled Hosseini's debut novel *The Kite Runner* (2003) is to help its readers in the West, Muslim or non-Muslim, understand why many people in Afghanistan might understand the war less in terms of a war between Islam and the West and more in terms of the long-standing ethnic divisions and hostilities that have always raged in that country. While, as some critical readings have pointed out, overall Hosseini's novel seems to have been perfectly in line with the interventionist neoconservative ideology dominant during the Bush administration, nevertheless by capturing the entrenched nature and the dehumanizing influence of cultural ethnocentrism in ordinary individuals it departs from the Manichean worldview for which the neoconservatives in the US became notorious. By showing the ubiquitous and banal nature of the "evil" produced in members of a culture by its inherent ethnocentrism, *The Kite Runner* blurs the clear-cut division between good and evil that marked the reductive discourse of American neoconservatives.

Published in 2003, *The Kite Runner* in time became a runaway bestseller, remaining on *The New York Times* Best Seller list for two consecutive years. It relates the story of its protagonist's search for redemption and forgiveness. Amir has been racked by guilt since the day he refused to help his constant childhood companion, Hassan, from being raped by the hateful and racist bully of their neighborhood Assef. What has rendered Amir's guilt particularly intolerable for him is the unsettling recognition that he, very much like Assef, viewed Hassan from the ethnocentric lens of his Pashtun identity as an inferior and worthless Hazara. Thus in recounting Amir's efforts to make amends for his past, *The Kite Runner* becomes manifestly invested with an allegorical significance, representing in microcosm the grave consequences of Pashtun ethnocentrism for minority Hazaras. Through the personal story of Amir and Hassan, Hosseini explores the ingrained ethnic and religious tensions between these two ethnic communities in Afghanistan. However *The Kite Runner* is more complex than a mere condemnation of Pashtun ethnocentrism embodied by the obviously villainous character Assef. Much of Amir's guilt arises from his detecting an inadvertent kinship between himself and the sadistic Assef; to his chagrin, Amir realizes that in his behavior toward Hassan, he has not been any less monstrous than Assef. By pointing out the unlikely affinity between Amir and Assef, Hosseini's allegorical tale brings out two important points: first, the great extent to which individuals are at the mercy of their cultural influences and second, how collective identities are inevitably predicated upon denigrating and dehumanizing perceptions of others; stressing the shocking kinship between Assef and Amir, Hosseini wants us to understand the central role played by our unchecked but ordinary cultural prejudices in the production of ethnocentric monstrosities like Assef.

What gives Hosseini's tale a particular relevance to contemporary world politics is its examination of the role played by nationalism in the worsening of ethnic tensions in Afghanistan.

The increasing marginalization and persecution of Hazaras in modern Afghanistan cannot be understood without their transformation into a minority in the wake of modern Pashtun nationalism. It is the politicization of ethnic identities under Pashtun nationalism that has resulted in the banality of ethnic hatred in Afghanistan which is the main theme of *The Kite Runner*. The evil represented by the racist Assef is not an individual one but the byproduct of the entrenched and pervasive anti-Hazara racism of his society and culture. What becomes unsettlingly clear to Amir on the day of Hassan's rape is that like Assef he does not regard Hazaras like Hassan as equally human. For him as well as for Assef, as a Hazara Hassan is subhuman and inferior. It is this recognition that unhinges Amir with guilt. *The Kite Runner* thus becomes an intriguing inquiry into the devastating consequences of nationalism in multi-ethnic societies like Afghanistan. Besides explaining in detail the humanistic critique of nationalism in *The Kite Runner*, I will try to point out the important cultural and economic reasons that have rendered nationalism irresistibly attractive for various ethnic and cultural communities in many underdeveloped and developing non-Western societies. However I think it is still very important that we never forget the atrocities and massacres that the politicization of ethnic identities under nationalism is bound to generate. And therein lies the significance of Hosseini's novel *The Kite Runner*.

## II

Understandably, nationalism has elicited strongly negative reactions from many contemporary cultural critics. By explicitly privileging the values and priorities of one particular culture and ethnicity, these critics argue, ethnic and cultural forms of nationalism stigmatize and discriminate against other ethnic and cultural communities in their territories; by promoting the homogeneity and superiority of one particular ethnicity or cultural group and declaring the territory of the state

as its eternal homeland, nationalism incites hatred and violence against members of cultural and ethnic minorities and paves the way for their persecution and even extermination. States and their public institutions, many cultural critics insist, should remain culturally and ethnically impartial; they should be free from particular ethnic and cultural biases as much as possible. The horrifying instances of genocide and mass killing in the modern period, they argue, have resulted from the politicization of cultural and ethnic identities under nationalism. Denouncing cultural and ethnic forms of nationalism as inherently discriminatory, racist and unjust, these critics recommend liberalism as a political system in which rights take precedence over ethnic identities and cultural conceptions of the good life. Embedded in liberalism as a political system, they argue, is an exemplary civic form of nationalism and national identity that does not discriminate among citizens on the basis of ethnicity, culture or religion.

For good ethical reasons, the arguments offered by these critics against ethnic and cultural forms of nationalism have become immensely influential in cultural studies. Peaceful coexistence in our irreducibly diverse societies, the consensus against nationalism seems to insist, requires us to privatize our cultural and ethnic identities and refrain from involving them in public affairs.

Nowadays few critics question the superiority of liberal states that remain impartial regarding the good life and do not discriminate against ethnic and cultural minorities. However the supremacy of these arguments against ethnic and cultural nationalism has resulted in the proliferation of simplistic theories and explanations that not only ignore the collective nature of cultural identities but also overlook the centrality of cultures for many fledgling or nascent non-Western nation-states. By focusing our attention merely on the oppressive and deadly aspects of nationalism, the predominance of anti-nationalism arguments has led us to overlook the awe-inspiring sense of self-sacrifice and commitment nationalism as a collective and cultural sentiment produces in

individuals. Furthermore, the primacy of assaults on nationalism has led us to forget that many non-Western peoples view a strong and stable nation-state as not only the only means by which they can preserve their distinctive cultural identities in the modern world but also as the only means by which they can become modern and developed in the first place. The exclusive focus on the evils of nationalism, while justified, has blinded us to these important factors that explain the irresistible attractions nationalism continues to have for many cultures and ethnicities around the world. By setting forth this counterargument, I don't want to revive one-sided defenses of nationalism that overlook its tendency toward ethnic cleansing and genocide. I merely want to remind us of what our rage against nationalism, however justified, has kept us from registering. I think it is time we supplemented our condemnations with understanding.

### III

The liberal case against nationalism is cogent and strong. Liberal opponents of nationalism advance the convincing claim that states should not openly discriminate among their citizens on the basis of ethnicity, religion or sex. Nationalism is problematic, they argue, because it reinforces and naturalizes the prejudices and exclusions of one particular cultural or ethnic community. As Lord Acton argued,

By making the State and the nation commensurate with each other in theory, [nationalism] reduces to a subject condition all other nationalities that may be within the boundary. It cannot admit them to an equality with the ruling nation which constitutes the State, because the State would then cease to be national, which would be a contradiction of the principle of its existence. According, therefore, to the degree of humanity and civilization in that dominant body which claims all the rights of community, the inferior races are exterminated, or reduced to servitude, or outlawed or put in a condition of dependence.  
(117)

In other words, by presuming the coextension of the nation and the state, nationalism inevitably leads to the disenfranchisement and exclusion of other ethnic and cultural communities residing

within the boundary of the state. Liberalism, on the other hand, is superior because it is inclusive and egalitarian. It does not deny the equality of other people simply because they belong to a different ethnicity or religion. By dismissing cultural differences as morally and legally irrelevant, liberalism brings into focus our equal humanity regardless of our cultural or ethnic identities.

Expounding the liberal view, Martha Nussbaum says,

To count people as moral equals is to treat nationality, ethnicity, religion, class, race and gender as “morally irrelevant”—as irrelevant to that equal standing. Of course, these factors properly enter into our deliberations in many contexts. But the accident of being born a Sri Lankan, or a Jew, or a female, or an African-American, or a poor person, is just that—an accident of birth. It is not and should not be taken to be a determinant of moral worth. Human personhood, by which I mean the possession of practical reason and other basic moral capacities, is the source of our moral worth and this worth is equal. (133)

Similarly the American philosopher Richard Rorty explains the advantages of political liberalism by contrasting it with ethnic forms of nationalism in Eastern Europe. Referring to the ethnic conflicts in Bosnia, Rorty explains how for Serbian nationalists “Muslims [were] no longer human” (“Human Rights” 167).

Serbian murderers and rapists [did] not think of themselves as violating human rights. For they [were] not doing these things to fellow human beings, but to *Muslims*. They [were] not being inhuman, but rather [were] discriminating between true humans and pseudo-humans. ... Serbs [took] themselves to be acting in the interests of true humanity by purifying the world of pseudo-humanity. (“Human Rights” 167, 168)

Rorty contrasts the exclusionary and dehumanizing nationalism of Serbians with the inclusive, pluralistic and egalitarian states and cultures in liberal Western societies that respect the equality and humanity of people from different ethnicities and cultures. Unlike ethnic and cultural forms of nationalism, liberal states and cultures do not discriminate against people and cultures that are different. On the contrary, they reserve for them equal rights and entitlements. Realizing the diversity of ethnicities and conceptions of the good life in the society, these pluralistic and liberal

states and cultures refrain from imposing the customs and values of one particular religion and ethnicity upon the whole population. Pluralistic liberalism is superior to ethnic and cultural forms of nationalism because it does not impose “a philosophical outlook, a conception of human nature or the meaning of human life” on members of “other cultures.” In assuming no conception of the good life, pluralistic liberalism and its institutions allow “individuals and cultures to get along without intruding on each other’s privacy, without meddling with each other’s conceptions of the good” (“Ethnocentrism” 209). The secret to the peaceful coexistence of diverse cultures and ethnicities in liberal societies, Rorty argues, is the exclusively political nature of their institutions. If we want various cultures to peacefully coexist with one another, Rorty argues, we should design “political institutions” that are liberal i.e. liberated from the biases and values of any particular culture or ethnicity (“Ethnocentrism” 209). In other words, cultures can live together peacefully only when the governing institutions of the society are culturally neutral and do not reflect the values and priorities of any one particular culture or religion.

Summarizing the liberal model, Michael Sandel says:

It ... gives pride of place to justice, fairness, and individual rights. Its core thesis is this: a just society seeks not to promote any particular ends, but enables its citizens to pursue their own ends, consistent with a similar liberty for all; it therefore must govern by principles that do not presuppose any particular conception of the good. ...

What makes the just society just is not the telos or purpose or end at which it aims, but precisely its refusal to choose in advance among competing purposes and ends.

[The liberal] ideal ... might be summed up in the claim that the right is prior to the good, ... in two senses: The priority of the right means first, that individual rights cannot be sacrificed for the sake of the general good, and second, that the principles of justice that specify these rights cannot be premised on any particular vision of the good life. (“The Procedural Republic” 82)

These principles are reconfirmed in Michael Ignatieff’s book on nationalism *The Warrior’s*

*Honor*. Cultures can get along with one another, Ignatieff argues, as long as they are not

politicized in the legal, educational and political institutions of the state. “No human difference matters much until it becomes a privilege, until it becomes the basis for oppression” (50). Ethnic and cultural forms of nationalism intensify clashes and conflicts between different ethnicities and cultures in a territory because they politicize a particular ethnic and cultural identity. With their politicization under the reign of ethnocentric nation-states, cultural and communal divisions that may have been indifferent or at least less significant in the past suddenly become matters of life and death. Cultural and ethnic forms of nationalism employ the all-powerful and omnipresent apparatus of states to promote and disseminate their particular culture and discriminate against people from different ethnic or cultural backgrounds. Thus they turn indifferent cultural differences into “markers of power and status.” By limiting rights and privileges to members of a particular race, ethnicity or religion, cultural and ethnic forms of nationalism turn cultures into hierarchical “races,” changing them into fundamental markers of inclusion and privilege on the one side and exclusion and oppression on the other. Under such circumstances, if you happen to belong to an ethnicity or culture different from the nationalizing ethnicity or culture, you are not only likely to be deprived of the important privileges and rights accorded by the central state to its citizens but are also likely to be subjected to discrimination, ethnic cleansing and massacre because you are seen as an outsider who does not belong in the territory of the nation.

The hardening of cultural differences under ethnic nationalism is akin to the “racialization” of cultures under colonial systems which created a hierarchical distinction between the privileged colonizers and the unprivileged colonized. As Albert Memmi argues in *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, racism and racialization are built into colonial configurations because they are by definition Manichean i.e. designed to privilege the colonizers and oppress and exclude the natives. Racism is inherent to colonialism because it represents a political structure that

transforms indifferent cultural differences into hierarchical and exclusionary ones. It divides the population into the “subhuman” colonized and the “superior” colonizers merely on the basis of racial and cultural distinctions. And once cultural distinctions become the basis of such political divisions, they become hardened, fixed and toxic. “Colonization creates the colonized just as ... it creates the colonizer” (Memmi 91). Memmi identifies racism as the hallmark of the Manichean structure of colonization, saying “Racism sums up and symbolizes the fundamental relation which unites colonialist and colonized” (70). Divided thus, the colonized and colonizers cease to have human relations with one another as equal individuals because they hate or distrust one another “en bloc” (130). The colonizers oppress and exclude the colonized “en bloc” regarding them as an inferior and subhuman race and the colonized distrust and hate the colonizers “en bloc” viewing them homogeneously as the source of their oppression and dehumanization. By turning cultural differences into markers of exclusion or inclusion, ethnic nationalism similarly creates a hierarchical and Manichean distinction between the privileged ethnic majority and unprivileged minorities. Built on a political structure that is designed to privilege and empower a particular ethnic group and exclude and oppress others, ethnic nationalism is as inherently racist and racializing as colonialism. As Michael Walzer says, “under conditions of security,” people comfortably slide into their multiple identities; they acknowledge that their hybrid and complex identities cannot be reduced to any simple and pure conception of cultural or ethnic identity (216). Nationalism makes this “multiplication of identities” impossible. By enthroning one ethnic identity, it threatens its surrounding identities. When our “parochialism is threatened, then [we become] wholly, radically parochial: a Serb, a Pole, a Jew, and nothing else” (215).

What distinguishes ethnic nationalism from colonialism is its increased susceptibility to genocide and ethnic cleansing. Non-settling European colonialism in Africa and Asia did not intend to

exterminate the natives. As a territorial ideology, ethnic nationalism is much more prone to genocide and ethnic massacre. Having turned considerable segments of the population of a territory into second-class minorities, ethnic nationalism reclassifies them as impurities that have defiled the national homeland and stained its purity. Its most extreme proponents seek to cleanse the soil of the nation-state from all such cultural impurities. “Reducing target populations to subhuman states,” Arjun Appadurai argues, ethnocentric nationalism creates “distance between killers and killed ... providing a self-fulfilling proof of the ideological argument that the victims are subhuman, vermin, insects, scum, garbage, and yet a cancerous part of the valued national body” (56). Minority populations become prone to genocidal violence, Appadurai argues, because they are literally reduced to dirt that needs to be wiped out.

This is a convincing argument against nationalism. It astutely recognizes the centrality and omnipresence of states in modern societies and insists on their cultural and ethnic impartiality and fairness. Given the diversity of ethnicities and cultures within different territories, justice and peaceful coexistence require that we, as Rorty said, ignore our ethnic and cultural identities in designing our political institutions. Otherwise, it is very likely that we erect ubiquitous and powerful state institutions that openly discriminate against certain ethnic or cultural groups and even promote their exclusion and extermination from the national soil. Expounding this argument, Ignatieff says:

The essential task ... is to help people see themselves as individuals, and then to see others as such; that is, to make problematic that untaught, unexamined fusion of personal and group identity on which nationalist intolerance depends. For nationalist intolerance requires a process of abstraction in which actual, real individuals in all their specificity are depersonalized and turned into carriers of hated group characteristics. (70)

Peaceful coexistence under liberalism requires that we depoliticize and privatize our cultural and ethnic identities and think of ourselves and others as individuals. Unless we see one another as “actual, real individuals,” we are likely to negatively stereotype and denigrate different people and cultures according to our in-built cultural biases.

But as communitarian critics of liberalism have pointed out it is very difficult, if not impossible, for us to think of people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds as individuals. We do not see other people independently of their cultures and ethnicities because we ourselves are never independent of our cultural and ethnic identities. What these communitarian critics question is the underlying “conception of the person” on which political liberalism founds and justifies itself. According to Sandel, the self or the person as presupposed by political liberalism is an “unencumbered self, a self understood as prior to and independent of purposes and ends” (“The Procedural Republic” 86). This is while we never understand ourselves as such unencumbered selves but as “the particular persons we are—as members of this family or community or nation or people, as bearers of that history, as citizens of this republic” (90). As Alasdair MacIntyre says, “We all approach our own circumstances as bearers of a particular social identity. I am someone’s son or daughter, someone else’s cousin or uncle; I am a citizen of this or that city, a member of this or that guild or profession; I belong to this clan, that tribe, this nation” (142). Expanding on this communitarian position, Sandel says, “we cannot conceive ourselves as independent ... as bearers of selves wholly detached from our aims and attachments. ... Certain of our roles are partly constitutive of the persons we are—as citizens of a country, or members of a movement, or partisans of a cause” (“Introduction” 5-6). We are not only “defined by the communities we inhabit,” but also “implicated in the purposes and ends characteristic of those communities” (Sandel, “Introduction” 6). As Macintyre says, “what is good for me has to be good for one who

inhabits these roles” (142). In other words, human conceptions of good life and interests are never individual affairs but collective and social ones. “The story” of our lives is “always embedded in the story of those communities from which [we] derive [our] identity—whether family or city, tribe or nation, party or cause.” These particular social and communal frameworks “situate us in the world” (Sandel, “Introduction” 6).

Prejudices and biases against other communities, cultures and ethnicities are an inherent part of the cultural constitution of human identities. Ethnocentrism is our defense against cultural relativism. Ethnocentrism reassures us that different people and ways of life are not equally normal and human, and that ours is superior and others are inferior and thus it helps us maintain the distinctiveness of our cultural identity. Explaining the inherently collective, oppositional and ethnocentric nature of cultural identities, the French anthropologist Claude Levi Strauss says:

By itself, the diversity of cultures would pose no problem beyond the objective fact of its existence. ... [However the existence of different cultures inevitably becomes problematic because] each culture calls itself the only genuine and worthwhile culture; it ignores the others and even denies that they are cultures. (7)

To an observer who has been trained by his own society to recognize its values, a civilization intent on developing its own very different values appears to possess no values at all. It seems to the observer as if something is happening only in his culture, as if only his culture is privileged to have a history that keeps adding events to one another. For him, only this history offers meaning and purpose. In all other societies, so he believes, history does not exist: at best, it marks time. (11)

From birth and, as I have said, probably even before, the things and beings in our environment establish in each one of us an array of complex references forming a system—conduct, motivations, implicit judgments, which education then confirms by means of its reflexive view of the historical development of our civilization. We literally move along with this reference system, and the cultural systems established outside it are perceptible to us only through the distortions imprinted upon them by our system. Indeed it may even make us incapable of seeing those other systems. (12)

Helping us recognize ourselves as members of a particular culture, in other words, other people and cultures have to be deemed inferior so that we can sustain the particularity of our cultures. By

being biased against or indifferent to others, we assure ourselves that our way of life and culture is the only one “genuine” and “worthwhile.” As members of particular cultures and communities, we cannot help such biases and prejudices. As Levi-Strauss says, viewed from the lens of our cultures, people from other cultures appear “to possess no values at all” (11). Explaining the instinctive nature of the ethnocentric force of cultural identities, Christopher Herbert says,

Nothing is more characteristically human ... than the irrational impulse to exclude as alien anyone perceived as belonging to another group. ... Human beings urgently need a sense of boundedness, of definite limits ... [which] they create ... collectively by classing other groups as alien and by reinforcing this principle of classification by feeling an invincible, quasi-instinctive repugnance for all ways other than their own. (136)

In short, the recognition of our particular cultural identities is bound up with the ethnocentric dismissal of others. It is by denigrating and dehumanizing other cultures and ways of life that we sustain the unsettling awareness of the contingency of our own culture.

This is an important insight that we tend to forget when we focus exclusively on the evils of nationalism. By merely emphasizing the virtues of privatized and individualistic identities, we forget how difficult and almost impossible it is to overcome our cultural biases and exclusions. Overcoming our prejudices against other cultures and ethnicities is difficult because they are an integral part of the collective and cultural attachments and relations that define who we are as persons. We can never think of ourselves as disembodied and detached individuals because we are always situated in particular cultural, ethnic and territorial communities. To say this is not to justify racism, discrimination and cultural apartheid but to understand the cultural and social constitution of human identities. The predominance of liberal individualism in the modern period coupled with the liberal assault on the evils of nationalism has blinded us to this important insight regarding both the cultural nature of human identities and their bounded and collective nature.

The awe-inspiring acts of self-sacrifice produced by nationalism in individuals are a manifestation of this important aspect of our identities.

What gives nations this awe-inspiring power is the sense of community, fraternity and continuity they have for individuals. Liberals and humanists are unable to comprehend the incredible sacrifices individuals are ready to make for their nations, communitarians argue, because they don't understand that human beings are never isolated individuals but members of particular communities or nations. Membership in such communities may be an accident of birth but it is fundamental to who an individual is and with whom he/she identifies. It is such bounded and particular communities, communitarians argue, that gives meaning to individual actions and density to human lives. Expressing this view, Uday Mehta says,

Human beings are not born blank slates; instead they inherit a mass of predispositions from an unfathomable past bounded by the variations of time and place. It is the emplacement within these points of references that gives to individuals, and to communities, a sense of their integrity and a self-understanding from which alone life can be, richly experienced—indeed, from which alone moral action is possible. (215)

Communitarians argue that individuals need these territorially bounded and particular cultures to become who they are. National identities are not superficial and ornamental but constitutive of individual identities. When individuals die for their country, they don't think they are dying in vain but that they are giving their lives for the dignity and glory of their country and nation.

To understand why people are ready to make incredible sacrifices for their nations, communitarians argue, we should put ourselves in their shoes. Individuals make immense sacrifices for their nation because for them it locates the one place and culture in which they can feel at home, in which things make sense, in which they can have proper human lives; because for them their nations and national cultures are the home outside of which they are bound to feel

debilitated and homeless. The cultural and territorial boundaries of the nation may appear arbitrary and meaningless from a universal and objective point of view but from the perspective of their nationals they are the line of demarcation between the one place and culture which is their home and the rest of the world that is not. The territorial boundaries of a nation mark the limits of the “consequential” or “consecrated” grounds of its national culture. Expressing this position, James Buzard defines “the nation as the largest ‘place’ there is, demarcating national place-hood not just against the functionally equivalent placehood of another sovereign nation but, more fundamentally, against the backdrop of a world not credited with the same degree of ‘place-ness’” (115). “Nation,” Buzard says, is “the largest organizable space in an entropic universe, the sole guarantor of meaning and value, the most capacious and significant ‘somewhere’ from which to withstand encroachment by the ‘anywhere’ that is nowhere” (116). For nationalists, Buzard argues, the boundaries of their nation are not the line between “one place and another, but between place and placelessness, between the one place where it feels possible to make sense of things, and the nonplace of non-sense, savagery and pointless behavior” (24-25). As Buzard argues, such an asymmetrical perception of geography is at odds with the symmetrical notion of space presumed by Enlightenment that views the whole world interchangeably as “rational, ‘empty,’ and homogenous” (25). By thinking of human beings as individuals, communitarians argue, we are not likely to understand why cultures are not interchangeable and superficial. The territorial and cultural boundaries separating different communities and cultures from others are essential to their distinctive identity as a people. Indeed, national cultures and their boundaries are contingent, communitarians argue, but this contingency is the secret to their uniqueness. And this uniqueness needs to be preserved not because it is merely symbolic but because it is constitutive

of the identity of the nation and its people. It is the bedrock upon which they have founded and organized their community.

Besides the objection raised by communitarians regarding the social and cultural nature of human identities, there are two other major reasons that have made nationalism compelling for many non-Western cultures and ethnicities. First, the preservation of their particular ethnic and cultural identity; second, modernization. Proponents of liberalism have rightly recognized the ubiquity and centrality of a homogeneous and dominant public culture in modern societies. As Will Kymlicka points out, “modernization involves the diffusion throughout a society of a common culture, including a standardized language, embodied in common economic, political, and educational institutions” (76). The existence of such a common societal culture is presupposed by modern states because of their need for “a mobile, educated, and literate work-force” (77). This ubiquitous and common public culture, opponents of nationalism argue, should be stripped of particular markers of ethnic and cultural identity so that it can be acceptable to the diverse population of the society. In other words, ethnic and cultural forms of nationalism are objectionable, they argue, because they explicitly and exclusively promote the values and beliefs of one particular ethnicity or religion and thus are discriminatory against those parts of the population who have different views or come from different ethnicities or cultural backgrounds. As I explained above, for many advocates of liberalism, public and cultural neutrality constitutes the main virtue of liberalism over nationalism.

However, some critics have argued that the establishment of culturally and ethnically neutral public institutions may be possible in the West because it is not worried about the preservation of its culture and civilization. Western cultures are not only firmly established in their own societies, they argue, but are also very popular in non-Western countries as well. This is while for many

non-Western cultures and ethnicities national and state institutionalization is the only means by which they can ensure the preservation of the distinctive features of their cultures. Making this argument, Gregory Jusdanis asserts that contrary to what many cultural critics believe, cultures and cultural identities are not merely conceptual or narrative fabrications. In the modern world, the formation, consolidation and maintenance of cultural identities require their institutionalization in “a centralized, omniscient and omnipotent state [which] could infiltrate and affect the minutiae of daily life in ways inconceivable [otherwise]” (6). To survive and preserve itself, a culture needs to be embodied in the major institutions of the modern society such as the media, the educational system, the armed forces and the bureaucracy. These pervasive and powerful institutions help a culture propagate itself and keep itself relevant. In short, the key to the survival of a culture in the modern world is its state institutionalization. If a culture wants to survive, it has to become the dominant “societal culture” within a society (Kymlica 76).

The failure of many scholars to take seriously the important role of central states in creating and maintaining a sense of national and cultural unity is the crux of the argument presented in Eugen Weber’s noted book *Peasants Into Frenchmen*. Weber takes scholars of nationalism to task for taking the existence of united national cultures for granted and instead wants us to think of the emergence and maintenance of national identities as “a living problem” for the centralizing institutions of modern states. “If the French were (are?) as French as we have been led to believe, why so much fuss? The fact is, the French fuss so much about the nation because it is a living problem, became one when they set the nation up as an ideal, remained one because they found they could not realize the ideal” (112). Citing Alexandre Sanguinetti, Weber says: It was centralization “which permitted the making of France despite the French, or in the midst of their indifference. ... France is a deliberate political construction for whose creation the central power

has never ceased to fight” (113). This does not mean that territorial and national attachments do not already exist and are only the invented byproducts of central states. Rather, that we should never forget the central role played by the pervasive ideological and coercive apparatuses of modern states in shaping, propagating and preserving a national culture.

One of the main reasons many non-Western cultures and ethnicities desperately seek to nationalize themselves is undoubtedly the preservation of their culture. As Jusdanis argues, “national culture itself serves as both the manifestation of uniqueness and its guardian, a process of creation and its end product” (7).

This does not mean that culture works like a magician, conjuring nations out of thin air, nor that nationalism alone is responsible for the emergence of nation-states. ... rather ... nationalists exploit the resources of their culture (interpretation, rhetoric, symbols, myths), its institutions (art, literature, the academy), and its ideology (the fantasy of a homogenous identity) in order to promote the creation and maintenance of a nation. (11)

Having helped create the idea of a nation, a culture looks to the powerful institutions of the state to spread and maintain it. “Nation building,” Jusdanis argues, is not solely “an act of conceptual fabrication.” “The enterprise of invention is accompanied by practical, mechanical, down-to-earth practices that help bring about national integration. All the cultural fabrication imaginable would be useless without the school, the army, the train, the newspaper, the market, the bureaucracy to put it into practice” (39). The view that Jusdanis critiques through this argument is that of some postcolonial opponents of nationalism who seem to believe that cultures can sustain themselves without such institutionalization. For example, in his essay, “Culture, Community, Nation,” the noted cultural critic Stuart Hall criticizes those among immigrants and minorities who pursue nationalization and instead promotes the “diasporic consciousness” of hybrid immigrants who “bear traces of particular cultures, traditions, languages, systems of belief, texts and histories

which have shaped them [without assimilating to the new] cultures they inhabit [and seeking to return to their origins and resolving their hybridity]” (362). These exemplary hybrid immigrants, Hall argues, “are inevitably the products of several interlocking histories and cultures, belonging at the same time to several ‘homes’—and thus to no one particular home” (362). The argument made here by Hall is echoed by many other postcolonial critics who view hybridity as the only way by which people can sustain their cultures without the carnage and violence of nationalism.

What seems to be elided by these arguments, however, is the fact that no matter how tolerant and pluralistic, Western societies are still characterized by the dominance of one national culture that is their institutionally embodied “societal culture.” Cultural and ethnic minorities in these societies may not be forced to assimilate to this dominant “societal culture,” but without similar institutionalization, their chances of survival are very low. Referring to the survival of immigrant languages in English-speaking Western societies, Kymlica says:

The immigrants’ mother tongue is often spoken at home, and passed on to the children, but by the third generation English has become the mother tongue, and the original language is increasingly lost. This process is speeded up, of course, by the fact that public schooling is only provided in English. In fact, it is very difficult for languages to survive in modern institutionalized societies unless they are used in public life. Given the spread of standardized education, the high demands for literacy in work, and widespread interaction with government agencies, any language which is not a public language becomes so marginalized that it is likely to survive only amongst a small elite, or in a ritualized form, not as a living and developing language underlying a flourishing culture. (78)

What is true for languages is true for other aspects of cultures as well; unless they become “the shared language” of a mobile and modern society, they become increasingly marginalized and irrelevant (76). The reason many immigrants and minorities in developed Western societies engage in supporting obviously and violently ethnocentric forms of nationalism in their countries of origin is not because they have not been naturalized and well integrated into Western societies

as scholars such as Benedict Anderson argue, but because they fear they cannot help being naturalized (“Exodus” 324). As an example, Anderson refers to the central role played by Hindu immigrants in wealthy Western societies in organizing and funding the destructive attacks by extremist Hindu nationalists on the Babri mosque in Ayodhya in 1992 (326). The popularity of such inexorably ethnocentric forms of “long-distance nationalism” among many minorities and immigrants in developed Western societies springs from their realization that the only way they can preserve their ethnic cultures is through state nationalization, not because they are not properly integrated; these immigrants and minorities realize that compared to the dominant societal cultures of their host societies, they have little chances of preserving their ethnic cultures for long. To say this is not to promote state cultural nationalism or to reject hybridity out of hand but to understand the urgency with which various non-Western cultures and ethnicities seek to nationalize themselves. Unlike what proponents of hybridity such as Hall argue, the desire for cultural nationalism on the part of many non-Western cultures and ethnicities does not arise from excessively purist, “essentialist” or “closed” conceptions of cultural identity but from the more mundane desire for cultural survival in the modern world.

The second reason for the attractiveness of nationalism for many non-Western cultures and ethnicities is modernization itself. The desire for modernization may not appear as important to developed Western societies which have already become modern, but for many underdeveloped non-Western societies it is of paramount importance. Modernization has been at the heart of nationalist projects throughout its modern history. As Jusdanis argues, “a significant impulse for the emergence of nationalism [in the modern period] has been the discovery by intellectuals and political elites of the tardiness of their societies” (7). The progress made by Western societies in the modern period, Jusdanis argues, put other societies “in a situation of ‘backwardness,’” “a

condition of belatedness” (7). Ever since different cultures and people have sought to nationalize themselves to catch up with the West and become modern and powerful themselves. Nationalism thus demonstrates the creative power of cultures; it shows how “people use culture to bring about social change” (11). Culture is a “creative force” that “enables a people to see itself as separate from others, to pursue a political program of justice and autonomy, and to promote a program of modernization” (11). Postcolonial proponents of hybridity who praise hybrid immigrants and vehemently oppose nationalism overlook the economic and developmental disparities between wealthy Western societies and poor and economically backward non-Western ones. As Saba Mahmood points out, the reason many immigrants leave their countries in Asia and Africa to live or work in Western societies is because their own societies are poor and “backward.” This is precisely why immigration in the past several decades has been one-sided, from Asia and Africa to Europe and America and not vice versa. As Mahmood says, “Whereas it is quite common (and acceptable) to migrate, for example, from Africa to the United States, it is seldom that people leave the latter to settle in the former” (“Cultural Studies” 10). By solely praising the hybrid identities of immigrants, Mahmood argues, postcolonial critics have become oblivious to this important fact (10). Nationalism is important for many non-Western countries because it can help them pursue modernization and become stable and prosperous themselves. As Jusdanis argues,

Nationalism has been an extraordinary force over the past two hundred years because it has permitted groups to maintain their differences while ensuring their survival in modernity, to seek justice and self-respect while becoming members of a transnational world of states, to form a polity on the basis of a (presumed) homogenous identity. (7)

Contemporary criticisms of nationalism, however justified, should consider the important reasons that have rendered nationalism irresistible to many ethnicities and cultures. Furthermore, whether we like it or not, as Jusdanis argues, we still live in the “international system of interconnected

states” bequeathed to modernity by the “Peace of Westphalia.” “This system,” Jusdanis argues, “is united in the belief that states are the ‘chief actors in world politics and the chief bearers of rights and duties within it.’” The peace of Westphalia in 1648 has made “the possession of states [by different cultures, both] desirable and mandatory” (54). The universal recognition of nation-states in the modern world order has transformed states into a coveted object of desire for different cultures and ethnicities sharing a particular territory. As Jusdanis says, “at no other time [in history] had it ever been proposed that the identity of the governed must somehow coincide with the institutions of government” (18). It is the premise of collective self-rule inherent in modern nation-states that invests cultures and ethnic identities with a “political authority” they did not possess under previous forms of political organization (22). “National culture is ... an ethnicity politicized, given an essence, and made to justify the existence of the state” (44). With the advent of nationalism, “ethnic, linguistic, and racial differences, *hitherto politically inconsequential*, acquired an ideological force and institutional weight” (19, emphasis in the original). We should condemn the exclusions, atrocities and genocides inspired by nationalism, but we should not forget the important reasons and realities that gravitate many cultures and ethnicities toward it.

Explaining the reasons for the attractions of nationalism does not detract from its deplorable tendency to ethnic apartheid, racism and ethnic cleansing. The lethal fiction to which nationalism has given rise to is two-fold. On the one hand, nation-states give the inherently wrong impression that the bounded territory of a particular nation-state is the eternal and exclusive homeland of a particular cultural and ethnic group. On the other, they use the ideological and coercive apparatus of the central state not only to promote one unified particular national culture but also to realize the fiction upon which the national ideology is founded. The ethnic massacres and genocides with

which nationalism in the modern world has become tainted are the consequences of the endeavors to realize the national fiction in different territories. By politicizing a particular ethnic and cultural identity, nationalism reinforces its exclusionary prejudices against other cultures and ethnicities within its territory. As Jusdanis argues, understanding the appeals of nationalism should not blind us to the dark side of nationalism.

On the one hand, nationalism is a means by which a group can take hold of its political affairs on the basis of a shared culture and territory. On the other hand, nationalism has an inherently destabilizing potential because the world is not discretely divided into nations—whether we are talking about Bosnia-Herzegovina, Quebec, Texas, Kashmir, or Rwanda, the boundaries of ethnicity, religion, or race overlap. Hence, the call by one group for national sovereignty usually imposes on the similar right of others. (215)

Remembering the appeals of nationalism should not make us forget the genocides and ethnic massacres it has inspired and continues to inspire. By explaining the reasons that make nationalism remain a powerful force for many cultures and ethnicities, I seek to close a gap that I notice in the contemporary debates on nationalism. I do not mean to underestimate or ignore its power to incite people to violence, genocide and ethnic cleansing. Having said that I think it is important to have a more balanced understanding of nationalism that recognizes both the realities, exigencies, aspirations and necessities behind its continuing appeal and its negative, dehumanizing and bloody aspects.

#### IV

In his immensely influential book on nationalism, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson goes to great lengths to defend nationalism against charges of racism and violence. For him nationalism is not about “hatred of the Other,” “fear” and “racism” but about “love, and often self-sacrificing love” (141). To justify this assertion, Anderson proceeds to define nations as “invented” or “imagined” communities “conceived in language, not in blood” (144). As such

nations are neither completely closed nor completely open. Their borders are those of their common language. “Seen as both a historical fatality and as a community imagined through language, the nation presents itself as simultaneously open and closed” (146). They are open because “one could be ‘invited into’ the imagined community” and they are closed because each language has an element of untranslatability which makes it “audible only to its speakers and readers” (146). As Anderson says, “If every language is acquirable, its acquisition requires a real portion of a person’s life. ... What limits one’s access to other languages is not their imperviousness but one’s own mortality. Hence a certain privacy to all languages” (148). Having defined nation as an invented i.e. historical, political community bound by an untranslatable and private language, Anderson proceeds to defend it against its detractors who equate it with racism.

The fact of the matter is that nationalism thinks in terms of historical destinies, while racism dreams of eternal contaminations, transmitted from the origins of time through an endless sequence of loathsome copulations: outside history. Niggers are, thanks to the invisible tar-brush, for ever niggers; Jews, the seed of Abraham, forever Jews, no matter what passports they carry or what languages they speak and read. (149)

Racism, Anderson insists, happened under European colonialism in Africa and Asia which turned Europeans into a master race ruling over subject races (150). It does not belong in the imagined communities of modern nation-states proper which are historical and political communities open to new members and bound by a common language and not race or blood.

Anderson’s defense and definition of nationalism is noteworthy in many ways. It draws our attention to the “self-sacrificing love” that a national community inspires in its members. As he says, “Labor Party” or “the American Medical Association” cannot produce such sentiments in their members. He also interestingly draws our attention to the “privacy” of languages, their untranslatability “above all in the form of poetry and songs” (145). While languages are all open

to new speakers, only one language can become a person's "mother tongue" in which he can enjoy poetry and music and feel at home.

However by disregarding the underlying unity presumed between a nation and a state in modern nation-states, Anderson's account is unable to explain the ease with which nationalism can lead to racism, ethnic hatred and ethnic cleansing. To understand the rather "direct" relationship between nationalism and racism and genocide, we need to refer to the work of Appadurai (4). The central question explored by Appadurai in his recent book on nationalism *Fear of Small Numbers* is the following: "Why the relatively small numbers that give the word minority its most simple meaning and usually imply political and military weakness do not prevent minorities from being objects of fear and of rage? Why kill, torture, or ghettoize the weak?" (49). To answer this question, Appadurai insists, we need to look more closely into the structures of modern nation-states. By giving rise to the fantasy of a pure "national whole," the idea that the territory under the control of the state is the exclusive and eternal homeland of a particular culture or ethnicity, nationalism paves the way for the transformation of majority identities into "predatory identities" (51). Appadurai insists that we understand "minorities and majorities [as] recent historical inventions," byproducts of the international system of nation-states. Scholars who dismiss atrocities and massacres committed under nationalism as the result of the primordial hatred of the other inherent in all cultures, Appadurai argues, do not realize the important role nationalism has played in inspiring such horrifying inhumanities. By generating the fantasy of pure nationhood, Appadurai argues, nationalism produces in the ethnic or cultural majority the "anxiety of incompleteness" (52). It is this anxiety that turns a majority identity into a predatory identity.

Predatory identities ... thrive in the gap between the sense of numerical majority and the fantasy of national purity and wholeness. Predatory identities, in other words, are products of situations in which the idea of a national peoplehood is successfully reduced to the

principle of ethnic singularity, so that the existence of even the smallest minority within national boundaries is seen as an intolerable deficit in the purity of the national whole. In such circumstances, the very idea of being a majority is a frustration, since it implies some sort of ethnic diffusion of the national peoplehood. Minorities, being a reminder of this small but frustrating deficit, thus unleash the urge to purify. . . . Small numbers represent a tiny obstacle between majority and totality and total purity. In a sense, the smaller the number and the weaker the minority, the deeper the rage about its capacity to make a majority feel like a mere majority rather than like a whole and uncontested ethnos. . . . It is precisely the smallness of the gap between national totality and minority presence that produces the anxiety of incompleteness and creates the frustration and rage that drives those forms of degradation that shock us most, from Nazi Germany to Rwanda, from Kosovo to Mumbai. (53, 56-57)

This is a compelling account of why nationalism tends to transform majority ethnic identities into dehumanizing and genocidal ones. It is the fantasy of national purity or totality inherent in the unitary structure of modern nation-states that generates in a cultural or ethnic majority the “anxiety of incompleteness”; ethnic cleansing and genocide aimed at minorities are motivated by the rage, anxiety and frustration produced in an ethnic majority by the small gap between “majority and totality and total purity” (56). This is how nationalism turns relatively “benign” ethnic and cultural identities into predatory and genocidal ones (51).

The concept of predatory identities can give us an interesting framework through which to understand Hosseini’s critique of Pashtun ethnocentric nationalism in *The Kite Runner*. It is nationalism, Hosseini argues, that has rendered the identity of the ethnic majority in Afghanistan i.e. the Pashtuns, predatory. A predatory identity, as Appadurai states, is one “whose social construction and mobilization require[s] the extinction of other, proximate social categories, defined as threats to the very existence of some group, defined as a we” (510). The other whose minority presence seems to have provoked the anxiety of incompleteness in Pashtuns in Afghanistan is the Hazaras. By redefining Hazaras as an inferior impurity that stands in the way of Afghanistan’s pure Pashtun identity, nationalism has turned Pashtun identity into a

dehumanizing and predatory one. Within the novel, the predatory formulation of Pashtun identity is unequivocally asserted and defended by the villainous and sadistic, Assef.

Both as the teenage bully of Amir and Hassan's neighborhood and as a Taliban official, Assef stands for an inexorably ethnocentric Pashtun nationalism defined against the minority Hazaras.

One day soon after the coup of 1973 in Afghanistan, Assef, the vicious bully of the neighborhood, stops Amir and Hassan to reproach Amir for being friends with a Hazara. This is how he explains his hatred of Hazaras: "Afghanistan is the land of Pashtuns. It always has been, always will be. We are the true Afghans, the pure Afghans, not this Flat-Nose here [referring to Hassan who is Hazara]. His people pollute our homeland, our watan. They dirty our blood. ... Afghanistan for Pashtuns, I say. That's my vision" (40). Reappearing later on in the novel, Assef describes his participation as a Taliban official in the massacre of Hazaras in Mazar in August 1998 thus:

We left them out for the dogs. ... Door to door we went, calling for the men and the boys. We'd shoot them right there in front of their families. Let them see. Let them remember who they were, where they belonged. ... Sometimes, we broke down their doors and went inside their homes. And ... I'd sweep the barrel of my machine gun around the room and fire and fire until the smoke blinded me. ... You don't know the meaning of the word "liberating" until you've done that, stood in a roomful of targets, let the bullets fly, free of guilt and remorse, knowing you are virtuous, good and decent. Knowing you're doing God's work. It's breathtaking. (277)

"Afghanistan," Assef says, "is like a beautiful mansion littered with garbage, and someone has to take out the garbage" (284).

However for Hosseini it is not in the obviously sadistic and evil Assef that we are to see the toxic effects of Pashtun nationalism, but in the narrator-protagonist of the novel Amir. It is Amir's contamination with anti-Hazara racism that best proves the predatory and dehumanizing nature of Pashtun nationalism in Afghanistan. As a child growing up in Afghanistan, Amir is dimly aware of the hierarchy of ethnic identities according to which Hazaras are deemed inferior outsiders, but

he also realizes that his constant and best friend is their servant's son Hassan. This is how he acknowledges the importance of his friendship with Hassan, despite their ethnic and religious differences.

The curious thing was, I never thought of Hassan and me as friends .... Not in the usual sense, anyhow. Never mind that we taught each other to ride a bicycle with no hands, or to build a fully functional homemade camera out of a cardboard box. Never mind that we spent entire winters flying kites, running kites. Never mind that to me, the face of Afghanistan is that of a boy with a thin-boned frame, a shaved head, and low-set ears, a boy with a Chinese doll face perpetually lit by a harelipped smile.

Never mind any of those things. Because history isn't easy to overcome. Neither is religion. In the end, I was a Pashtun and he was a Hazara, I was a Sunni and he was Shi'a, and nothing was ever going to change that. Nothing.

But we were kids who had learned to crawl together, and no history, ethnicity, society, or religion was going to change that either. I spent most of the first twelve years of my life playing with Hassan. Sometimes, my entire childhood seems like one long lazy summer day with Hassan. (25)

What has shocked Amir and overcome him with guilt is the inability of this friendship to keep him from sinking to the level of the anti-Hazara racist Assef. Amir becomes guiltily aware of this failure on the fateful day when Hassan is raped by Assef and his gang. Amir witnesses Hassan's rape but instead of helping him, he runs away. As he confesses later on, in that moment he was running away not only from Assef but also from himself.

In the end, I ran.

I ran because I was a coward. I was afraid of Assef and what he would do to me. I was afraid of getting hurt. That's what I told myself as I turned my back to the alley, to Hassan. That's what I made myself believe. I actually aspired to cowardice, because the alternative, the real reason I was running, was that Assef was right: Nothing was free in this world. Maybe Hassan was the price I had to pay, the lamb I had to slay, to win Baba. Was it a fair price? The answer floated to my conscious mind before I could thwart it: He was just a Hazara, wasn't he? (77)

The wicked self from which Amir is running away here is the one who deems Hassan "a fair price" for winning his distant father's affection. Hassan is a fair price, Amir cannot help admitting

momentarily, because he “was just a Hazara.” Thus Amir has to acknowledge to himself that he, like Assef, regarded Hassan as nothing but an inferior and worthless Hazara. Following Hassan’s rape, Amir becomes an insomniac, wanting to tell everyone that “I was the snake in the grass, the monster in the lake” (105). By abandoning Hassan because he “was just a Hazara,” Amir becomes conscious of his kinship with the monstrous Assef. And it is this recognition that paralyzes him with guilt. This is why that “frigid overcast day in the winter of 1975” has become such a pivotal turning point in Amir’s life (1). His failure to help Hassan on that fateful day drove home to Amir the overpowering, banal and pervasive nature of anti-Hazara racism in an Afghanistan defined by Pashtun ethnocentrism.

Explaining guilt, the philosopher Gabriele Taylor says:

When feeling guilt, ... the agent sees himself as the doer of a wicked deed and so as alien to himself; he sees another self emerging. The “wicked deed” refers to his action (or omission) seen as violating some taboo, and the emerging self is the self capable of violating the taboo. ... Guilt ... is felt ... at the recognition of the emergence of a worse self. (134-135)

According to Taylor, guilt is felt when the person recognizes the “emergence of a worse self,” an “alien” self “capable of” violating taboos. He feels guilty because he has become conscious of a wicked part of himself of which he was not aware before. This self is alien because the person does not think their real self is capable of such transgressions.

The “wicked deed” of which Amir finds himself guilty on the day of Hassan’s rape is racism. However, the “worse” or “alien” self at whose emergence he feels guilty is not, to his shock, alien at all but his real normal self as it is nurtured in an ethnocentric Afghanistan. Amir’s guilt has not only made him acutely conscious of his “worse” self but of the environment in which that self was acculturated. That day has become so painfully unforgettable and important for Amir because

it marked the time when he shockingly and guiltily became aware of the meaning of his identity as a Pashtun in Afghanistan. *The Kite Runner* is not just the narrative of Amir's dangerous journey to a Taliban-ruled Afghanistan in search of forgiveness, but also and more importantly a retrospective examination of the cultural and political environment in which his "worse self" took form.

One thing Amir remembers vividly about the Afghanistan of his childhood in the early 70s is the predominance of racist views against minority Hazaras.

They [kids in the neighborhood] called [Hazaras] "flat-nosed" because [of their] characteristic Hazara Mongoloid features. For years, that was all I knew about the Hazaras, that they were Mogul descendants, and that they looked a little like Chinese people. School textbooks barely mentioned them and referred to their ancestry only in passing. Then one day, I was in Baba's study, looking through his stuff, when I found one of my mother's old history books. It was written by an Iranian named Khorami. I blew the dust off it, sneaked it into bed with me that night, and was stunned to find an entire chapter on Hazara history. An entire chapter dedicated to Hassan's people! In it, I read that my people, the Pashtuns, had persecuted and oppressed the Hazaras. It said that Hazaras had tried to rebel against the Pashtuns in the nineteenth century, but the Pashtuns had "quelled them with unspeakable violence." The book said that my people had killed the Hazaras, driven them from their lands, burned their homes, and sold their women. The book said part of the reason Pashtuns had oppressed the Hazaras was that Pashtuns were Sunni Muslims, while Hazaras were Shi'a. The book said a lot of things I didn't know, things my teachers hadn't mentioned. Things Baba hadn't mentioned either. It also said some things I did know, like that people called Hazaras mice-eating, flat-nosed, load-carrying donkeys. I had heard some of the kids in the neighborhood yell those names to Hassan. (9)

By alluding to the history book he finds in his father's study, Amir lets us see the deep-rooted nature of the tensions between Hazaras and Pashtuns in Afghanistan. Pashtuns have defined Afghan national identity in purely ethnic terms and have persecuted and oppressed non-Pashtuns particularly the Hazaras who stand out for their different religious sect and physiognomy. The historical events Amir reads about in the history book refer to a particularly repressive period for Hazaras in Afghanistan in late nineteenth century when they were ruthlessly persecuted by the

Afghan ruler, Amir Abdul Rahman Khan. However as Amir explains, the oppression of Hazaras has persisted. Like many other Hazaras in the Afghanistan described by the novel, Hassan and his father have menial jobs, working as house servants in Amir's father's big house. As Hazaras, they are neither allowed to hold important official jobs nor receive sufficient education. In fact, one of the major sources of Amir's sadistic fun over Hassan derives from his illiteracy; Amir constantly taunts Hassan for his ignorance. However looking back, Amir understands how Hassan's illiteracy was a result of his subordinate and unprivileged position in the society as a Hazara.

"That Hassan would grow up illiterate like ... most Hazaras had been decided the minute he had been born ... after all, what use did a servant have for the written word?" (28). The ethnic hierarchy in Afghanistan had set aside different trajectories for people from different ethnicities. Accordingly Hazaras who represented an inferior people were denied the opportunities and privileges available to others. Remembering the predominance of stereotypical and denigrating views of Hazaras, Amir understands his own behavior toward Hassan as a consequence of his acculturation in an ethnocentric Afghanistan. To grow up a Pashtun in Afghanistan then, Amir concludes, it was natural to have explicitly derogatory perceptions of Hazaras.

The tensions between Hazaras and Pashtuns in Afghanistan are cultural differences that have become violently intensified through their politicization under Pashtun nationalism. What is responsible for the exclusion and oppression of Hazaras as an ethnic minority in Afghanistan, according to *The Kite Runner*, is their obvious ethnic and religious differences from the majority Pashtuns who have sought to make the Afghan nation a Pashtun one. These two ethnic groups have become antagonistic because the nationalization of one has directly led to the disenfranchisement and oppression of the other. Pashtun nationalism has only intensified its inherent dehumanization of Hazaras, effectively turning them into second class citizens who are

not only vulnerable to persecution but are also denied equal rights. Afghanistan thus has been one of those countries where politicization has not only made groups acutely conscious of their particular identities but also rendered them extremely suspicious of and hostile to one another; one of those countries where normal and humane relations between members of different ethnicities have become almost impossible. As a member of the majority and dominant Pashtun culture, Amir has naturally internalized the negative stereotypes of Hazaras. Hassan's rape and his reluctance to help him overpower Amir with guilt because it brings him face to face with the evil the inherent ethnocentrism of his culture has nurtured in him. Before this, Amir had viewed himself as a decent human being manifestly different from the evil Assef. Hassan's rape shatters Amir's confidence in his own decency because it makes him realize that as far as the dehumanizing perceptions of Hazaras are concerned, he has not been very different from the Assef; thanks to the ethnocentric influence of his culture, Amir had not recognized his derogatory views of Hazaras as problematic. He had believed that was the way Hazaras were. Pashtun ethnocentrism had naturalized anti-Hazara racism for him, not contradicting his perception of his own humanity. Following Hassan's rape, a guilt-stricken Amir wants to tell everyone that "I was the snake in the grass, the monster in the lake" (105). He is traumatized by Hassan's rape because witnessing it has de-naturalized his anti-Hazara racism, making him intolerably aware of the inner racist in him. Prior to this, he did not see anything wrong with his racist perceptions of Hazaras; he took those stereotypes for granted. Hassan's rape cripples him with guilt and unsettles his sense of humanity. Condemning ethnocentrism, *The Kite Runner* recognizes it as an important and inevitable corollary of difficult situations that render individuals aware of the particularity of their cultures and thus a force before which individuals are mostly powerless. As a child, Amir learns from his father's closest friend, Rahim Khan, something to this effect. Rahim Khan tells

Amir about the failure of his love affair in his youth. Rahim Khan had fallen in love with a Hazara girl, Homaira, who lived in their neighborhood.

You should have seen the look on my father's face when I told him. My mother actually fainted. My sisters splashed her face with water. They fanned her and looked at me as if I had slit her throat. My brother Jalal actually went to fetch his hunting rifle before my father stopped him. It was Homaira and me against the world. And I'll tell you this, Amir jan: In the end, the world always wins. That's just the way of things. . . . That same day, my father put Homaira and her family on a lorry and sent them off to Hazarajat. I never saw her again. (99)

Rahim Khan's story resonates with Amir because his impossible relationship with Homaira is akin to Amir's friendship with Hassan. The central point of Rahim Khan's story is that of the novel as a whole which focuses on situations that render individuals powerless before the ethnocentric force of their cultures. When Rahim Khan says, "It was Homaira and me against the world . . . In the end, the world always wins," he is indicating the fate-like character of hardened cultural identities under such difficult situations. By portraying ethnocentrism as one of the natural byproducts of our cultural construction, Hosseini does not condone or promote racism. Assef who perfectly embodies ethnocentric racism is depicted as unequivocally evil. However by highlighting the proximity of Amir and Assef, Hosseini helps us understand the politicized conditions that can naturalize and justify the evils of racism; to be a Pashtun in Afghanistan is to have racist views of non-Pashtuns and not recognize it.

It is guilt, however, that becomes Amir's key to redemption. As Timothy Aubry says: "What ultimately saves Amir from the status of monster and preserves his humanity is his unremitting sense of guilt. Throughout his life, Amir is tormented, indeed victimized, by the sense that he is a victimizer" (33). Amir's guilt is triggered by the recognition of humanity in Hassan from their personal relationship. His companionship with Hassan has enabled him, despite his culture, to

acknowledge Hassan's humanity. Amir is overpowered by guilt for betraying Hassan because, despite the ethnocentric influence of his Pashtun culture, he and Hassan have, in effect, become friends.

*The Kite Runner* thus introduces two different forms of humanity operating in people's lives. The first is the more powerful one derived from and embedded in the visions of good life and human flourishing promoted by our particular cultures. We learn how to become "human" within such particular cultures. Becoming human and becoming acculturated are thus interchangeable. However once we see ourselves bound with others as a community, we have a marked and inexplicable preference for them and an instinctive distaste and suspicion against other cultures and people. In short, the first type of humanity is bound up with our collective and primordial identities as members of a particular culture defined inevitably against inferior others.

However the vagaries of life are bound to bring us into close contact with individuals from other denigrated cultures with whom we might become intimate. The close relationship between Hassan and Amir is an example of this. Despite the hostile relations between their respective ethnic communities, growing up together in the same house, Amir and Hassan have developed a close relationship. It is the memory of this personal and individual relationship with Hassan that lies at the heart of Amir's humanizing guilt and thus saves him from the evil of racism his ethnocentric cultural identity is pushing him toward. This form of humanity happens despite and contrary to cultures on a personal and individual level, whereby over time two persons discover the necessary decency and trustworthiness in one another and become friends. The humanity that Amir detects in Hassan is grounded in the latter's decency and loyalty as an individual. Even though, according to his Pashtun culture, Hassan is nothing but an inferior and subhuman Hazara, his personal relationship with him has proven otherwise and has demonstrated his "humanity"; and it is this

personal knowledge that ultimately saves Amir from becoming Assef and helps him “to be good again” (2). The redemptive powers of what after Aubry I call “guilt-ridden humanity” (34) derive from its extraordinary nature in conditions that make human and humane relations between different cultures almost impossible. This second type of humanity i.e. guilt-ridden humanity, is therefore extra-cultural and individualized. It is grounded in closely and friendly relations between individuals. Amir’s guilt is tied to this part of his individual life. As a Pashtun, he may not have felt guilty or uneasy for his racist views of Hazaras, but as a close companion and friend of Hassan, he cannot be but troubled and guilty for betraying him.

By highlighting the second form of humanity, the one that is extra-cultural and individualized, Hosseini clearly expresses his distaste for the intolerances that arise from the particular forms of “humanity” promoted by our parochial cultures. However the power of *The Kite Runner* resides in portraying the difficult conditions that render such ethnocentric prejudices overwhelming and almost instinctive for individuals. Finding ourselves in circumstances that make us aware of the particularity of our identity, we are bound to be powerless before their ethnocentric dehumanization of others. Extreme and widespread poverty, instability and multi-ethnicity in Afghanistan have turned it into a setting where cultural identities are constantly asserted against one another with grave consequences for everyone. Under such circumstances where explicit ethnocentrism is the norm, it is only the second form of humanity that can save individuals from the inhumanities naturalized by their ethnocentric cultures. Given the intractability of the political conflicts that have intensified cultural tensions in Afghanistan, such unlikely and rare examples of individualized and extra-cultural humanity are probably the only kind we should expect and hope for.

### Chapter III Exile as Critique: Translatable or Not?

The idea of exile as cultural critique figures prominently in the work of the literary critic and public intellectual Edward Said. For him, exile seems to signify the detached subjectivity necessary for the performance of oppositional intellectual labor. Such detachment enables the oppositional intellectual to de-reify what has been naturalized by a given culture. It can shed light on the exclusionary violence necessary for the formation and maintenance of cultural boundaries and identities. As Said says in his magnum opus, *Orientalism*, “The more one is able to leave one’s own cultural home, the more easily is one able to judge it, and the whole world as well with the spiritual detachment and generosity necessary for true vision” (259). In dwelling on the intellectual and ethical potential of exile, Said harks back to intellectuals such as Theodor Adorno who made a similar point in *Minima Moralia*: “it is part of morality not be at home in one’s home” (39).

The trope of exile plays a prominent role in the career of the Iranian literary critic and author, Azar Nafisi as well. She has experienced exile both as a non-Westerner in the West and as a secular intellectual in an Islamic Iran. Furthermore, in her autobiographical *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003), Nafisi recounts how she deployed the foreignness of canonical Western literature to question the universality and innateness of the prevailing cultural discourse in Iran. However, the publication of this memoir in the US has provoked a fierce controversy between those who promote her as an exemplary non-Western intellectual and those who dismiss her as a reactionary and dubious “native informer.”

In this chapter, I want to look more closely into this controversy and examine how it elucidates significant implications relating to the thesis of intellectual as an exile as articulated by Said.

Two important questions that I will explore here are as follows: Is the kind of critique derived from cultural foreignness or detachment translatable across cultures and contexts or is it context-specific? Second, does the West represent a culture akin to other spatially bounded cultures and traditions or is it of a different order? In other words, the idea of exile as cultural critique implies a spatially and territorially bounded understanding of cultures in which an outsider from a different geographic context can see through the reifying functions of the culture that are inadequately scrutinized by insiders. Thus, if the West is like any other culture and tradition, contingent and territorially bounded, then what happens to the ethical and humanistic premises in the kind of critique advocated by Said? Furthermore, why should Nafisi be seen as an exemplary exile by some and as a “native informer” by others?

In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Nafisi recounts her experiences in post-revolutionary Iran where she used Anglophone literature to demystify and de-familiarize the Iranian experience engineered by the Islamic regime.<sup>1</sup> The book centers on meetings with her secret reading group following her resignation from the University of Allama Tabataba'i in Tehran in 1995. The group consists of 7 of her former female students who, according to Nafisi, are genuinely devoted to English literature. They meet once a week to discuss the masterpieces of Anglophone fiction and relate them to their own experiences as women living under an Islamic regime. Nafisi mixes her account of this study group with her own memories in the 18 years she spent in post-revolutionary Iran. After 17 years of studying abroad, she returned to Iran just after the revolution had overthrown Iran's monarch in 1979. She started teaching English literature at Tehran University but resigned when they forced the female faculty to wear a headscarf. Nafisi

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<sup>1</sup> The book remained on the *New York Times* bestseller list for more than one hundred seventeen weeks and has been translated into thirty two languages.

intertwines a close analysis of important works of fiction by Anglophone authors such as Vladimir Nabokov, Henry James, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Jane Austen with an account of the problems and restrictions facing women after the triumph of the Islamic revolution in Iran.

Within Iran, Nafisi seems to fulfill the function of the intellectual as exile as described by Adorno and Said. She drew on canonical works of Western literature to problematize prevailing social norms. To elucidate the defamiliarizing effects of such literature to her students,

I explained that most great works of the imagination were meant to make you feel like a stranger in your own home. The best fiction always forced you to question what we took for granted. It questioned traditions and expectations when they seemed too immutable. I told my students I wanted them in their readings to consider in what ways these works unsettled them, made them a little uneasy, made them look around and consider the world ... through different eyes. (94)

While canonical works of Western literature had provided her with an external vantage point from which to observe and critique post-revolutionary Iran, transplanted into the American context, her account of this critique is not revolutionary since it reaffirms this audience's values. These anecdotes and memories are likely to produce a feeling of hominess for her American audience and reassure them of the universality and innateness of their preconceptions.

Thus if an unsettling of one's audience is the test of the kind of morality advocated by Adorno and Said, within the Western context Nafisi seems to have failed. Instead of challenging the assumptions of her audience in the West, she lends further credibility to their conviction regarding the universality of their values. Reading Nafisi's account, one gets the impression that non-Western cultures can be critiqued by measures extracted from the Western canon, but it is not possible to criticize the West itself from the standpoint of other cultures.

In fact, what we see in Nafisi seems to be a rather different conception of Western modernity. Western values are universal, modern ones according to which other cultures can be evaluated, deconstructed and reconstructed. Traditional cultures, on the other hand, are parochial and local. Contrary to Said's approach in which an external, non-Western perspective can critique American/Western experience, Nafisi seems to believe in its universality. From Nafisi's point of view, Westerners ought to insist on the universality of their modern values to which all traditional cultures should aspire. On the other hand, for Said, no culture, including that of the West, is exempt from contingency.

But for Nafisi, however, Western values are modern universal ones and are bound to supersede traditional cultures and religions. Nafisi explicitly articulates these views in her interview with the journal *SAIS Review*. There, Nafisi states: "before the revolution I considered myself a modern woman ... the revolutionary regime labeled that modernity as Western and therefore alien to our culture and traditions" (32). "I do not consider myself Western, but rather modern" (37).

The question that emerges regards the importance of location in this usage of exile as a form of critique. Said and Nafisi do not feel at home in two different locations: Said is an exile in America while Nafisi feels like an exile in her own country after its Islamic revolution. Is Said's critique of America translatable to other contexts outside of the West? How about Nafisi's critique of post-revolutionary Iran? Can critiques derived from an exile's point of view be generalized across cultures? Are modern Western cultures comparable to less "modernized" ones outside the West? In other words, is modern, Western civilization confined to the West or is it a universal one?

Both Said and Nafisi draw on the trope of exile to critique the hegemonic discourse of their respective contexts. Said is particularly concerned with American imperialism, while Nafisi uses exile to undercut the dominant ideology of the Iranian regime. Said uses other cultures to debunk the “naturalness” of the American experience, and Nafisi uses Western literature to deflate the certainties of the reigning Islamic discourse in Iran.

However, Nafisi seems to take the Iranian revolution’s experience as a paradigm case for any context in which non-Westerners try to use local cultures and religions to oppose the universality of Western liberal democracy. In other words, Iran’s revolution is different from others in that it has been carried out in the name of a local and religious culture against the cultural hegemony of the West and America. Ironically, Nafisi argues that Iranian youth who grew up after the revolution have become intensely pro-American. Alienated from the ruling Islamic ideology, they have reacted by embracing the opposing Western culture.

According to Nafisi, the trajectory of Iran’s revolution demonstrates that the only culture within which modern individuals can feel at home is that of Western liberal democracy. Instead of diminishing the appeal of the American liberalism for its youth, Iran’s revolution has actually intensified it. Like her female students, the reason Nafisi seems to feel like an exile in her own country is the artificiality of the Islamic culture presented by the Iranian regime. Because it has tried to present a traditional culture and religion as its national model, Iran has alienated “modern” individuals. Thus, according to Nafisi, to feel at home modern individuals require a “modern” culture whose blueprint is already available in the American liberal experience.

Soon after her return to a revolutionary Iran, Nafisi realizes that that she cannot feel at home in such an ideologically saturated place. As she says regarding her first impressions of

revolutionary Iran: “It was not until I had reached home that I realized the true meaning of exile” (145). “I had never felt this sense of loss when I was a student in the States. In all those years, my yearning was tied to the certainty that home was mine for the having, that I could go back any time I wished” (145). However, Nafisi stresses that this alienation derives from the Islamic nature of the revolution in Iran which had “crushed” “all things personal” “like small wildflowers to make way for a more ornate garden, where everything would be tame and organized” (145).

Over the years, Nafisi realizes that her feelings of alienation and resentment are actually shared by many of Iran’s youth who grew up after the revolution. Such feelings of alienation manifest themselves as a strong attachment to the liberal values of Western culture. What canonical works of Western literature represent at best, Nafisi argues, are the values of liberalism which remain the only system which could accommodate the diverse experiences of modern individuals. In contrast, political systems derived from traditional cultures and religions are likely to be oppressive to the nonconforming and the different.

Under non-liberal systems, Nafisi argues, “you make your mind blank—you pretend to be somewhere else ... That’s what we do over here [in Iran]. We are constantly pretending to be somewhere else” (329). And what do Iran’s internal exiles take refuge in? Western literature and things Western in general; the very things that have been tabooed by the revolution. Thus, canonical works of Western literature are enthusiastically received by Iran’s youth not because of Nafisi’s efforts but because of the revolution and its cultural and political system itself. For many of these youths, things Western from high culture to low culture represent an alternative,

utopian experience that has been denied them by the Iranian regime.<sup>2</sup> To explain the popularity of Western values in these terms might imply that their attraction for Iranian youth simply arises from their being forbidden and banned by the regime. To forestall such a conclusion, Nafisi goes further and states that the experiences of Iran's youth demonstrate the innateness and universality of certain values: "Genuine democracy cannot exist without the freedom to imagine" (339). "To have a whole life," she argues, one should have "the right to free access to imagination" (338). Modern Anglophone fiction, she says, has a "democratic structure" because it is "polyphonic," (188) and contains an irreducible "cacophony of voices" (268). In the best of these novels, "there are spaces for oppositions that do not need to eliminate each other in order to exist" (268).<sup>3</sup>

Unlike Said, the main question for Nafisi is not how to best encourage the detachment of exile in individuals but under what conditions they are likely to feel estranged. From her personal experiences in Iran, Nafisi argues how cleaving to traditional cultures and religions is likely to create alienating conditions. Anglophone fiction represents the opposite values—those of individuality and freedom. In other words, these works of literature are democratic not only because they accommodate diversity of perspectives but also because they extoll "freedom of choice."

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<sup>2</sup> "Satellite dishes were becoming the rage all over Iran. It was not merely people like me, or the educated classes, who craved them. Tahereh Khanoom informed us that in the poorer, more religious sections of Tehran, the family with a dish would rent out certain programs to their neighbors" (*Reading Lolita* 67).

<sup>3</sup> We see this tension between Western classics having some transcendent, inherent value or just being idealized because they represent an alluring because forbidden West in a piece in New York Times on Nafisi's book prior to its publication. The reporter says how Nafisi's graduate students at Johns Hopkins seem bored by her lectures on Western literature and contrasts with it with the enthusiasm these books received in Islamic Iran according to Nafisi. To explain this, the reporter says: "The constraints of a ruling totalitarian theocracy turned banned literature into forbidden fruit and gave teaching undergraduate staples like Jane Austen the panache of leading an underground rebellion." Here what is not clear is whether these Western books are actually enjoyed by Nafisi's students because of their "inherent" value or because of the external restrictions at work in Iran. See Julie Salamon's "Professor's Rebellion." This is not to deny the importance of classics but to ponder how the power attributed to them by Nafisi derives less from something within them than from the context within which they are being consumed.

Having reached these conclusions, Nafisi proceeds to question critics like Said who question the universality of the Western experience. To caution against localizing the modern experience as Western, Nafisi invokes post-revolutionary Iran where a local culture has been essentialized in opposition against the West and imposed upon people as “indigenous” and “authentic.” Iran serves as a test case for cultural translation of liberalism. The Western experience is the “modern” experience, valid everywhere and across cultures. Nafisi implies that universalizing the liberal model of the West results in fewer drawbacks than imposing local and traditional cultures on all members of a society; the liberal model is capacious whereas the local models are limited.

Nafisi thus reverses Said’s model of the subversive non-Western exile. As an exile in the West, Nafisi invokes post-revolutionary Iran in order to challenge those who question the universality of the Western experience.<sup>4</sup> Typically, an articulate non-Western exile was supposed to function as an intermediary between the two cultures. More specifically, the exile was tasked with complicating the reductive representations of their culture prevailing in the West. What had been de-humanized from the Western perspective could be re-humanized from a native’s. This is at least how Mary Louise Pratt defines the genre of postcolonial autoethnography. Pratt describes “autoethnography” as “instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer’s own terms. If ethnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others, autoethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations” (7). If a colonized culture had been misrepresented by colonizers in the past, the postcolonial

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<sup>4</sup> Putting Nafisi’s conclusions like this is reminiscent of Richard Rorty’s resolution of the dilemma of relativism by preaching “ethnocentricity.”

autoethnographer could play a corrective function and humanize their culture. Explaining the critical work of the French ethnographer Michel Leiris, James Clifford says: “Westerners had for centuries studied and spoken for the rest of the world; the reverse had not been the case. He [Leiris] announced a new situation, one in which ‘objects’ of observation would begin to write back. The Western gaze would be met and scattered” (256).

While at first glance, Nafisi’s narrative might appear to be functioning within the framework of post-colonial autoethnography, in fact, it is not. The autoethnographic model expounded by Pratt and Clifford is predicated on a multiplicity of cultures which are considered to be more or less valid. The postcolonial autoethnographer uses the terms of the Western metropolitan culture to humanize the difference of their culture rather than to domesticate it. Despite their difference, members of this culture are equally human, the autoethnographer says to his Western audience. Nafisi, on the other hand, does not seem to subscribe to this relativistic model in which cultures function as “differentiating and expressive ensemble[s]” (Clifford 263). For her the current situation is characterized by a dichotomy between a series of traditional cultures and a superior modern monoculture. As a result, she does not set out to humanize the Islamic dimensions of the Iranian culture even though they are reductively represented in the West. Rather she seems to agree with her Western audience regarding the obsolescence of the Islamic model. Her goal is not to humanize the Islamic aspects of Iran but instead those parts of Iran which are in agreement with her binary model of a modern culture vs. outmoded traditional cultures. For her, the Iranian revolution which “came in the name of a past” (262) misrepresents Iran to the outside world. Thus the distortion of the Iranian experience is caused by the Islamic government in Iran rather than the West. For these reasons, she sets out to rectify the image projected by the Iranian government that in a way conforms to the model of Pratt’s postcolonial autoethnography. In this

way, her narrative becomes a counter-autoethnography which does away with the ethnographic perspective i.e. “a pluralizable model of culture” (Buzard 5).

Like the model autoethnographer described by Pratt, Iran’s Islamic revolution attempted to humanize Islam to the West which had reductively dismissed it. It tried to re-assert the relevance of the Islamic model for the modern situation which had been dominated by the Western model. Believing in the multiplicity of cultures, it tried to confine the Western model to the West and construct a model that it deemed appropriate to its indigenous context. Nafisi’s narrative deconstructs this autoethnographic effort by the Iranian government by debunking the cogency of its authenticity and revealing its constructedness.

So the usual postcolonial experience of “writing back” against the West (Clifford 256) has been inverted in Nafisi’s narrative—the Iranian Islamic revolution had sought to do that. Instead of writing back against the West, Nafisi speaks out against the oppressiveness and artificiality of the postcolonial autoethnographic model itself. What is also being questioned in Nafisi’s critique of Iran’s “autoethnographic” revolution is the very viability of the model that believes in multiple modernities derived from a “plural and spatialized conception of culture” (Buzard 11).

Nafisi seems to believe that what is wrong with the ethnographic model, predicated on the multiplicity of cultures, is that it is based on a premise that homogenizes individuals within each culture. Within any given culture, that anthropological model seems to presume a kind of universal homogeneity defining all individuals. It discounts the irreducible diversity of individual experiences which do not lend themselves to collective representation and summation. Nafisi invokes works by Vladimir Nabokov, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Henry James and Jane Austen to extoll their respect for the uniqueness and authenticity of individual experience and for their

celebration of individual integrity above all other qualities. The villains of all these novels are those who seek to impose their will on others and who are unsympathetic to their individuality. Nafisi draws a comparison between these villains and the Islamic regime in Iran which has imposed a uniform model on all Iranians.

Thus, Nafisi reinterprets Nabokov's *Lolita* not as a story about the "rape of a twelve-year-old by a dirty old man but *the confiscation of one individual's life by another*" (33 emphasis in the original). The Iranian government had tried "to shape others" according to its "own dreams and desires" but "Nabokov, through his portrayal of Humbert, had exposed all solipsists who take over other people's lives" (33). In the mock trial of *Great Gatsby* in her literature class at the start of the revolution, Nafisi argues that "Empathy lies at the heart of *Gatsby*, like so many other great novels—the biggest sin is to be blind to others' problems and pains" (132). What distinguishes heroines of Henry James from his villains is, according to Nafisi, their "compassion" (223). "The most unforgivable crime in fiction," she argues, is "blindness" (224). This is the quality that James has in common with other notable authors of the Western canon. They all apotheosize "compassion" and "respect for others"; "Lack of empathy was to my mind the central sin of the [Iranian] regime" (224). Likewise, "The most unsympathetic characters in Austen's novels are those who are incapable of genuine dialogue with others. They rant. They lecture. They scold. This incapacity for true dialogue implies an incapacity for tolerance, self-reflection and empathy" (268-9).

According to Nafisi, such works of fiction are relevant because in Iran, individuals like herself have been reduced to "figments of someone else's imagination" (25): "An absurd fictionality ruled our lives" (26). Nafisi ascribes this reduction of the individual experience to a collective stereotype to the cultural, ethnographic (Islamic) nature of the revolution in Iran; it is based on

certain assumptions about Iranians and more specifically, Iranian women. “A stern ayatollah, a blind and improbable philosopher-king, had decided to impose his dream on a country and a people and to re-create us in his own myopic vision. So he had formulated an ideal of me as a Muslim woman, as a Muslim woman teacher, and wanted me to look, act and in short live according to that ideal” (165). Khomeini, the leader of Iran’s revolution, is likened to Humbert, the villain of Nabokov’s novel, in that both seek to reduce “living, breathing human beings” (25) into “stationary” and “fixed” objects (37).

In her critique of the ethnographic model of cultures, Nafisi sounds very much like Said in *Orientalism*. As James Clifford points out in his informed critique of Said’s book, Said is at his most humanistic in his denunciation of Orientalism on account of its “tendency to dichotomize the human continuum into we-they contrasts and to essentialize the resultant ‘other’” (258). The essential question for a “humanist” Said is “Can one divide human reality, as indeed human reality seems to be genuinely divided, into clearly different cultures, histories, traditions, societies, even races and survive the consequences humanly?” (*Orientalism* 45). As Clifford argues, “Said castigates Orientalism for its construction of static images rather than historical or personal ‘narratives’” (263). As Said had put it, in the Orientalist discourse, “Orientals were almost everywhere nearly the same” (*Orientalism* 38). While Clifford agrees with Said’s skepticism regarding the “consistency” and “oppressive systematicity” (257) of the Orientalist discourse (262, 273), he nevertheless has doubts about Said’s “cosmopolitan” “values” (263) which like all “humanist common denominators” bypass “the local cultural codes that make personal experience articulate” (263). “But the privilege of standing above cultural particularism,” Clifford maintains, “of aspiring to universalist power that speaks for humanity, for the universal experiences of love, work, death, and so on, is a privilege invented by a

totalizing Western liberalism” (263). According to Clifford, the question that is glossed over in Said’s critique of Orientalism is “Can one ultimately escape procedures of dichotomizing, restricting, and textualizing in the making of interpretive statements about foreign cultures and traditions?” (261). In his suspicion of any notion of cultures, Clifford argues, Said is “ambivalently enmeshed in the totalizing habits of Western humanism” (271).

Thus Clifford detects in Said’s critique a humanistic cosmopolitanism that does not seem to have “any developed theory of culture as a differentiating and expressive ensemble” (263).<sup>5</sup> The same liberal humanism can be seen in Nafisi’s critique of the Islamic republic of Iran in her memoir. As I said before, the Iranian government seems to represent itself autoethnographically to the West and the outside world as an Islamic (Iranian) culture. In the process it has “dichotomized” the human experiences into the binary of West and Islamic (Iranian) and has essentialized Iran’s culture as homogenously and uniformly Muslim.

If Clifford sees in Said’s work a “restless suspicion of totality” (273), in Nafisi too we see a thoroughgoing stress on the uniqueness of the individual that is not by any means reducible to collective totalizations like cultures. Invoking Nabokov’s *Invitation to a Beheading*, for example, Nafisi says: “We were all victims of the arbitrary nature of a totalitarian regime that constantly intruded into the most private corners of our lives and imposed its relentless fictions on us” (67). Like Nafisi, Said dismisses many of the classifications and divisions inherent in the Orientalist discourse (54) as “purely arbitrary.”

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<sup>5</sup> In *Culture and Imperialism*, we see Said’s refusal to subscribe to the particularistic premise of cultures as envisaged by ethnographic anthropology: “All cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated and unmonolithic” (XXV).

If the essentialistic picture of the Orient served to define the West in glowing and celebratory terms, according to Said, then an essentialistic picture of the West in Iran is being invoked to invent a contrasting picture of modern Islam. If the Oriental needed to be seen in monolithic terms, Said argued, it was because the whole discourse of Orientalism had little to do with the Orient and everything to do with the Occident. As Clifford says: “Seen in this way ‘the West’ itself becomes a play of projections, doublings, idealizations, and rejections of a complex, shifting otherness” (272). Similarly in Nafisi’s analysis of the official ideology in Iran, we see how essential and structural the opposition to the West is to the self-definition of Iran as Islamic. Speaking of the committee for cultural revolution in Iran, Nafisi says: “This committee was given the power to reconstruct universities in such a way as to make them acceptable to the leaders of the Islamic republic. What they wanted was not very clear, but they had no doubt as to what they didn’t want ... decadent Western culture” (147). Islamic Iran, in a sense, has appropriated the essentialistic maneuvers of the West to define itself in ways that remind us of the constitutive function of “the Orient” for “the Occident” as described by Said (265).

Nafisi explains how at the start of the revolution in Iran a certain liberal discourse epitomized by canonical works had been deemed essentially “Western” and rejected in favor of indigenous and Muslim alternatives. America was rejected as decadent and immoral, so that an alternative revolutionary Muslim discourse could be invented for Iranians. Within this new framework, there seemed to be little redeeming about America and the West as far as culture was concerned. As one of Nafisi’s conservative students puts in in the mock trial of *Gatsby* in her class, “Americans are decadent and in decline ... they are going down! This is the last hiccup of a dead culture” (127). More than anything else, what should draw our attention here is the oppositional function of America to the autoethnographic task of Iran’s Islamic (cultural) revolution. The

America invoked by these assertions may or may not refer to the real America in the outside world; it seems to be more an essential part of the inventive process by which an alternative Islamic culture is to be brought into being. In his critique of Orientalism, Said had found a similar function performed by that “coercive cultural discourse” (Clifford 262). “Orientalism,” he argued, “has less to do with the Orient than it does with ‘our’ world” (*Orientalism* 12).

As opposed to the essentialist conception of cultures, Nafisi invokes canonical works of Anglophone literature which stress the importance of finding a “way to preserve one’s individuality, that unique quality which evades description but differentiates one human being from the other” (77). It is in this regard that these exemplary Anglophone novels are inherently “democratic,” Nafisi argues. “A good novel is one that shows the complexity of individuals, and creates enough space for all these characters to have a voice; in this way a novel is called democratic—not that it advocates democracy but that by nature it is so” (132). Such novels are thus opposed to the discourse of cultures employed by the Islamic republic. If the latter deals in types and the collective, these novels highlight the inimitability of the individual. Under the Islamic republic’s ethnographic model of cultures,

Whoever we were—and it was not really important what religion we belonged to, whether we wished to wear the veil or not, whether we observed certain religious norms or not—we had become the figment of someone else’s dreams. A stern ayatollah, a self-proclaimed philosopher-king, had come to rule our land. He had come in the name of a past, a past that, he claimed, had been stolen from him. And he now wanted to re-create us in the image of that illusory past. (28)

Such humanistic critique of the notion of cultures is in evidence throughout Nafisi’s narrative. Above all, Nafisi’s critique of uniformity in Iran relates to the imposition of the head-covering on women after the revolution. This can be seen most clearly in her description of the two photos taken of her and her study group upon her departure for the US.

In the first there are seven women, standing against a white wall. They are, according to law of the land, dressed in black robes and headscarves, covered except for the oval of their faces and their hands. In the second photograph the same group, in the same position, stands against the same wall. Only they have taken off their coverings. Splashes of color separate one from the next. Each has become distinct through the color and style of her clothes, the color and length of her hair; not even the two who are still wearing their head scarves look the same. (4)

Here Nafisi stresses the contrast between the vision that she attributes to the ethnographic lens of the regime and her own liberal and individualistic perspective. One is seen and condemned as uniform, while the other is seen as accommodating of individual diversity and difference. From the first perspective, individuals are important insofar as they are a part of a distinct culture, while, from the other, individuals are everything. These perspectives involve different conceptions of authenticity: one stresses cultural authenticity and the other emphasizes individual authenticity. The ethnographic model ascribed by Nafisi to the Islamic regime in Iran is akin to Eagleton's definition of "culture as identity" which is "averse to both universality and individuality; instead it values collective particularity" (54).

Said and Nafisi thus share a set of similar values in their humanistic suspicion of the totalizing discourse of cultures. However it is vis-à-vis America and its imperialism that the two seem to part ways. For Said, the "ascendancy" of America is not to be uncritically accepted but constantly monitored and critiqued. He criticized the Orientalist discourse because it perpetuated "the positional superiority" of the West, putting "the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand" (*Orientalism* 7). For Nafisi, America seems to be the land of the future, showing the way to all other nations and cultures. Nafisi explains this through a discussion of Fitzgerald's *Gatsby*, saying it is "an American classic" because of its subject matter: "the American dream" (109). "We in ancient countries have our past—we obsess over the past. They, the Americans, have a dream: they feel

nostalgia about the promise of the future” (109). Nafisi pushes for the universal emulation of America’s future-oriented model, while Said stresses that it is not “the American dream” that merits attention but its military, economic and political domination of the world. As he notes in *Culture and Imperialism*, “The United States is no ordinary large country. [It] is the last superpower, an enormously influential, frequently interventionary power nearly everywhere in the world” (54). “United States Middle Eastern and Central American policies ... can only be described as imperialist” (55).

This is while Nafisi insists that the personal should never be mixed with and sacrificed to the political (273). The most remarkable heroines in Anglophone fiction are those that strive “to preserve a sense of personal integrity in the face of outside aggression” (213). Unlike for Said, the adversary for Nafisi is not defined as an external superpower, but as “conventions” and “traditions” of a society. The modern novel is “revolutionary” because it has pioneering heroines that “defy the conventions of their time ... and refuse to be dictated to” (194). These “defiant heroines” are “more complicated than the later, more obviously revolutionary heroines of the twentieth century, because they make no claims to be radical” (195).

To show how any attempt at cultural translation of liberalism defined in opposition to America or the West is bound to fail, Nafisi constructs her narrative as a retrospective understanding of her experiences under Islamic republic. What all the students in Nafisi’s private study group have in common is that they are too young to have experienced pre-revolutionary Iran (76). Instead of internalizing Iran’s Islamic ideology, however, these youths have turned to the West to vent their dissatisfaction with their constricted situation: “Thanks to the Islamic republic,” Nafisi says, “they have a rosy picture of the West ... All that is good in their eyes comes from America or Europe, from chocolates and chewing gum to Austen and Declaration of independence” (312).

Her friend, the magician, affirms this when he says, “None of us can live in and survive *this* fantasy world—we all need to create a paradise to escape into” (281 emphasis in the original). Despite claims to the contrary, Nafisi does not seem to have done much to forestall her students’ tendency to romanticize the West and instead seems to believe that this pervasive fascination with things “Western” on the part of the “children of the revolution” (319) (the Iranian youth) promises hope for change.

Looking back at the turbulent and “ideological” early days of the revolution, when she had to struggle against conservative and leftist students to be able to include *Gatsby* in her syllabus, she says, “Now, in retrospect, I see that *Gatsby* was the right choice. Only later did I come to realize how the values shaping that novel were the exact opposite of those of the revolution. Ironically, as time went by, it was the values inherent in *Gatsby* that would triumph, but at the time we had not yet realized how far we had betrayed our dreams” (108). The return to the “values” of *Gatsby* which she takes to be those of American liberalism in Iran is not to be critiqued but to be seen as evidence for “the rightness” and “naturalness” of those values. For Nafisi, the resurgence of these liberal values in an Islamic Iran shows its failure and weakness. In one of the most memorable passages of the narrative, she describes this reversal in terms of the metaphor of the hostage-taking crisis of the American embassy in Iran in 1979.

The fact was that America, the place I knew and had lived in for so many years, had suddenly turned into a never-never land by the Islamic Revolution. The America of my past was fast fading in my mind, overtaken by all the clamor of new definitions. That was when the myth of America started to take hold of Iran. Even those who wished its death were obsessed by it. America had become both the land of Satan and Paradise Lost. A sly curiosity about America had been kindled that in time would turn the hostage-takers into its hostages. (106)

This fascination with the West has not been confined to Iranian youths, but can be observed among “former revolutionaries” as well: “Many former revolutionaries were reading and interpreting works of Western thinkers and philosophers and questioning their own orthodox approaches. It was a sign of hope, if an ironic one that they were being transformed by the very ideas and systems they had once set out to destroy” (277). This enthusiastic return to the West, according to Nafisi, cannot be helped but is more a function of the “superiority” of Western ideas and systems which have been perversely opposed by the Iranian revolution.

Having witnessed the “auspicious” vindication of liberal values among Iran’s youth and intellectuals, Nafisi leaves Iran to announce the good news to the West itself. If under postmodernism, the West seems to have suffered from skepticism regarding the superiority of its liberal ways, a malaise which has been termed by Terry Eagleton as the West’s “crisis of identity” (76),<sup>6</sup> Nafisi comes to disabuse Westerners of doubts. Almost a decade after Francis Fukuyama, she comes to announce the cogency of his thesis regarding liberal democracy being “the end of history.” If Fukuyama had seen the end of history in the ashes of the crumbling communist regimes in Eastern Europe, Nafisi sees it in the failure of Iran’s Islamic revolution. To further clinch her argument regarding the superiority of secular liberal democracy for all cultures, she uses her narrative as a polemic against anyone in the West who opposes liberal values of individualism and freedom in the name of cultures. One of these targets is the discourse inaugurated by Said himself, postcolonialism. Said’s book, *Culture and Imperialism*, Nafisi warns her readers, is being cited by “Muslim fundamentalist[s]” in Iran “against Austen” (290). “It was ... ironic that the most reactionary elements in Iran had come to identify with and co-opt the work and theories of those considered revolutionary in the West” (290). She thus chastises

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<sup>6</sup> See Terry Eagleton’s *The Idea of Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000.

Said for criticizing Western colonialism and imperialism in a way that makes him complicit with the conservatives in Iran.

For Nafisi, the prevalence of Said's views and the discourse of postcolonialism is symptomatic of the West's postmodern "crisis of identity": "When I was growing up in the 1960s there was little difference between my rights and the rights of women in Western democracies. But it was not the fashion then to think that our culture was not compatible with modern democracy, that there were Western and Islamic versions of democracy and human rights. We all wanted opportunities and freedom" (261). Then the "Islamic" revolution happened in Iran and instead of having more rights, Nafisi had "fewer" (261). After this revolution, "the laws had regressed to what they had been before my grandmother's time: the first law to be repealed ... was the family-protection law, which guaranteed women's rights at home and at work. The age of marriage was lowered to nine ... adultery and prostitution were to be punished by stoning to death; women, under law, were considered to have half the worth of men" (261). These regressive changes in Iran are justified, Nafisi argues, only under the relativistic premises of postmodernism and its offshoots such as "Islamic feminism": "a contradictory notion, attempting to reconcile the concept of women's rights with the tenets of Islam [which] enabled the rulers to have their cake and eat it too. They could claim to be progressive and Islamic, while modern women were denounced as Westernized, decadent and disloyal" (262).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Notice how here Nafisi seems to be angry at the conservatives' appropriation of the label "progressive" which she thinks belongs to "modern" intellectuals like herself. Nafisi voices similar ideas regarding the universality of secular liberal democracy in her commentary on the Iranian activist, Shirin Ebadi, winning the Noble Peace Prize in 2003. There again, Nafisi launches an attack on "Islamists and their apologists in the West." "I am a Muslim," Ms. Ebadi asserts, 'so you can be Muslim and support democracy.' This negates the stereotypical images that many Islamists and their apologists in the West disseminate about Islam and democracy. They try to persuade us that among all the religions only Islam is culturally determined, and that while there is no such thing as Christian or Judaic or Hindu or Zoroastrian democracy, Muslims are only defined and shaped by their religion. This claim, no matter how moderate or extremist its advocates might be, is dangerous because it segregates Muslims from the rest of the world.

As John Carlos Rowe has argued, implicit in Nafisi's narrative is a warning to her US readers "that neglect of our 'great writers,' the 'bearers of the canon,' by the advocates of 'political correctness' may well result in a totalitarianism in the United States analogous to what Nafisi finds in the Islamic republic" (267). Describing the ironic fate of her zealous leftist comrades after the triumph of the Islamists in Iran, Nafisi says to one of her religious students, "be careful what you wish for!"; a warning which seems to be addressed to the US readership as well (114). Nafisi's minatory message to her American audience can be traced in her reformulation of her experiences in Iran in terms of the raging culture wars here in the West: "I wanted to write a book in which I would thank the Islamic Republic for all the things it had taught me—to love Austen, James and ice cream and freedom" (338). If before the revolution, she had any doubts about the superiority and universality of "Austen, James, ice cream and freedom," the Iranian revolution taught her otherwise. The lessons of Islamic Republic are not specific to one particular political and cultural context. Rather they have to do with fundamental "existential" questions (165). The Iranian revolution, according to Nafisi, realized the aspirations of a generation of religious and leftist intellectuals in Iran who used to pour scorn on works of the canon as "bourgeois" and "decadent" (108). The trajectory of Iran's revolution only vindicated the canonical works of literature and the values they represented which are now, according to Nafisi, fetishized by Iran's massive young population.

Unlike the generation of writers and intellectuals I was brought up with and now consorted with, this new generation, the one my girls belonged to, was not interested in ideologies or political positions. They had a genuine curiosity, a real thirst for the works of great writers, those condemned to obscure shadows by both the regime and the revolutionary intellectuals ... Unlike in pre-revolutionary times, now the "non-

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Democracy loses its meaning when it is restricted by any ideology, religious or secular." It is interesting to note what has been pointed out by Hamid Dabashi regarding the fact that the Iranian lawyer, Ms. Ebadi "did not earn the Noble Prize she so richly deserved and joyously received by reading *Lolita* in Tehran" (83). See Hamid Dabashi's *Brown Skin, White Masks*. Winnipeg, MB: Fernwood. 2011. See Azar Nafisi's "Commentary" *Wall Street Journal*, Oct. 13, 2003.

Revolutionary writers,” the bearers of the canon, were the ones celebrated by the young: James, Nabokov, Woolf, Bellow, Austen and Joyce were revered names, emissaries of that forbidden world which we would turn into something more pure and golden than it ever was or will be. (39)<sup>8</sup>

What happens when the enemies of the Western canon of great literature take power:

“Totalitarianism.” Although the women in her study group come from different religious and ideological backgrounds, she says, they all seem to be unhappy with the outcome of the revolution. Several of them (formerly leftist) have been imprisoned and almost all of them have been harassed by the morality police. The persecution of women, as presented by Nafisi, seems to be typical for all women in Iran. Nafisi constructs an imaginary narrative of one of her students’ return journey from her class to her house. Nafisi says: “How can I create this other world outside the room? I have no choice but to appeal to your imagination. Let’s imagine one of the girls, say Sanaz, leaving my house and let us follow her from there to her final destination” (26). This student, Sanaz, is thus portrayed by Nafisi as a stand-in for all women in Iran. If she feels oppressed by the new changes, then all women in Iran must similarly feel oppressed, no matter who they are.

Just as Nafisi’s more secular students are dissatisfied, her religious student, Mahshid, is unhappy with the revolution as well. According to Nafisi, this is because she no longer finds her act of wearing the hejab meaningful. Whereas, “before the revolution she had worn the scarf as a

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<sup>8</sup> In her memoir, *Lipstick Jihad*, the Iranian journalist Azadeh Moaveni, writes how “young people” in Iran are “transfixed with the United States” and “tired of the constrained social life prescribed by the regime associated brand-name icons of American culture, Coke and Barbie, with the freedoms they were denied” (209). She explains how “young people embraced the ‘Great Satan’s’ products not out of approval for US foreign policy in the region but as a way to register their discontent with the religious conservatives who controlled their country” (210). When her “loudly anti-American” mother says that her “stories” about “pro-US sentiment in Iran” are invented to “pave the way for American cultural/political/military/culinary domination of the region,” Moaveni asks: “Do America’s abhorrent Middle East policies somehow oblige us to defend the Islamic Republic?” (211). What is interesting to note here is how Moaveni’s account, unlike Nafisi’s, of the “popularity of American culture” among Iran’s youth does not feel obliged to censor any comprising reference to US Middle Eastern policies both in the past and at present. See Azadeh Moaveni. *Lipstick Jihad*. New York: Public Affairs, 2005.

testament to her faith. Her decision was a voluntary act. When the revolution forced the scarf on others, her action became meaningless” (13). It is not clear if Nafisi deduces this conclusion indirectly from Mahshid’s diary or by reporting her thoughts directly. However, both Nafisi and her student seem to agree that “freedom of choice” (152) seems to be the ultimate criterion for the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of any act. The canonical works of Western literature are universal, according to Nafisi, because they place “the individual, her happiness, her ordeals and her rights at the center of the story,” “not the primacy of conventions but the breaking of conventions” (307) and thus bring to life “that elusive goal at the heart of democracy: the right to choose” (307). More than anything else, it seems, modernity for Nafisi seems to reside in “the right to choose” for individuals no matter what their culture, history and background may be.

In her humanistic critique of the Islamic republic, Nafisi seems to have humanized Iranians as part of the universal human family. Thus she seems to disagree with Samuel Huntington’s thesis that “differences among civilizations are not only real ... [but] basic ... These differences are the product of centuries. They will not soon disappear” (25). Values such as “democracy and liberalism” are “Western,” according to Huntington, and their promotion as universal is only likely to engender resistance and opposition (29). Nafisi seems to reject Huntington’s thesis regarding the constitutive nature of cultures and civilizations and thus tries to show the commonalities between Iran’s youth and Americans; both of them seem to value similar things. The liberal values of America, “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” (281) are not “Western,” Nafisi argues, but “modern” and thus “universal.”

However, as critics such as Mitra Rastegar have pointed out, in her attempt to humanize Iran’s youth, Nafisi has dehumanized that part of the Iranian population that is already deeply despised and feared in the West i.e. the religious part. Humanization in Nafisi’s narrative seems to be

contingent upon agreement with her views regarding Western literature, Islam and the West in general.<sup>9</sup> While Iran gets to be humanized in her narrative as a place amenable to “modern” values, it is Islam and its partisans that become the necessary scapegoats. Thus, anywhere Islam is mentioned, we have insistent references to its responsibility for the regressive changes that have happened in Iran after the revolution such as the lowering of the age of marriage, the punishment by stoning for adultery and prostitution (27, 257, 261). For Nafisi, it is Islam that should be marginalized and suppressed because the ascendance of Islam has resulted in the persecution of women in Iran. “Our society was far more advanced than its new rulers” (262) Nafisi says, drawing a clear distinction between all Iranian people and their Muslim “new rulers” as if the latter have introduced completely new things and are not a part of Iran’s society. She positions herself as the “voice” of “our society” in the West. How representative she and her views of Iran are is open to question but she constructs her narrative and her conclusions as if they were.

For many of Nafisi’s readers, the publication of her denunciatory narrative of Iran almost a year after Bush had identified Iran as part of the “axis of evil” has raised many questions regarding her connections with the hawkish neoconservatives in power in Washington at the time. For example, Rastegar argues that at a time when the US is determined to “liberate” Muslim women in certain countries at any cost, why should Nafisi present a reductive picture of women in Iran

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<sup>9</sup> As John Rowe points out, in her narrative Nafisi constantly complains how her religious and leftist students “refuse to read the book”; what is not clear, according to Rowe, is whether they have not actually done their homework and read the book or whether since they refuse to read these books “according to Nafisi’s hermeneutic protocols” then they must not have read the book (266). In other words, by assuming that anyone whose interpretation of the literary works she teaches differs from hers must not have read the book, she shows how the version of apolitical liberalism she preaches can be as “monologic” as the Islamic ideology of the Iranian regime. The most noticeable example of Nafisi suspecting her conservative student of not having read the book is in the last section of the narrative about Austen when her student cites Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism* to call into question her interpretation of Austen’s novel (*Reading Lolita* 289-90).

so that it could be used as propaganda in the outbreak of a war. It is important to stress the “reductive” nature of Nafisi’s picture, Rastegar insists, because Nafisi herself does not seem to forestall the tendency of her readers in the West to take her picture at face value. All the women in Nafisi’s reading group, Rastegar argues, must have come from “urban middle-class backgrounds” because all of them are “university educated and proficient in English” which are qualities that are not “shared by the majority of Iranians” (115). “Within the memoir,” Rastegar argues, the “opposition between religion and secularism is bolstered through an erasure of most of the crimes of the secular, Western-supported shah’s regime” (119). In other words, contrary to what Nafisi suggests, authoritarianism has little to do with the secular or religious character of an administration. The monarchy ruling Iran before the revolution was fairly secular but brutally repressive toward any opposition. Rastegar claims that Nafisi’s failure to historicize the conditions under which Iran’s revolution took place seems to be necessary for her one-sided account of post-revolutionary Iran. If she had looked at history, Rastegar argues, she would have seen why many people in Iran distrusted the US after its orchestrated CIA coup in 1953 overthrew the democratic government of the nationalist leader Mossadeq and reinstated an increasingly authoritarian shah. History would also have enabled Nafisi to see the fundamental infrastructural problems that existed under the shah: problems such as “illiteracy,” “poor rural infrastructure,” and massive poverty in expanding urban slums (119). Instead what we have in Nafisi’s narrative is an ahistorical account that presents the pre-revolutionary shah period as having “laws that were among the most progressive in the world” (27) and revolutionary Iran as “way behind Jane Austen’s times” as her student Manna puts it (259). Rastegar dismisses the universal conclusions that Nafisi draws as her own “class-biased” projections saying, “without disagreeing with the importance of these issues [changes in some laws], one may note the

absence of the issues of poverty, food, housing, education, and the repercussions of the Iran-Iraq war” in Nafisi’s account. “It is typical of much of human rights discourse on the Third World,” Rastegar maintains, “to focus on such practices as regulating women’s bodies, especially those identified with Islamic law, while ignoring socioeconomic concerns” (116). The result is an account in which “a set of class-biased priorities and perceptions regarding hardships under the Islamic republic become authenticated as the priorities of all Iranian women” (116). Examining published reviews of Nafisi’s narrative, Rastegar points out that many “reviewers focus primarily on restrictions on dress, makeup, and accessories, without wondering whether all Iranian women find these equally oppressive or important” (115). As for Nafisi’s central critique of the veil in Iran, Rastegar says:

Without disputing this depiction, one might wonder if these students had other concerns that are never raised and whether they give as much weight to veiling as Nafisi does. For one thing, Nafisi hardly discusses any socioeconomic concerns and gives little information about how these grown women are making ends meet, what their educational and occupational goals are and to what extent they are meeting them. In contrast, she repeatedly asks her students whether they have fallen in love, seeing the regime as inhibiting their ability to achieve the ideal of romantic love. (115)<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> In her account of post-revolution Iran, Azadeh Moaveni mentions the cases of women like the following whose lives seem to have been less negatively affected by the revolution. Moaveni here talks about a female Iranian journalist she met when she was in Tehran. “She came from a traditional, pious family that was exhibiting exceptional openness by allowing her this independence, letting her out of the house at all hours alone, to pursue her work. They did not feel entirely comfortable with this, but that they agreed at all was one of the not-so-small successes of the Islamic Republic. ... The revolution rolled back the legal rights of Iranian women, but it transformed the lives and horizons of women like Fatemeh. Under the Shah’s regime, traditional parents like hers would never have let their daughters stray out into society. They preferred to keep them uneducated and housebound rather than exposing them to corrupt, Westernized Iranians who drank, smoke, wore miniskirts, and slept around. The revolution erased all those sins from the surface of society (tucking them under wraps, along with women). In the process, it made it possible for young women like Fatemeh to venture out of the home sphere. They were given the opportunity to do something with their lives besides washing dishes and birthing.

A generation of such middle-class, traditional women were educated under the revolutionary republic. ... [Fatemeh] was the first woman in generations of her family to have a career, and her work made her feel capable of more. It raised her expectations of what life should offer her. Captivated by possibility, she was trying to negotiate her future within the conventional role her parents still expected her to play” (180-1). See Moaveni’s *Lipstick Jihad*.

Rastegar's reading calls into question Nafisi's claim that the Islamic revolution in Iran did not have "any cultural foundations" (119) and argues that Nafisi resorts to typical Orientalist tropes and presents women in Iran as completely "oppressed" by their Islamic rulers "without [any] possibility of resistance" (118).<sup>11</sup> Rastegar declares that a person's class background might make an important difference in one's understanding of Iran's revolution, even for women. The critique of the mandatory veil which forms the cornerstone of Nafisi's book, she argues, is not by any means the number one concern of many women in Iran. Despite Nafisi's mention of her exceptionally elite background (her father was the mayor of Tehran and her mother was a member of the parliament before the revolution), many of her readers in the West are likely to mistake her and her concerns for those of Iranian women in general. Rastegar also finds it problematic that Nafisi does not mention any "indigenous" means of resistance in Iran and instead presents canonical works of Western literature as the only means of oppositional resistance for oppressed Iranian women under Islam (at least that is the way Nafisi's published reviewers seem to have read her) (108). Rastegar wonders why Nafisi's reviewers who seem to believe in the revolutionary potential of canonical works of literature never ask themselves how "Nafisi's ultimate decision to leave" Iran might undermine the argument for the effectiveness of these works (122). In other words, instead of seeing Nafisi's advocacy of canonical works of Western literature as "heroism" and "resistance," Nafisi's readers in the West should have asked

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<sup>11</sup> Saba Mahmood makes a similar point: Nafisi's narrative "reproduces the presumptions of its audience convinced by the feat of its own ignorance that Iran is nothing but a site of religious zeal, hatred of women and totalitarianism. It is in this respect that *Reading Lolita in Tehran* fits the Orientalists paradigm most faithfully: it reproduces and confirms the impressions of its Western audience, offering no surprises or challenges to what they think they already know about Iran and its rich cultural and political history. . . . Once cannot help but wonder how Nafisi's book would have done had it surprised its readers with social facts that do not nearly fit her readers' structure of expectations such as the fact that the literacy rate for women shot up dramatically under Islamic rule from 35.5 percent in 1976 to 74.2 percent in 1996 or . . . that postrevolutionary Iran has had more women representatives elected to the parliament than the US congress?" (93). See Saba Mahmood, "Feminism, Democracy, and Empire: Islam and the War of Terror" *Women's Studies on the Edge: A Differences Book*. Durham: Duke UP, 2008.

how effective these books have been in bringing about changes in Iran's society and how revolutionary Nafisi has been if she left Iran for the US.

What should be noted here is that much of the dismissive edge in Rastegar's response to Nafisi seems to result from the "war on terror" during which Nafisi's book was published in the United States.<sup>12</sup> Rastegar seems to agree with John Rowe's understanding of Nafisi as a "reactionary" agent of warmongering "neoconservatives" in America.

Is Azar Nafisi part of a neoconservative conspiracy to co-opt neoliberal rhetoric for its own purposes, including the manipulation of "culture" as a weapon in the ongoing war for the "hearts and minds" of Americans and the citizens of those states we hope to convert to our form of democracy? The extrinsic evidence of her position as director of the Dialogue Project at SAIS, her support from the Smith Richardson Foundation and her participation in the public relations' campaigns of SAIS to promote the United States as the "protector" of the Free World is compelling. The intrinsic evidence of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is even more compelling, suggesting not that Nafisi has fallen into the conservative "traps" readied these days for unwitting liberals, but that she actively participates in the agenda of an overtly "depoliticized" cultural study that is in fact profoundly political. (Rowe 271)

The question that could be raised here is how does Nafisi manage to provoke such anger in some of her readers in America? Besides the ominous shadow of war against Iran hanging over her book, I think there are some other fundamental reasons why she is so deeply resented by some of her readers here in the West. What these enraged readers seem to have expected from Nafisi is for her to have used her position as an outsider in US society to critique its domestic and foreign

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<sup>12</sup> In a caustic remark, Dabashi says the same thing: "Perhaps she [Nafisi] would ride into Tehran on a tank, in décolleté, holding Nabokov's *Lolita* and heralding freedom" (83). Almost all readers of Nafisi seem to have concluded that her account is framed in a way that shows little objection to a possible military strike against Iran that could "liberate" Iran's women from their oppression. Bahramitash, for example, views Nafisi's book as an attempt to support "the neo-conservative agenda to stir anti-Muslim sentiment in North America as well as to promote the war on terror" (221-2). Donadeh and Ghosh similarly argue that "Pseudo-feminism has a long history of being used to bolster western colonialist and imperialist agendas, and Nafisi's memoir has the potential to convince some American feminists that a US military intervention in Iran would 'liberate' Iranian women" (643). They continue, "read solely in a US context, the memoir comes dangerously close to confirming a set of stereotypes about Islam for readers who are already saturated with them: that it is a theocratic, evil religion that should be allowed no place in the public sphere; that it oppresses women; and, finally that it stands in stark contrast to the American way of life, thus justifying further foreign military intervention and US political dominion over the world" (643-4).

hubris rather than to reaffirm it. As a translator of another culture, Nafisi is expected by these readers to have adopted what Lawrence Venuti has called “an ethics of difference.” As an intermediary between two unequally empowered cultures and languages, Venuti argues, it behooves a translator to pay attention not only to the original non-Western context but more importantly to the Western/American context of reception and use his/her translation “as a potential site of variation” (10).

By unequal relations of power between various cultures and languages, Venuti refers to the lopsided direction of world-wide translation traffic from other languages into English and how “translating” is “fundamentally ethnocentric” i.e. an “assimilative process” (11). In other words, in translating for an audience, we cannot avoid pursuing “fluency,” “transparency” and “intelligibility” (12). In translating another language and culture into English, a translator domesticates its foreignness and assimilates it into the dominant values and norms of American culture. Thus, as Venuti says, to pursue an ethics of difference

is not to say that translation can ever rid itself of its fundamental domestication, its basic task of rewriting the foreign text in domestic cultural terms. The point is rather that a translator can choose to redirect the ethnocentric movement of translation so as to decenter the domestic terms that a translation project must inescapably utilize. This is an ethics of difference that can change that domestic culture. (82)

Taking “an ethics of difference” as the measure for evaluating different translation projects, Venuti proceeds to define “bad translation” as one that promotes “a domestic attitude that is ethnocentric: ‘generally under the guise of transmissibility, [it] carries out a systematic negation of the strangeness of the foreign work’” (81). “Good translation,” on the other hand, is one that “aims to limit this ethnocentric negation: it stages ‘an opening, a dialogue, a cross-breeding, a

decentering' and thereby forces the domestic language and culture to register the foreignness of the foreign text" (81).

Interestingly enough, Venuti terms translations that pursue an "ethics of difference" "minoritizing." He explains how his theory and practice of translation is "premised on the irreducible heterogeneity of linguistic and cultural situations" (9). In other words, an ethical translation is one that draws on "the irreducible difference introduced by the translation" (116) to challenge "domestic stereotypes for foreign cultures" (81) and unsettle "reigning domestic values" (13). Certain translations "increase this radical heterogeneity by submitting the major language to constant variation, forcing it to become minor, delegitimizing, deterritorializing, alienating it" (10). These translations "compose a minor literature, whose 'authors are foreigners in their own tongue'" (10). Defining the "ethical" translation in these terms, Venuti returns us to the "oppositional" overtones of the concept of exile pointed at by thinkers and activists such as Adorno and Said.<sup>13</sup> Venuti explains how his reformulation of the task of translator involves a basic redefinition of the concept of "loyalty": the "foreignizing" (81) translator is "prepared to be disloyal to the domestic cultural norms that govern the identity-forming process of translation by calling attention to what they enable and limit, admit and exclude, in the encounter with foreign texts" (83). In contrast, we have "thoroughly domesticating" translations that are firmly "grounded in domestic ideologies and institutions" (82). They engage in "an ethnocentric reduction of possibilities, excluding not only other possible representations of foreign cultures, but also other possible constructions of domestic subjects" (82). Thus it becomes clear that

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<sup>13</sup> See Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*. 54. Pointing to Adorno, Said explains how Adorno "expands the possibility of freedom by prescribing a form of expression whose opacity, obscurity and deviousness—the absence of 'the full transparency of its logical genesis'—move away from the dominant system, enacting in its 'inadequacy' a measure of liberation" (333). In similar terms, Venuti warns against "the popular aesthetic of immediate intelligibility and sympathetic identification" (184) that seeks to completely domesticate the foreignness of other cultures and contexts.

translation projects have important “social functions and effects” in “forming cultural identities” and contributing to “social reproduction and change” (81). An ethical translation thus seeks to “limit the ethnocentric movement inherent in translation” (82) not to reinforce it. The anthropologist Saba Mahmood describes the same ethics as “a mode of encountering the Other which does not assume that in the process of culturally translating other lifeworlds one’s own certainty about how the world should proceed can remain stable” (*Politics of Piety* 199).

A translator who renders texts from other languages and cultures into English can use the foreignness of other cultures to “defamiliarize domestic cultural values” and thus challenge “the global hegemony of English” and America (10). Angry readers of Nafisi’s memoir seem to share with Venuti such a belief in “an ethics of difference.” Such an approach to intercultural translation is more concerned with the audience in the target culture and context than the original foreign culture and text. Instead of a fluent domestication of the foreign culture, what is encouraged is “an estranging experience” which constantly reminds its readers of the irreducible difference of the other context lest they universalize the reigning values of their culture. Thus, insistence on cultural difference is equated with a radical version of ethics.

By these terms, Nafisi’s text would constitute a “bad translation” because it reiterates the dominant views of Americans about Islam as a fundamentalist religion and Muslim women as inherently oppressed by their religion and reaffirms the superiority and universality of Western canonical works of literature (Donadey 643-4). Nafisi, on the other hand, seems to believe in a different version of ethics, one that privileges the universality of the individual experience over the heterogeneity of different cultures. While the “ethics of difference” expounded by Venuti had its origins in a conscious challenge to “the global hegemony” of English and America, which seeks to “assimilate unfamiliar forms of life within its own projection into the future ... defined

by the unfolding of the liberal vision itself ... within a teleological process of improvement (“Feminism,” Mahmood 108), “the ethics of sameness” favored by Nafisi does not seem to be concerned with that hegemony at all but with how cultural difference could be invoked to curtail individual freedoms and rights. For Nafisi, the homogenization of cultures into a set of similar values and norms does not seem to pose a major ethical problem. Instead, it might result in the emancipation of individuals in traditional non-Western cultures from the tyranny of outdated customs and structures. Thus, here we have two fundamentally different approaches to the question of globalization. For some, it is the hegemony of America which forms the main object of concern and for others it is the persistence of local customs and traditions which account for the main form of injustice. One is certain of “irreducible cultural differences” that could be used for opposition to America’s global hegemony while the other is sure of the negligibility of such cultural differences and the universality of the modern individual experience.

However, one might ask how can universality and sameness which can render “all life forms that do not accord with [liberal] futurity” “either extinct or provisional” (“Feminism” Mahmood 108) be ethical. In an important challenge to the “postmodern” cultural turn in the West and its complicity with “Islamic fundamentalism,” Haideh Moghissi, like Nafisi in her memoir, attacks those in the West who try to rehabilitate “the image of Muslim women dominant in the West” (138) and thus whitewash the continuing oppression of women in Muslim countries. “If in the Orientalist version, Islam is condemned for its unreformed and unreformable gender-oppressive character, in this neo-Orientalist version, it is applauded for its woman-friendly adaptability, its liberatory potential” (7). “In the new understanding ... Islam appears as an all-encompassing entity defining all that there is in the Middle East, with the difference that the ‘Muslim woman’ is presented as wholly dignified, spiritually empowered being. Non-Westoxicated, she enjoys a

balanced dose of public activity and moral restraint, an enviable security from the violence afflicting women in the developed West” (7).

If in the past, Muslim women could not be seen as anything but victims of male aggression, now they are represented as independent-minded, gender conscious citizens who participate in the social and political life of their societies; have adopted the veil as a brave act of defiance against the social corruption of a Western-oriented market economy and against consumerism ... Muslim women, therefore, represent an indigenous non-Westoxicated model of liberated women to all women in these societies. (41)

Having rejected the postmodern premises of “Islamic feminism,” Moghissi concludes: “It is one thing to challenge the negative colonial imagery of women in Islamic societies as helpless, frail, uneducated, passive. It is quite another thing to reverse the argument and construct one that celebrates Islamic traditions and obscures their gender-biases and oppressive consequences for women” (91). Ultimately, Moghissi wants us to return to concepts such as “universality, equality, modernity and human rights” and stresses how “women as women have definable interests and concerns that can form the basis for solidarity, common action and common struggle among women. That is why we can consider feminism as a universal movement against sexism” (93).

Nafisi has been blamed by her critics for perpetuating the image of Muslim women as oppressed and Islam as oppressive. In her book, Moghissi instead blames these critics themselves who are responsible for manufacturing the “image of strong Muslim women in active negotiation with a Muslim male elite” because “it might ornament gender experience under Islamic fundamentalism and mystify the consequences of non-compliance for women who do not share the beliefs of their Muslim sisters” (50). She blames “postmodernist relativism” for the emergence and popularity of this mystifying form of “Islamic feminism” in the West (50). She warns the proponents of Islamic feminism that they should not forget that only “Westerners” can afford to

reject the “totalizing metatheories and the universalism of liberal pluralism, Marxism and feminism” (50) because they are already “blessed by democratic, social, political and cultural institutions” (58). “Protected as they are, they will not come to harm if they entertain fantasies about communal bonding, the exotic, the small and local, or romanticize premodern practices and institutions” (58).<sup>14</sup>

Rather than getting defensive or apologetic about their rejection of fundamentalism or Western intervention in the region, secular Middle Eastern scholars need to make clear why they stand opposed to both. To oppose Western imperialistic interests in Islamic states, challenging Western attempts to present Islam as the ‘new danger’ in a ‘post-communist’ era should not mean supporting the fundamentalists’ self-serving, anti-Western perspectives in the name of anti-imperialism; nor does the criticism ... of the manifold failures of Western ‘modernity’ or the shortcomings of ‘modernization’ in the East require celebration of the ‘primitive’ and ‘local’ among socio-economic and cultural structures and institutions. (61)<sup>15</sup>

While I agree with many points raised by Moghissi in her critique of “Islamic feminism,” I think she finds herself forced to return to a rather oversimplified binary view that rejects all religions and cultures in the name of the universal discourse of Enlightenment modernity. While she

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<sup>14</sup> Terry Eagleton makes the same point in *The Idea of Culture*: “A cultural relativism hatched in the postmodern West and reflecting its own crisis of identity can be exported to post-colonial nations in ways which underpin the most dogmatic forms of separatism and supermacism. As Meera Nanda points out, the postmodern doctrine that truth is culture-bound can end up ‘providing theoretical grounds for and a progressive gloss on the fast growing anti-modernist, nativist, and cultural/religious revivalist movements in many parts of what used to be called the third world.’ What may seem the last word in epistemological radicalism in Paris can end up justifying autocracy elsewhere. In a curious reversal, cultural relativism can come to ratify the most virulent forms of cultural absolutism” (76-7).

<sup>15</sup> If we pay closer attention, we realize that Venuti and Moghissi stand for views that are incommensurable. According to Moghissi, non-Western cultures represent the “premodern” and the “exotic” which are inherently at odds with progressive “concepts” such as “universality, equality, modernity and human rights” (47). In other words, you cannot draw on “outdated” practices and ways of life to critique the modern Western way of life, as Venuti wants the ethical translator to do. You can only “romanticize premodern practices and institutions harboring hopes in them for authentic cultural practices which would respond to spiritual human needs” (58). The critique of postmodernism at the heart of Moghissi’s book is basically an attempt at restoring the binary of the traditional vs. the modern. “To reject modernity in the Middle East without offering a more humane and egalitarian alternative is to validate fundamentalism, celebrating its non-Western, non-Eurocentric, home-grown, culturally harmonious values as the only hope appropriate for the Islamic world. Middle Eastern intellectuals must decide whether modernism is an alien and alienating idea for the Islamic world or whether ... it provides the germ of a universal civilization” (56). To reject postmodernism, as Moghissi advocates, is to return to “the asserted universality of social and historical progress and the unidirectionality of humanity’s intellectual and moral striving” (53).

claims to respect diversity of views, it seems that for her any claim that women can enjoy “good life” and feel “empowered” in different ways is already a fallacy and a fantasy. Although I don’t want to validate the particularistic premises of those who essentialize Islam and Muslim women, I think it is important not to foreclose “valuable forms of human flourishing outside the bounds of a liberal progressive imaginary” (Mahmood 155). In other words, if we have already limited “good life” to the achievement of “individual autonomy and freedom” (Moghissi 55), it is possible that we have already blinded ourselves to forms of “agency” that are not derived from the defiance of “norms” but rather from the “multiple ways in which one inhabits norms” (Mahmood, *Politics of Piety* 15). Put differently, values can be defined differently by various “ways of life” and they are not reducible to one universal form. Another point that could be raised against both Nafisi and Moghissi is how by reconnecting the question of women with the “critique” of Islam, they are likely to de-emphasize “the diversity of women’s experiences along lines which cut across class, ethnicity, ideology and politics” (Moghissi 47). As pointed out by Rastegar, for example, Nafisi’s exclusive focus on the imposition of the headscarf for women in Iran draws attention away from questions that have to do with the diversity of concerns and priorities for women from different class backgrounds. In other words, one could legitimately ask if all women in Iran are equally and similarly oppressed by this new law or do they, because of their different class and cultural backgrounds, have different aspirations, needs and concerns which are not ever raised in an account such as Nafisi’s? To raise this question is not to reject Nafisi’s critique of mandatory laws in Iran but to ask if “universal” liberal approaches favored by people like Nafisi and Moghissi are not likely to result in a different kind of “blindness” and “oppression” that reduces everything to a matter of Islam vs. modernity and which refuses to take local and contextual factors into account.

While postmodernism is a vexed issue that can be debated and critiqued from several perspectives, in its emphasis on the particularity and specificity of contexts it is a major improvement on the universal premises of modernity. Although I agree with Moghissi that no consideration, neither the imperialism of “the United States and other great powers in the Middle East and North Africa” (3) nor the predominance of “stereotypical images of Islam and Muslim women” (37) in the West, should stand in the way of our criticizing “women’s oppression in Islamic societies” (135). Nevertheless, we should be careful not to reduce everything to a matter of Islam as has been done in the Orientalist discourse of people like Bernard Lewis. The issue of “Islamic fundamentalism” itself is much more complex and context-specific than a simple “rejection of the social and moral ideas and standards associated with the project of modernity” (Moghissi 64). Again attempts at clarification, contextualization and historicization should not be understood as justification of these forms of Islamic revival in different countries. However, to simply reject all forms of Islamic revival in the past three decades as revolutions “in the name of a past” or an “illusory past” (Nafisi 28), is to be blind to the important contemporary forces that make such movements and ideologies compelling and attractive. Islamism in Iran is not similar to its counterparts in other Muslim countries and arose under specific political and historical conditions that are unique to Iran. Much of the suspicion against the US in Iran had to do with its support for the authoritarian government of the shah and his reinstatement after the CIA-orchestrated coup of 1953.<sup>16</sup> While as Nafisi stresses in her book, after the revolution, regardless

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<sup>16</sup> See Stephen Kinzer’s *All the Shah’s Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror*. In an interview with the New York Times reporter just before the release of her book, Nafisi expresses some of her frustration with the West which she had scrupulously left out of the book. In the interview she says: Governments of the West “have been careless about who they support.” “Political and economic relations” seem to trump other considerations such as democracy and human rights, Nafisi complains. To exemplify her argument, she refers to close ties between America and Saudi Arabia and Egypt (under Hosni Mubarak). “You need to support the democratic forces, to give them hope and to be stricter toward these horrible governments” Nafisi urges “governments of the West.” In the interview, Nafisi also talks about Iran-Iraq war in a different way: Instead of

of their personal choice, Iranian women have been forced to wear the hijab, nevertheless, many women have also been able to take part in important arenas in the public sphere. More than 60 percent of student population in Iran's institutions of higher education is made up of women.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, to portray the situation in Iran as if every woman was equally unhappy with the new conditions is rather reductive. Again, this is not to repudiate Nafisi and her critique but to point out how universalistic perspectives that identify themselves as "modern" and regard any other viewpoint as necessarily wrongheaded could be rather solipsistic and "monologic."

In a journalistic piece published in *The London Review of Books*, the Iranian expatriate, Roxanne Varzi points out how while "a narrative is subjective and the story of a life especially is made up of assumptions, desires and fantasies about what may have happened or could have happened," readers in the West are likely to take such subjective "life stories" "for fact" and take at face value their generalizations about a different culture and context.<sup>18</sup> Hurt by the negative stereotypes about Iran promoted by Betty Mahmoody's *Not Without My Daughter*, Varzi explains how after graduating from college in the US, she went to Iran to write an account that would "show everything that Mahmoody and the press did not." Upon sharing her manuscript

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solely criticizing the Iranian government as she did in her book, here she criticizes the West for supporting Saddam Hussein. "That is what happened in the Iraq-Iran war. The US used Iraq against Iran not thinking they are creating a monster, but they did." Although she notes all these contradictions in the diplomacy of Western governments, she attributes opposition to and skepticism about the West in Muslim countries solely to their fear of losing their culture, to "their inability to change" as the reporter puts it. Muslim countries are "worried that you will come in and change their perspective," Nafisi says. See Julie Salamon's "Professor's Rebellion: Teaching Western Books in Iran, and in US, Too" March 24, 2003. *The New York Times*.

<sup>17</sup> Bahramitash, 233.

<sup>18</sup> On third-world literature as national allegory, see Fredric Jameson's "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" *Social Text* 15 (1986): 65-88. Third world literature is allegorical because the "telling of the individual story and the individual experience cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the collectivity itself" (85-6). Jameson rather unconvincingly attributes the primacy of "social totality" in third world literature to their being industrially and materially third world. I think a more convincing explanation of the inevitability of a collective allegory in representations of cultural others is offered by James Clifford and Renato Rosaldo who explain how allegory in such texts come from the effort to evoke a coherent "foreign" culture and context. See Clifford's "On Ethnographic Allegory" and Rosaldo's "From the Door of his Tent: The Fieldworker and the Inquisitor" in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*.

with her uncle who had just been released from Iran's notorious Evin prison, she is told that her "writing is deeply self-censored."

I had left out the juicy stuff: the neighbor's lesbian relationships, the opium addicts, the widespread plastic surgery, his [her uncle's] incarceration. I did it to "protect people," I told him. I wasn't trying to sell books, I was trying to sell a vision of Iran different from the Western media's. I, too, had an agenda and while I hadn't made up any of the details in my book, what I left out made it less "truthful."

While I don't think it is necessarily that easy to determine the "truthfulness" of any account, it is important to realize the importance of "agenda" to our selection of details in any narrative account about another culture. Varzi's account had been motivated by debunking the dominant and hurtful stereotypes about Iran in America. Thus she decided to focus only on the "positive" and leave out anything that would show Iran in a negative light. Varzi's account, which remained unpublished, could have been successful in changing some views about Iran although it would not have been "truthful." While I don't find it advisable to unequivocally take sides in the dispute between Nafisi and her angry critics, I think it is important to end with this emphasis on "agenda." Establishing Nafisi's agenda would amount to "intentional fallacy" which I will not engage in but given the context within which her account is published and the consistency with which she stresses certain oppressive aspects of Iran while de-emphasizing others, I think it is safe to agree with those critics who find Nafisi on the side of the neoconservatives in Washington. This does not detract from the subjective "truthfulness" of her account but shows how she could be situated within her context of reception.

While Nafisi's enraged critics have tried to explain this "agenda" solely by means of her affiliations with neoconservative institutions in America, I would like to argue for the possibility that her ahistorical account of Iran's Islamic revolution is actually a "truthful" reflection of her

universalistic perspective. In other words, it is not her neoconservative credentials that explain her reductive account of Iran's revolution but instead her refusal to take local cultures and contexts seriously. In this regard, she is rather similar to Orientalists like Bernard Lewis who engage in overgeneralizations about the world of Islam and the Western world instead of delving into the specifics of their historical, political and cultural contexts in various Muslim majority countries. Instead of trying to incorporate the local context's logic and trajectory, Nafisi requires it to conform to her normative views about modernity and tradition. This may be the lesson that critics of postmodern "relativism" such as Moghissi could take away from Nafisi's account. While universal accounts such as liberalism and feminism can explain a lot about the modern situation, insistence on them can produce historical and cultural blindness to the ways in which local contexts unfold in history.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> An excessive and uncritical indulgence in such liberal cosmopolitanism can easily turn critical non-Western intellectuals into what Hamid Dabashi calls "comprador intellectuals": dubious "native informers with no loyalty to any particular nation or commitment to any particular cause" serving a belligerent US empire (20). See Dabashi's *Brown Skin, White Masks*.

## Conclusion

The controversies provoked by Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* and Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, I have argued, are important because of the light they cast on the general dispute over the merits of political and culturally relativistic perspectives such as postcolonialism. While the latter is undoubtedly afflicted with many problematic assumptions, the exclusively liberal perspective which these authors have sought to reaffirm in its place has its own plethora of defects. The charges levelled against these authors are thus applicable to other critics and scholars who have similarly sought to dismiss postcolonialism as the faddish radicalism of tenured academics. Ali, Hosseini and Nafisi merit a closer attention not only for their exposing some of the flawed views promoted by postcolonialism but also for their demonstrating why an unqualified reversion to liberalism may not still be the best way of dealing with and understanding the non-Western world.

Given the prevalence of liberalism in the West and its growing popularity around the world, it is no wonder that it should be taken for granted and not properly appreciated. By vividly describing the grave and inhumane consequences of non-liberal political structures for individual freedoms and minorities, *Brick Lane*, *The Kite Runner* and *Reading Lolita in Tehran* reconfirm the superiority of liberalism and help us better understand its advantages over ethnic and cultural forms of nationalism. Furthermore, both through their focus on the complexity and individuality of their central characters and through the imaginative identification they enable between their Western readership and these characters, these narratives reaffirm the humanity of peoples that are otherwise apt to be misunderstood and denigrated. At a time when the belligerent rhetoric of the clash of civilizations has gained a new and widespread currency, stressing and demonstrating

the equal humanity of people from other cultures and civilizations is bound to have salubrious effects.

The liberal perspective employed by Ali, Hosseini and Nafisi is particularly good at illuminating the limitations inherent postcolonialism and multiculturalism. The political and culturally relativistic views espoused by the latter not only distort the realities of the cultures they purport to defend but also mystify and thus help perpetuate the plight of many who are oppressed under the reign of traditional cultures. Their narratives illustrate the ethical and epistemological defects of insisting on the particularity of cultures and thus questioning the universality of humanity. They reveal not only the oppressive and dehumanizing consequences of such doctrines for individual freedoms, women and minorities, but also expose the questionable overgeneralizations on which monolithic conceptions of cultures are founded. In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, for instance, Nafisi seeks to discredit postcolonial views not only by showing the increasing popularity of liberal values in post-revolutionary Iran but also by revealing the discriminatory and oppressive nature of the Islamic culture imposed by the Iranian regime. Postcolonial critics in the West who have invoked Iran as proof of the failure of liberal theories of modernization, Nafisi objects, not only ignore the enthusiasm of many Iranians for liberal values but also empower reactionary and conservative elements in Iran. Cultures, as these narratives demonstrate, can become particularly oppressive and exclusionary when they become entangled with intractable political conflicts. *The Kite Runner* thus vividly describes the dehumanizing consequences of the politicization of ethnic identities entailed by Pashtun nationalism for the minority Hazaras in Afghanistan.

And yet a closer inspection of the criticisms elicited by these narratives has brought to my attention a set of desires, experiences, and aspirations that cannot be properly understood through

a liberal prism. The problematic concept of cultures promoted by postcolonialism, I argue, better helps us comprehend these non-individualistic and non-universal experiences and aspirations. The liberal perspective deployed by Ali, Hosseini and Nafisi has no positive terms for aspirations, experiences and priorities other than freedom and individuality. Liberalism may tolerate cultures and may even advocate for their diversity, but it does not understand them. Conceiving of human beings as autonomous individuals first and foremost, liberalism either reduces cultures to superficial and colorful differences that add variety to its modernity or opposes them as burdens and impediments that oppress the freedom, authenticity and agency of individuals. With such premises, liberalism can help us understand neither the determination of displaced immigrants to preserve their particular cultures nor their sadness at perceiving the erosion and loss of their cultures. Liberalism can expose the negative consequences of cultural forms of nationalism but cannot help us understand the important collective motives of cultural survival and economic modernization which underpin nationalism. Nor can liberalism help us understand the attachments people have to their particular national communities and the sacrifices they are ready to make for their sake. Above all, I argue, the primacy of freedom and individualism in liberalism obscures from view the dialogic and cultural nature of individual identities and sentiments. We cannot properly understand these relationships, sentiments, attachments and experiences unless we draw help from the admittedly problematic concept of cultures promoted by postcolonialism. As I argue, understanding the importance and true diversity of cultures may be the first step in better coping with the frictions, animosities and exclusions they have caused and continue to cause. One of the important benefits we can draw from this more acute awareness of the cultural constitution of human identities is the recognition

of the entrenched nature of the prejudices instilled in us by our cultures and the difficulty of our ever completely freeing ourselves from the distortions of other cultures these prejudices entail.

In short, Ali, Nafisi and Hosseini are right to note the problematic assumptions of political and culturally relativistic perspectives such as postcolonialism, but the exclusively liberal perspective they reaffirm instead keeps them from registering the intricate complexities that arise from the cultural nature of human identities and sentiments. This is, in fact, the gist of Clifford Geertz's argument against anti-relativists in his essay "Anti Anti-Relativism." To acknowledge cultural differences is not to endorse the essentialistic pictures of different cultures that are at times set forth and defended in the name of cultural relativism. It is rather to point out the excessive thinness of the individualistic picture of human nature inherent in universal perspectives such as liberalism. Individuals are never as "wholly detached" and "unencumbered" as Enlightenment and individualistic liberalism envisions them to be. "From the start," they are "situated, embedded in a history that locates [them] among others, and implicates [their] good in the good of the communities whose stories [they] share." These stories situate them "in the world and gives [their] lives their moral particularity" (Sandel, "Introduction" 9, 6). Thus to acknowledge postcolonial perspectives is not to rationalize and condone the various inhumanities and inequalities that may occur within different cultures but to remember that "it is through the parochial that most of us experience and live life" (Mehta 27) and be alert to our own ethnocentric tendency to immediately call "barbarism whatever is not [our] own practice" (Montaigne qtd. Geertz 264-265). By understanding the limitations of liberal perspectives, we could better take note of the specific political, economic and cultural factors that drive powerful movements and tensions in many non-Western societies. Thus despite its many weaknesses,

postcolonialism should not be completely abandoned because it helps us better understand these political and cultural complications.

In the end, I hope I have been able to show the important reasons both for understanding the advantages of political liberalism and for comprehending the force and diversity of cultures. Considering the fundamental dissonance between liberalism and the idea of cultures, this hope may sound contradictory. And yet this seemingly contradictory formulation conveys the important point set forth by Geertz regarding the idea of cultures being both an insightful tool and a heavy responsibility. Knowledge of the importance and diversity of cultures opens our eyes to and helps us comprehend much that is belied otherwise such as the cultural constitution of individual desires and identities. It is, however, also a responsibility because recognizing the importance and diversity of cultures is not going to inoculate us against ethnocentrism and may in fact reinforce it. Likening the capacity to responsibly dispose of the knowledge of cultures to learning “to live in a collage,” Geertz rightly stresses that “it is not a connatural capacity ... upon which we can complacently rely” (“Uses of Diversity” 87). This is why I stress the advantages of political liberalism; knowledge of the force and diversity of cultures neither condones nor detracts from the enormity and inhumanity of the atrocities and massacres carried out in the name of cultures.

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