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Examination of the Orientalist Derogation of the Iranian People and Nation Presented in the
1991 Film, *Not Without my Daughter*

“We can’t stay here. This is a backward, primitive country. I won’t live here. I won’t bring up our daughter here” (00:34:11-00:34:17). Distraught by the savagery of a nation and culture she does not know, Betty Mahmoody desperately protests her husband’s declaration that they would not be returning to the US as their trip to Iran comes to an end. With her objection being met by a startling blow to the cheek (00:34:45), it does not take long for Betty to realize that the man before her is no longer the sophisticated American husband with whom she had fallen in love. Presented before her, rather, is the pinnacle of Iranian masculinity, a violent force that would continue to terrorize her and her daughter as they work to escape the allegedly backward nation that is Iran. It is this journey in breaking away from a sadistic husband and country that is detailed within the 1991 film, *Not Without my Daughter*. Based on a memoir of the same name written by American author Betty Mahmoody, *Not Without my Daughter* glorifies the stigmatized Iranian image constructed within the US in the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian Revolution and Hostage Crisis. Despite its questionable representation of this nation and its people, the unfortunate truth remains that Americans view Mahmoody’s account not simply as a memoir of “domestic discord,” but rather as an authentic representation of contemporary Iranian practices and overall way of life (Goodwin, 759-760). This essay will thereby assess how the film’s narrative depiction of Iranian masculinity and traditional practices enforce the orientalist

notion of Iranian inferiority relative to American superiority. In doing so, it will ultimately prove how the the film rationalizes anti-Iranian sentiment, which continues to plague the modern political and social climate of the US, and even questions the humanity of the Iranian people. The 1991 film, *Not Without My Daughter*, as it adversely characterizes Dr. Sayyed Bozorg Mahmoody as a brutish Iranian man who terrorizes his American wife, Betty Mahmoody, portrays the alleged primitivity of Iranian culture as well as the Islamic practices it promotes; in light of the violence evoked by the 1979 Islamic Revolution and Hostage Crisis, such fictitious representation conclusively advances an orientalist agenda through which the film strives to barbarize the people and nation of Iran.

The derogatory portrayal of Iran and its people exemplified in *Not Without my Daughter* stems from the anti-Iranian sentiment prevailing in the US after the 1979 Islamic Revolution and Hostage Crisis. Also known as the Iranian Revolution (1978-1979), such conflict constituted the formation of the Islamic Republic under Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who ousted Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Shah or last monarch of Iran. Prior to the revolution, the US was heavily involved within Iranian politics and even supported the monarchy under the Shah. Following the election of Mohammad Mosaddegh as the Prime Minister of Iran in 1951, such American intervention would surge per the desire of Mosaddegh to nationalize Iran's oil industry. Seeing Mosaddegh as an evident threat to the economic interests of the US within Iran, the CIA launched Operation Ajax (1953), a coup that ousted Mosaddegh and led to the reinstatement of the Shah. Like his father, the Shah went on to stirr discontent amidst the Iranian people per his desire to modernize and westernize Iran, an agenda that was advanced through the instigation of a political dictatorship in which he resorted to force to lead this nation towards the

“Great Civilization” (Mohammadi, 70). The establishment of SAVAK, a terrorizing police force, as well as the deviation of the Shah’s regime from Islamic practice caused the Iranian people to turn towards the religious ideologies preached by Khomeini “for a foundation of familiarity and identity” (Mohammadi,73). As stated by Dr. Mahmoody in the film, the eviction of the Shah in 1979 “was just amazing...For the first time, [Iranians] could say to everyone, this is our faith, this is who we are” (00:41:01-00:41:20). Nevertheless, initial resentment towards the US per its involvement in the abdication of the beloved Prime Minister Mossadegh was rekindled after the Shah was granted refuge within this nation. Thus, on November 4, 1979, Iranian students stormed the US embassy in Tehran, seizing 52 American diplomats who would not be released until 444 days later. American media heavily covered the Hostage Crisis, with ABC’s “The Iran Crisis - America Held Hostage” program even offering a count pertaining to the number of days for which such animosity had gone on; this program also broadcasted the scene outside of the embassy: rampant crowds of Iranians burning American flags as they chanted, “Marg bar America,” *death to America* (Mahdavi, 216). The image of brutality painted by this historical occurrence thereby set the framework for the stigmatized American perception towards Iran that is glorified within *Not Without my Daughter*.

The antagonistic characterization of Dr. Mahmoody in *Not Without my Daughter* advances this film’s intent to vilify the image of Iranian masculinity by presenting Iranian men as being both deceitful and violent. The stark contrast exhibited by the characterization of Dr. Mahmoody in the US versus in Iran is one of the narrative measures undertaken by the film to glorify the notion of Iranian savagery relative to American civility and sophistication. As stated in the publication, “Not Without My Daughter: On Parental Abduction, Orientalism and

Maternal Melodrama,” the Dr. Mahmoody introduced in the US is a “real American family man” (Hart, 55), one who tells his daughter, Mathob, the stories of the wondrous Persian empire (00:07:13-00:07:39) and vows he would never do anything to “jeopardize [Betty] or Mathob’s safety” (00:12:34-00:12:39). It is not until he arrives in Iran that he suddenly transforms into a “violent, irrational, and unpredictable maniac who beats his wife and locks her up” (Hart, 55). Mahmoody’s immediate transition into what is referred to by the publication, “The U.S. Media and the Middle East: Image and Perception,” as a “caricature of patriarchy” is first exemplified in the previously-described confrontation with Betty (Kamalipour, 2564); it is at this point in the film that he reveals his true intention of finding employment and establishing a new life in Iran, despite the fact that he had previously sworn on the Quran for their quick return back to the US (00:12:28-00:12:40). Betty’s disheartened realization regarding her husband’s scheme and refusal to stay in this “primitive and backward country” are quickly subdued as he strikes her, thereby touching upon the violent and deceitful image of Iranian masculinity that would continue to be endorsed by the overall film (00:34:12). Looking at a single shot within this scene, Betty can be found caressing her cheek, aghast by her husband’s sudden drive for physical violence, as he towers over her, muttering, “you’re in my country, you’re my wife, you do as I say. Do you understand me? We’re staying here” (00:34:46-00:34:58). The looming presence of Dr. Mahmoody over his wife that is crafted within this frame hints at his newfound authority relative to her subservience, an unjust dynamic that deviates immensely from the more complacent relations that they initially upheld in the US. Irrespective of the propriety he exhibited in the US, the fact that Dr. Mahmoody almost immediately transforms into this uncontrollable stranger upon becoming more immersed within his native country proves that efforts at truly refining the

“civilized savage” are hopeless, as “they are always hiding something violent under the thin layer of civilization” (Hart, 55). The fact that “the influence of the Iranian, Islamic culture and family” is supposedly responsible for inducing such an egregious transformation affirms how this film’s presentation of Iranian masculinity contributes to its overarching intent of fictitiously categorizing and consequently dehumanizing the entirety of the Iranian people and nation (Hart, 55). With respect to the real-world prevalence of such xenophobic categorization, the publication, “An Analysis of Literary Representations of Iranian Men in Diasporic Iranian Literature,” reveals that the “construction of Iranian men’s primitive masculinity” started in the late 1980s, thereby aligning with the time of the Hostage Crisis (Fotouhi, 2). The depiction of Iranian men as violent fanatics is also alluded to in Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, in which such foreign and unorthodox men are deemed to be “sadistic, treacherous, and low” (Fotouhi, 3). While the glimpse of modernization brought to Iran in the early twentieth century worked to negate such ideologies through educating and civilizing Iranian men, the truth remains that the 1979 Islamic Revolution and Hostage Crisis reinvigorated the biased Western classification of Iranian men as the “devilish savages of Islam” (Fotouhi, 4). It is the emulation of such malice by the character of Dr. Mahmoody that affirms the overarching intent of *Not Without my Daughter* to marginalize the Iranian people and establish a sense of binary opposition emphasizing American superiority relative to Iranian inferiority.

Furthermore, the victim-villain dichotomy constructed through Dr. Mahmoody’s abuse towards and confinement of Betty as well as the film’s demeaning presentation of the Persian language contribute to its overarching motive of antagonizing and dehumanizing the Iranian people. It is through dramatizing the relentless authority exerted over Betty that the film

ultimately constructs an image of the villainous Iranian man, a domestic terrorist who, according to the publication, ‘They Do That to Foreign Women’: Domestic Terrorism and Contraceptive Nationalism in *Not Without My Daughter*,” executes the violence allegedly authorized by “irrational and anti-American religiosity” (Goodwin, 765). Betty’s relegation to a completely subservient position is exemplified by the fact that she is denied the ability to make any phone calls or leave the house; her bold decision to do the latter on the basis of seeking aid from Hossein, who ultimately arranges for her departure from Iran, would result in yet another scene of merciless physical violence, during which Mahmoody shockingly remarks, “I’m going to cut you up. You’re dead” (01:14:46-01:16:22). Such defiance in conforming to her husband’s relentless assertion of power results in her confinement, during which she is completely separated from Mahtob (01:20:00-01:22:41); it is such incidents of maltreatment that drive Betty to repeatedly pronounce that she is being held hostage, thereby parallelizing with the historical circumstances that provoked the utter hatred that is highlighted within this film (00:44:17-00:44:26). As stated in “Bound for Glory: The Hostage Crisis as Captivity Narrative in Iran,” the word hostage in itself has “long served as a cultural symbol of the American experience” (Scott, 179). More specifically, the derogatory connotation of this word is heavily attributed to the Hostage Crisis, which has been glorified as a “a story of captivity and torment” (Scott, 181). The prevalence of this word within the film thereby serves not only to connect Betty’s struggles with those of the real hostages, but to reinforce the notion that Dr. Mahmoody is simply one of those “devilish [Iranian] savages” who advances his deceitful motives through the execution of brutality and violence, hence alluding to how the film’s presentation of Betty’s victimization and Dr. Mahmoody’s dominance ultimately advances its orientalist agenda

(Scott,177). On another note, the role played by language in establishing this notion of Iranian barbarity is exemplified by the film's derogatory presentation of Farsi. The marginalization of the "Iranian other" endorsed by this film stems from the allegedly incomprehensible nature of the Persian language. As stated in "Constructing Alterity: Colonial Rhetoric in Betty Mahmoody's *Not Without My Daughter*," Betty describes the conversations of her husband's family as "the neverending chatter of imponderable tongues" and is greatly taken aback by their "shrill chatter and expansive gestures" that make an otherwise normal conversation seem much more like a heated and chaotic argument (Nazari, 17). Rather than acknowledging such communication style as a cultural difference, the film strives to "manipulate the western viewer into feeling overwhelmed by loud, illogical people with no conversational rules" in order to conclusively highlight the apparent lack of propriety upheld by all Iranians (Kamalipour, 2569). Contrarily, the relief expressed by Betty upon realizing that Hossein speaks English hints at how the film establishes a sense of "linguistic sovereignty" that ultimately glorifies English as the key to her liberation while also berating the supposedly unrefined nature of Farsi, thereby alluding to the notion of Iranian inferiority and American superiority that is heavily emphasized within this film (01:05:44-01:06:18; Nazari, 16).

Additionally, the degrading depiction of the Iranian household and culture presented in *Not Without my Daughter* strengthens this film's underlying intent of glorifying Iranian primitivity relative to American superiority. The initial apprehension and later disgust with which Betty would come to view Iran is first apparent upon her arrival in this nation, during which she seemingly distances herself from Dr. Mahmoody's family as they greet, or rather, bombard him (00:13:27-00:14:00). The apparent separation of Betty and her daughter within a

specific frame of the scene where family members are shown to be embracing Dr. Mahmoody hints at the film's intent to disassociate Betty from their seemingly unrefined and unsettling customs (00:13:42). Large crowds of people like what is exhibited in this scene are intrinsic to Orientalist accounts as they are seen as a "threat to the western individual because they all look the same and speak a foreign language," thereby affirming the significance of presenting such image of a chaotic Iranian family in advancing the film's prejudice agenda (Nazari, 15). Betty's cultural oblivion and corresponding stigmatization is further emphasized by her and Mathob's horror upon witnessing the butchering of a lamb, which, according to Dr. Mahmoody, is "a traditional way of saying welcome. It's a great honor. They give the meat to the poor" (00:18:23-00:18:34). Evidently, it is Betty's lack of understanding and corresponding intolerance that renders this seemingly bizarre practice to be yet another example of the apparent barbarity underlying Iranian culture. The primitivism attributed with traditional practices of the Iranian people is also emphasized with relation to their eating etiquette. Iranians often enjoy their meals on the floor and gather around what is referred to as a *sofreh*, or oilcloth. Once again, it is the deviation from Western cultural norms that renders such practice to be "uncivilized and bizarre [and thereby] deserving of condescension and derision" (Nazari, 11). The idiosyncrasy underlying the cultural practices of the Iranian household drives Betty to shield Mathob from her paternal heritage and instill upon her the same pressing desire to flee from this primitive nation, as shown by their nightly prayers: "Dear lord, please help us leave Iran and get back to America. Please let nothing separate us, and keep us safe in your care. Amen" (00:42:02-00:42:30). Thus, by accentuating the unorthodox nature of such customs, the film ultimately justifies the dehumanization of and discrimination towards the Iranian people.

Finally, the film highlights the depraved limitations on women and violence allegedly endorsed by the Islamic religion, thereby revealing its prejudiced agenda to brutalize the Iranian people and nation. The restrictive nature and corresponding primitivity of Islam is first hinted at by the film through the uproar expressed by Dr. Mahmoody's family in response to Betty's inability to completely cover herself with a *hijab*; The dramatized arrival of armed forces and affirmation by Dr. Mahmoody's brother that "every hair that is not covered is like a dagger that [Betty] aims at the heart of [their] martyrs" serve to emphasize the severity and even irrationality of such religious ideology as well as its deviation from the modernity attributed with Western society (00:21:28-00:22:18). The submissive position and confining dress-code expected to be upheld by Iranian women has come to "signify Iran's backwardness in the eyes of the West... the veil has become a symbol of backwardness" (Fotouhi, 5). The binary opposition constructed within this film thereby stems from the contradiction of Islamic practice to what is traditionally deemed to be modern according to the Western standard. It is this viewpoint regarding the alleged antiquity of Islamic principles that warrants Dr. Mahmoody's colleague to make the discriminatory remark that Iranians have "prayed themselves back to the stone age" (00:04:34-00:04:38). Furthermore, *Not Without my Daughter*'s enduring focus on the violence and abuse expressed towards Betty, both physical and sexual, strives to present Islam as being both anti-American as well as "a specific bodily threat to white American womanhood" (Goodwin, 761). The fact that Dr. Mahmoody repeatedly proceeds to beat his wife "in the name of Islam" corresponds to the stigmatized belief that this religion is built upon the fundamental endorsement of violence and utter cruelty (Goodwin, 765). The film also denounces Islam as a "racialized sexual peril embodied by Iranian Muslim men" through presenting the attempted rape

of Betty by one of the guides accompanying her and her daughter as they work to escape from Iran (Goodwin, 769; 01:45:00-01:45:40). The accentuation of such abusive and sexual tendencies ultimately advances the film's motive to marginalize Iran and rationalize the real-world enmity held towards this nation and its people. On a final note, the cruel nature of Islamic law specifically is emphasized by Betty's perpetual conflict in not being able to divorce Mahmoody, as she would have to relinquish custody of Mahtob in order to do so (01:08:41-01:08:48); the deprecation of women and children to the simple "property of Islamic men" is yet another alleged facet of Islam presented by the film that ultimately strengthens its dehumanizing agenda (Hart, 61).

Contrarily, the Islamic denouncement of violence as well as the political, not religious, motives underlying the unlawful regulations instituted by a power-centric regime challenge the notion of Iranian inferiority emphasized in *Not Without my Daughter*. The fictitious notion of Iranian barbarity fabricated by the film is alluded to in the following quote stated by the real Dr. Mahmoody: "I am a beast in the eyes of the world...my sin, my only sin was that I loved my child, my daughter" (Goodwin, 762-763). Presented in Mahmoody's countering documentary, *Without my Daughter*, this quote begs the question as to whether this film is justified in asserting that every and all Iranians are infatuated with a ravenous lust for waging violence or are held back by the supposedly archaic principles preached by Islam, as "most Americans know next to nothing about the history, culture, politics, or religions within Iran, and few realize the irony of castigating Iran, one of the world's earliest civilizations, as primitive" (Kamalipour, 2573). The orientalist agenda upheld by this film thrives off of the characterization of Dr. Mahmoody as rapacious, violent, and abusive. Yet, in endorsing such a derogatory image of Iranian

masculinity, *Not Without my Daughter* wholeheartedly neglects the denouncement of violence and the importance of good deeds and tolerance advocated by the true Islamic religion. The notion of acceptance and the denunciation of reprimanding those who don't follow or see the true nature of Islam is exemplified in the following verse from the Holy Quran, which can be said to refute the notion of the vindictive and hostile Iranian that is glorified within this film: "And do not insult those they invoke other than Allah, lest they insult Allah in enmity without knowledge" (Miqdad, 33). On another note, the imposition of wearing the veil is "mandated by the state as a mechanism of restriction" and thereby does not affirm the primitivity of Iran or the Islamic religion, rather, it is an example of the many prohibitive measures instituted by an oppressive regime whose relentless assertion of power and inclination to uphold such societal control through violence have been wrongfully distorted by the American public to be a representation of the immoral motives allegedly carried by all Iranians (Yeon, 32). The truth remains that the malpractice of such government does not align with the morality and desire for societal justice that is upheld by the Iranian people. Iranian women do not wish to be confined to the state of submission symbolically represented by being forced to wear the hijab, as they are not only actively fighting against such a ruthless exercise of power through social movements like "My Stealthy Freedom," but they are also working towards taking on a more prominent role in Iranian society; this is proven through the rise in Iranian women's level of education during the post-revolutionary era (Yeon, 31). The corrupt political, not religious, motives underlying the requirement of wearing the hijab as well as the newfound drive exhibited by Iranian women to disengage from their historically passive role in society both conclusively challenge the notion of Iranian inferiority that is glorified within the film. Finally, Betty's lack of marital and custodial

control can be challenged by the 1967 Family Protection Act, which “abolished men’s unilateral right to divorce and put women on an equal footing with men in matters of divorce and child custody” (Mir-Hosseini, 59). While the annulment of this act after the Iranian Revolution hints yet again at the oppressive tendencies of a corrupt regime, the fact that it has gradually become reimplemented within the modern Iranian society demonstrates this nation’s attempt to fight against such ideologies of inferiority as what is put forth by the film.

“We are not a race of hatred. We don’t cause wars. We believe in peace. We enrich our minds. We achieve. We excel” (Ejakh). Taken from an interview with my own uncle regarding his experiences as an Iranian immigrant living in the highly racialized American society, this quote hints at the true morality of Iranians that is wholeheartedly overshadowed by the ignorant marginalization endorsed by the film, *Not Without my Daughter*. With the Iranian affiliation to violence and modern terrorism continuing to proliferate amongst Western nations, the need to reject such bigotry as what is presented in this film is more dire now than it has ever been. While the legacy of this film does allude to the power of the media in shaping public opinion, the truth remains that the picture it paints of Iran stems not from a place of validity, but rather one of cultural obstinacy as well as the incessant Western desire to marginalize and dehumanize any who fall under the category of a “foreign other.” Hatred and bigotry have become the modern weapons of choice. With that, it is now time to see Iran as the resilient, kind, and beautiful country that it truly is, not as the primitive and violence-driven country that it is perceived to be. In conclusion, the adverse depiction of Iranian masculinity, Iranian culture, and Islamic ideologies presented in *Not Without my Daughter* advances an orientalist agenda through which this film ultimately strives to brutalize the people and nation of Iran.

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