The Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic: A Lacanian Reading of Ramita Navai's *City of Lies*

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary life writings of Iranian diaspora are often censured for promoting a universalizing, dehumanizing and hegemonic image of the nation. The common misgiving is that the narratives project Iranian women as archetypal victims and their male counterparts as essentially powerful subjects. The present study aims at problematizing this assumption by arguing that Ramita Navai's *City of Lies* (2014) portrays an anti-essentialist character sketch of individuals with diverse identities and complex subjectivities. To pursue this line of argument, this article examines the titular characters' development in the face of the existing tensions between the different psychic and social realities. Lacan's triadic model of the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic is used in relation to his notion of the mirror stage to analyze the ways in which the characters traverse between the three orders in the process of forming a sense of selfhood. The notion of selfhood is explored in light of latent desires, anxieties, and the feelings of loss as determining factors behind the psychic development of each character within the prevailing normativities of a heteropatriarchal government. The findings reveal that while Amir, Leyla, Asghar, Bijan, and Farideh find themselves permanently lost in the unconscious tensions between different psychic orders. Dariush, Morteza, and Somayeh break into the Symbolic order and reassert their subjectivity. In this manner, the life writing challenges the grand narratives about Iranians as a homogenous group of people as it offers an equal chance of attaining selfhood and subjectivity to both male and female characters.

Keywords: Life writing; Iran; identity formation; Ramita Navai; Lacan

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, and especially after the 9/11 events in America, life writing has seized a central place in Iranian diasporic literary tradition. Many of the published works are praised for providing truthful insights about the condition of life in the country by offering ethnographical perspectives that situate the characters' personal journey towards selfhood within collective historical experiences. Life stories of women writers have gained some positive attention for breaking their silence as an established norm of feminine ideal and voicing out their personal, social, and political opinions and sufferings. Much of the critical reviews, however, has unfairly subjected the works to a profound suspicion of homogenizing, universalizing, dehumanizing and hegemonic representation of the nation (Ahmadi, 2016; Darznik, 2007; Marandi & Tari, 2017; Zeiny, 2019). According to this popular perspective, the stereotype that Iranians are passive victims, constantly oppressed by a dictatorial hetero-

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patriarchal regime, is a grand narrative that forms the crux of contemporary life writings by Iranian diaspora. The common view about life stories is that they adopt an essentialist position on identity and portray both men and women with a set of fixed characteristics. In this relation, while men are granted with the privilege of mobility, free-will and power, women's individuality, agency, and subjectivity are systematically overlooked.

The present study aims at problematizing this prevalent assumption that underpins the general view of Iranian diasporic life writings by underlining the fluid and complex formation of Iranian identity as depicted in the British-Iranian diasporic writer Ramita Navai's *City of Lies: Love, Sex, Death, and the Search for Truth in Tehran* (2014). It is argued that the *City of Lies* offers an anti-essentialist character sketch of individuals whose identities are affected by both socio-political and psychic factors. In eight chapters, Navai writes realistic accounts of men and women's continued fight for survival in the capital city of Iran, wherein their everyday life experiences are bound to a complex web of lies and deceit. The life writing is a collection of singular odysseys of male and female characters whose evolution hinges on their individual and collective attempts to assuage the hostile environment and oppose the dominant discourses. Together, the stories offer a fertile ground for understanding the various ways in which the citizens' mental realities, personal quests, and desires are shaped and reshaped in a continuous process of identity formation.

More specifically, this article seeks to examine the titular characters' development in the face of the existing tensions between the different psychic and social realities. To this end, Lacan's triadic model of the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic is used in relation to his notion of the mirror stage to analyze the multiple ways in which the characters traverse between the three orders in the process of forming a sense of selfhood. A Lacanian framework is relevant to Iranian life writing because the existing hetero-patriarchal normativity in the country maintains a strict domination over its citizens under the pretext of religion in such a way that only the male is presumed to be capable of achieving full subjectivity. In other words, a Lacanian perspective can unravel the characters' success or failure in fully captivating subjectivity not only in relation to the existing patriarchal discourse that allows male subjects to force women as the other but also in connection to the unconscious realm of mother-infant synergism that prevents women's subjectivity from being absolute. Hence the significance of a Lacanian framework in explaining the underlying consciousness surrounding the characters' identity and action.

By analyzing Navai's life writing through a psychoanalytical perspective, this article contributes to the Third World feminist scholarship that seeks to present a counter-discourse to Orientalist views about women in the Middle East. Much of the existing body of literature illustrates the construction of Iranian women, to borrow from Mohanty (1984), "as a homogeneous 'powerless' group often located as implicit victims of particular socio-economic systems" (p. 338). According to Third World feminists, such a particular focus on the definition of women in terms of their object status erroneously objectifies women as a category of analysis which has to be challenged and reinterpreted (Golley, 2014; Mohanty & Carty, 2018). In this regard, the present psychoanalytic examination of both male and female characters of Navai's stories would help to not only avoid defining Iranian women as archetypal victims and their male counterparts as essentially powerful subjects but also dispel the common misconception that Iran is a country of fixed gender relations and identities.

CRITICS' RECEPTION OF DIASPORIC WOMEN'S LIFE NARRATIVES

Even though the rapid rise in the production of auto-/biographical narratives by diasporic Iranian women has been taken as a form of metaphorical unveiling (Naghibi, 2016, p. 2), the popular trend among critical reviews of the stories provides a narrow focus on representation

of women as ahistorical, fixed, and absolute beings. Such negative critique of the issue of representation seems to emerge from the general suspicion of diasporic writers' political motivations (Asl, 2019 & 2020). Some scholars have pointed to the stereotypical portrayal of women as submissive and static to argue for diasporic writers' imperialist, neoconservative, and Orientalist agenda. By situating certain narratives within the contemporary Islamophobic discourse, Ameri (2012) suggests that the works describe women as "oppressed, abject and in need of liberation by Westerners" (p. 61). In a similar way, Bahramitash (2005) criticizes some of the memoirists for their monolithic representation of "a homogeneous category" of Iranian women as subject to "misogynist state policies," arguing that their biased perspective contributes to a particular agenda (pp. 21-22). In nearly all the existing life accounts by Iranian diaspora, as Marandi and Tari (2017) similarly claim, Iranian Muslim women are dehumanized and rendered invisible as the other with the aim of legitimizing the dominant viewpoint about Iran in the West. In like manner, Darznik (2007) suggests that the condition of women and the discourse of subjugation are often yoked to the implementation of women's veiled appearances to reinforce the Western bias against the Islamic Republic (p. 2). Some of the life narratives by diasporic Iranians, according to Zeiny (2019), constantly depict women as passive and voiceless victims only to condemn the Islamic republic for its social, cultural, and political restrictions on women (p. 126).

Other critics have similarly inveighed against the biased perspective of certain narratives. For Hasan (2015), the content and even the "authorial authenticity" of some works are manipulated by Western collaborators and publishers (p. 90). Hence, many of the works stereotypically show local men's monstrous and chauvinistic treatment of women, who are accordingly "perceived as passive, complicitous, submissive, silent, voiceless, invisible, waiting to be rescued by a passing Westerner, or as rebellious and escaping to the West" (Hasan, 2015, p. 91). Newns (2018) repeats the charge by claiming that some of the Middle East women life writings "are filtered through the lens of Western publishing houses" to contribute to the conventional, not least the post-9/11, discourse of "a homogeneous world of veiled and oppressed Muslim women in need of saving" (p. 286). In nearly all these works, the subordinated women gain agency within patriarchal communities only in giving up "the visible signs of their religious belief, especially any form of veiling or hijab" (Newns, 2018, p. 286). Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that the critics avoid making sweeping generalizations about the political agenda of Iranian diasporic life writings and tend to, instead, zoom in on certain out-of-context exaggerations to question the authenticity of the writer in censuring the male-dominated and misogynistic milieu of contemporary Iran.

As women's oppression is a long-standing social problem in Iran, it is no surprise that the subject matter of diasporic writings revolves around the patriarchal power structures and boundaries that severely restrict the social and political space given to women. Indeed, the recent progressive changes in women's life in Iran should not hide the fact that gender discourses and movements are still heavily monitored, controlled, regulated, and restrained by the prevailing government. As Aslam (2017) asserts, the general intolerance of traditional authority against women's active participation, mobility, and progression is shown in the continuous prosecution of popular feminist figures and social activists (pp. 49-50). In light of this, Fathi (2014) concludes that not all the life narratives—in particular works of those writers who would like to return home someday—can be grouped as written to appease the Western audience by portraying an exaggerated and monolithic image of women (p. 268). In like manner, Abercrombie (2019) argues that in showing women's struggles against the government, life writings depict women's agency, subjectivity, and patriotism for their country and their identity by connecting their personal lives to current political milieu (pp. 75-80). That said, although documenting life stories might be an act of producing a counter-discourse to the restrictions of patriarchal society (Pourya Asl, 2020), the narratives are not limited to featuring

a certain type of individuals. In the preface to her life writing, Navai points to the complexity and ambiguity of her characters. According to her, even though submissiveness and duplicity might be essential for her characters to survive in an oppressive government, the defining trait of her Tehrani citizens is their kindness and bravery which invites the readers to look at these characters from a new perspective.

When looking at the limited number of studies (Ahmadi, 2016; Shahrokni, 2020; Marandi & Tari, 2017; Fotouhi, 2017) surrounding Navai's life writing, it is clear that little attention has been given to the various ways in which the collection facilitates the complex development of the self against the essentialist view of Iranians as fixed, static, and unchanging characters. Nevertheless, one recent study has attempted to demonstrate Navai's book as challenging the Orientalist generalizations of the nation. In his intersectional analysis of the book, Asl (2022) draws attention to the element of feminist resistance as enacted by Navai's female characters by examining their spatial experiences in Iran through Foucault's conceptions of heterotopia and counter-conduct. Elsewhere, he argues that by refining new socio-spatial relations of boundaries and hierarchies, the female characters manage to disrupt the dominant sociocultural discourses, and in so doing present a fluid form of identity (Asl, 2021, p. 18). Hence, Navai's life writing provides a nuanced account of life in contemporary Iran which exonerates it from reiterating Orientalist stereotypes and representations.

Against the evident reluctance on the part of critics on diasporic Iranian writings to examine women's dynamic subjectivities, this article explores the trajectories of identity formation in both men and women's lives. In doing so, the study moves beyond placing women in any essentialist "categories, such as modern versus traditional or sexually liberated versus sexually oppressed" (Sharifi, 2018, p. 185). Rather, it highlights the heterogeneous picture of the identity of both men and women through an unorthodox focus on the psychic development of the main characters. It shows how Navai's stories are full of examples of not only developing female characters who achieve subjectivity but also static male individuals who fail to alter their selves and remain as passive subjects. This particular focus on characters' psychic reflection and redefinition of the self saves the study from falling into what Third World feminists describe as a familiar Orientalist formula, that is "the native informant confirming mainstream stereotypes about Iran" and Iranians (Elahi, 2008, p. 39). However, unless one appreciates the Lacanian notions of the psychic orders, one would not be able to comprehend the complexities of individual experiences. Hence, in what follows, the study offers a brief review of Lacanian theories of the three orders.

LACAN'S THE REAL, THE IMAGINARY, AND THE SYMBOLIC

The theoretical approach to the present study of *City of Lies* (2014) is adopted from the Lacanian notions of the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic order to examine how they are reflected through the development of the titular characters under the prevailing authority. Lacan's framework is drawn from Freud's immensely influential model of psychosexual development that sketches a narrative of consciousness development over the course of childhood that determines one's personality. The model is relevant as it recognizes the possibility of inadequate growth out of the primal stages of development which could result in numerous neurotic symptoms in adulthood (Felluga, 2015, p. 245). The three concepts are crucial in explaining the sense of Self as experienced by the subject. In terms of order of experiencing, the Real describes the state of nature as prior to the Imaginary and the Symbolic.

Lacan (1995) defines the Real as "the register in which the drive manifests itself" (p. 140). It is a condition whereby the need is subconsciously prioritized. In other words, the demand for satisfaction of desire is particularly strong at this stage. The Real is an impossible encounter because voicing out the need/desire will mark the subject's entrance into the

Symbolic order (Lacan, 1995, p. 14). Therefore, it is a "brute, pre-Symbolic reality, which returns in the form of pronounced need, such as that of hunger" (Hook, 2003, p. 19). This means that the Real belongs to the unconscious, where language and law that fits into the Symbolic do not reside together. By voicing out the need, one's existing reality is threatened, causing anxiety to rapture as an aftermath of a desire that is disappearing (Pourjafari & Anjomshoaa, 2013, p. 129). Those who are not able to grow out of this state will eventually be consumed by a sense of alienation for the Real is not a part of the social world, making their need a burden they had to unload in brutal speech acts like frustration, distress, and anxiety (Bahroun, 2018, p. 428). This portrayal of neurotic symptoms caused by failure to outgrow the phase is exemplified in the case of Amir's story in Navai's work as he is not able to grow out of his childhood desire to avenge his parent's death and thus alienates himself in the process. In short, the Real is closer to the unconscious in reference to the notion of selfhood whereby the subject is forever lost from entry into the language structure.

The Imaginary order is a state that follows after the subject breaks the unconscious phase and which is closely related to the mirror stage. Subsequently, the mirror stage is a period of identification which Lacan (1977) posits as "the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image" (pp. 1-2). To understand the notion of the Imaginary, we must be able to comprehend the mirror stage as an early childhood development where a child takes pleasure in recognizing his image in the mirror. Nevertheless, the child's identification to his image in return transforms his initial perception into hostility, as Lacan (1977) describes the mirror stage as,

> "a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation – and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic." (p. 3)

In return, the Imaginary is a space where alienation to the self is materialized due to the individual's loss of totality. As the child projects himself onto his mirror image, he/she creates a detached self versus the mirror reflection. This phenomenon is a misidentification on the part of the child caused by his mistake in identifying the mirror image as himself and abandoning the true self (Klages, 2006, p. 81). In other words, the Imaginary order is a realm whereby the child starts to develop a sense of selfhood but mistakes his mirror image as his real self. It continues to assert itself even as the child enters the Symbolic order. For that reason, in looking at the notion of selfhood, one has to count Lacanian formation of the *I* as a process of identification in addition to the mirror stage. The process of *I* formation begins in infanthood once a baby fully recognizes his image in the mirror, and then realizes that the image is hollow as he finds the relation between his various gestures and the image produced from the movement. This means that the child is aware of the virtual complex and reality duplicated from these relations (Lacan, 1977, p. 1). Consequently, a premature *I* emerges that puts the agency of ego, free from social realities, into a fictional, imaginative direction. This *Ideal-I* is impossible to diminish by the self alone, hence a disagreement between the *I* and his own reality must be relieved for it to come-into-being as a subject (p. 2).

Lacan (1977) further explains that the subject is discontented with his own complete form of the body, or what he calls a gestalt, as it appears in sizes and symmetries that are not what the child anticipated (p. 2). This dissatisfaction is the mental permanence of the *I* that is in danger of heading towards an estranged destination as he only deems himself perfect in his own fantasy world rather than the reality. The child's mirror image, or *imago*, is the entrance to the visible and real world. The gestalt recognizes the need to mature by looking at another human being in the reflection of a mirror, where desire comes through as a result from exposing the self to the visual action of a similar image (Lacan, 1977, pp. 2-3). In short, the mirror stage

combined with the function of the imago is necessary to establish a link between an individual and his reality. The mirror stage is a person's internal drama with premature ability complex whereby he undergoes a period of insufficiency to expectancy in the fantasy desire for fragmented body-image to a form of its totality. The fragmented body manifests itself in dreams, simultaneously proving that the subject's entire mental development is unyielding (Hadi & Asl, 2021). To escape this circle, the subject must battle his ego's verification to survive the reality. The notion of selfhood in relation to the Imaginary can be divided into two parts, either the subject will forever be lost in the unconscious as he keeps misrecognized himself or the subject has the potential to become conscious of this mistake, both of which will be observed in the analysis of Navai's work.

And finally, the Symbolic order is a space occupied by language and social law equivalent to adulthood. By materializing one's own needs and desires, the individual marks its entrance into the Symbolic as a conscious speaking subject (Klages, 2006, p. 77). Lacan details the Symbolic order as a social space due to the need for language components in expressing human loss of absent entities, which he terms as a Lack/Loss. Once the Lack or Loss is recognized, the subject is able to express the missing object as a condition for integrated selfhood (Pourjafari & Anjomshoaa, 2013). As the subject can voice out his own need and desire, he will also be reminded of his original Lack that will remain missing for the rest of his life. In return, this marks a sufficient attainment to selfhood for the child has successfully grown out of unconsciousness into reality. As the child resides in this space, it is important to stress that the Symbolic order orbits around the Name-of-the-Father, an authority that overlooks the social world. As Lacan (1977) asserts, "it is in the name of the father that we must recognize the support of the Symbolic function which from the dawn of history has identified his person with the figure of the law" (p. 50). In Navai's life writing, this position falls onto the prevailing government. The condition on which whether one can conform to the authority determines the final psychological development of the character. While some may adapt to the social world under the authority, others might rebel against it and choose to operate in a revolting way against the "Name-of-the-Father" (Felluga, 2015, p. 307). Nevertheless, the recognition of the Name-of-the-Father determines whether someone has entered the Symbolic order or not.

THE TRIADIC MODEL IN *CITY OF LIES*

THE SYMBOLIC REALM: DARIUSH, MORTEZA, SOMAYEH

As stated in the previous section, the Symbolic order represents adulthood in which a person finally becomes a speaking subject after realizing his own lack and loss. Accordingly, this stage denotes an acceptance of the reality without a rose-tinted filter affecting one's own perception (Klages, 2006, p. 77). The *City of Lies* embodies a few characters who recognize their own lack and gain entrance into the Symbolic realm. Dariush, Morteza and Somayeh are characteristic examples that successfully enter the Symbolic realm through their discovery of language structure as a prerequisite in distinguishing their imaginary self from the one in reality.

"Dariush" is the first story featured in Navai's life writing and is one of the male characters who ventures into the Symbolic. The narrative shows a clear development from the Real and the Imaginary into the Symbolic. Numerous instances of the Real and the Imaginary occur in his adolescence as he grows up "serious and bruised by life" (Navai, 2014, p. 17). Dariush cherishes Arezou as his "soulmate" because of her similar tragic life experiences—as she was an "exiled Iranian who grew up with revolution talk" (Navai, 2014, p. 17). In return, Arezou exposes Dariush to the Imaginary realm by involving him with the MEK—i.e., the Mojahedin-e-Khalq or the Warriors of the People, as claimed by the group (p. 7). It is within this group that Dariush develops an identity as an active member with important missions

involving assassinations and terrorization of the Iranian government. This identity is one under the Imaginary stage whereby the subject mistakes his real self to the image reflecting the mirror in Lacanian mirror stage. This mirror image is faux as it is merely an "armour" or an illusion, identified by an external image built from the exterior rather than an image cultivated by the individual himself (Klages, 2006, p. 78). The MEK misleads Dariush with obvious lies inasmuch as Dariush becomes so committed to his false identity that he is ready to commit suicide as soon as he is caught by the government. This is illustrated in the cyanide pill that he lodges in his mouth all the time while he is being inspected by the airport officials upon his arrival in Iran (Navai, 2014, p. 6). Dariush's passionate devotion to this newfound identity is also shown through his motivation to save his fellow countrymen when he thought that "The situation in his mother country was an emergency, and he had to act" (p. 22).

However, it is when he resides in Tehran that his faith towards the MEK begins to waver as the eruptions of the Symbolic appear. One instance of realization of the deceit and shattering of the Imaginary occurs when he notices that the equipment provided by the MEK for his mission are expired, sloppy and inaccurate hence hindering him from executing his mission without flaw (Navai, 2014, p. 25). The map was out of date, and the Iranian's impression of the MEK was so bad that the gun-runner wanted him gone quickly; "You all come here thinking we're all waiting to be saved by you. The truth is that we can't stand you" (p. 19). This growing crack on the Imaginary stage is further demonstrated through Dariush's own perception of the MEK's reliability when he ponders, "Maybe the Group had been out by a few seconds; they seemed to be out about a lot of things" (p. 25). Finally, the emergence of the Symbolic realm is made visible upon the recognition of his Lack, which in this case is the hand that was blown away in his attempt to commit suicide after failing his mission (p. 26). Dariush's 'ideal ego' as MEK's freedom fighter is also shattered as he becomes a speaking subject to help the deserters through a government-backed charity to rescue MEK recruits and reunite them with their family (p. 28). Furthermore, his entrance into the Symbolic allows him to gain control over the structure of language as he successfully convinces his mother to move to Tehran after his release from the prison (p. 28). In this sense, Dariush manages to grasp his true identity by voluntarily abandoning the MEK and mending his personal relationship with his mother. Despite the presence of Lack, which in this case is the loss of arm, he is able to break out of his Imaginary stage by becoming a subject of his own will.

Morteza is another illustrative example of a subject who manages to enter the Symbolic realm. His successful entrance into the field is a consequence of unitary selfhood build by his own quests, desires and losses that brings the tensions between the different psychic orders to the unconscious world. In this tale of complexity of self-development, Morteza realizes that he will never be able to possess his desire under any circumstances. On the one hand, his main desire is to be a masculine figure in a heteronormative sense as dictated by the authority of the name-of-the-Father. This is illustrated in his childhood narrative whereby he wished he could be more like his powerful brothers (Navai, 2014, p. 195). In order to possess this desire, he joins the Basij-e Mostazafin, a voluntary militia, to be a respected man in the eyes of the society as seen in his reply to Ebbie when he was asked why he joined the group; "Morteza repeated words he had heard since he was born. 'I want to serve God and my country. It's our duty. And if we go to war, I'll fight just as my brothers did'" (p. 202). He is able to suppress his transvestite thoughts through his involvement with the group that gives him purpose and focus whereby "Supplication to God and country strengthened his resolve to fight his debased feelings towards his sex" (p. 206). However, he quickly realizes how dangerous the masculine heteronormativity around him is as he witnesses the violence it evokes with regards to the authoritarian responsibility. Reaching one's desired object only causes another strong desire to be aroused in the process of satisfying his Lack. Likewise, Morteza begins to realize another desire, namely his sexual interest towards the same gender. To be accepted by the society,

Morteza was forced to hide his homosexual tendencies. In the process, he has experienced anxiety in response to the threat of the exposure of his Lack when he tries to convince his peers that he is in fact a normal citizen who conforms to the principles of the Name-of-the-Father. As he says, "'You believe me, don't you? I love God and my country, and it would be impossible for someone like me to be like that.' He tried to make his face grimace in revulsion, but his muscles were paralysed" (p. 215). Later, when he can no longer suppress his sexual interests, he ventures into Park-e Daneshjoo to fulfil his illicit homoerotic desires but is violently rejected when he asks for a kiss from his partners, who call him a pervert (p. 223). This event shows that his transgressive thoughts do not stop despite him of fulfilling his homosexual desires. Once again, his effort to satisfy this desire reminds him of his original Lack, which in Morteza's case is his gender. This realization of one's own Lack is the key to the Symbolic world where he realizes that it is impossible to possess his desire as a consequence of a unitary selfhood that he has finally achieved. As mentioned in the previous section, upon one's entrance into the Symbolic world, the subject also enters the structure of language to express his Lack. In Morteza's case, he is finally able to express his Lack towards his family when he returns home and announces to his mother that he has left the Basij (p. 228). Though he is immediately chased away for embracing his transvestic identity, he is happier than ever from this unitary selfhood. In this manner, Morteza is finally able to accept his selfhood through his entrance into the Symbolic realm.

Somayeh is an example of a female character who successfully enters the Symbolic realm. By the end of her story, Somayeh manages to obtain her selfhood by realizing her Lack and redirecting her unwanted desires. Throughout her narration, it is obvious that she yearns to be a respectful member of the society that is governed by the Supreme Leader, the Name-of-Father whom she regarded so highly. As she tells us, "The Supreme Leader was a saint; a representative of God and as sacred as the imams" (Navai, 2014, p. 49). Somayeh grew up being told to mind her appearance both by his father and the government as seen in a line where women "had been fed the regime's line on hejab, which was usually touted around the city via huge billboard advertisements, since birth" (p. 35). That is why she minds who she is associated with and does not want to be seen near the western looking girls for she is certain that "the way you clothed yourself was a litmus test for morality," and morals mattered the most to her (p. 34). Her desire to be respected by the society is further fueled by her wedding to Amir-Ali, who belongs to the upper class of Tehran. She is someone who has it better than other girls who had to further their studies at universities to gain matrimony prospects, as opposed to her who gets engaged before she even finishes her high school (p. 67). Furthermore, Somayeh can enjoy a taste of being surrounded by Tehran's upper-class community through her relationship with her rich husband. Nevertheless, her possessed desire brings her Lack into perspective, namely the happiness that comes with her marriage. At first, she is aware of this Lack when she realizes that her husband might have an affair and chooses to remain silent for fear of humiliation that will tarnish her status as a married woman (p. 69). However, the presence of a foreign, locked briefcase in her house casts an anxiety for "she was sure the answer to her misery was in the briefcase" (p. 70). In a moment of suspense surrounding the briefcase, Somayeh enters the Symbolic realm as she is exposed to the impending truth surrounding her husband's illicit affair in the locked briefcase. Upon her entrance into the Symbolic, she acquires an access to the structure of language resulting in her demanding a divorce from her in-laws, who care about the honor of the family more than anything else (p. 69). It is important to note that divorced women do not hold an honorable reputation within the society, hence Somayeh's insistence towards a divorce marks her separation from her desire. Her selfhood development frees her not only from her loveless marriage, but also from her desire to be respected in the patriarchal community. In this way, Somayeh achieves a new level of self and is positioned as someone who successfully acquires her selfhood through her entrance into the

Symbolic. Somayeh's life account thus challenges the postulation of women as static and unchanging and illustrates how a Lacanian perspective can unravel the character's success in fully captivating subjectivity.

THE REAL: AMIR

Contrary to the Symbolic realm which highlights separation and Lack as a condition to obtain a sense of selfhood, the Real would threaten one's existing reality, leading to the manifestation of anxiety. This anxiety is a reaction to the disappearance of desire, which is the component that drives one towards the Symbolic (Pourjafari & Anjomshoaa, 2013, p. 129). As long as one becomes a part of society's roles and functions, one will stray further from the Real. Consequently, the closer the subject is to the Real, the more alienated he will be from the society. The Real is portrayed through the character of Amir, who fails to enter the Symbolic world due to the distance he keeps from the society after his parents were executed by the government. At one point in his life, Amir develops a desire to inflict pain towards the man who is responsible for his parents' death. However, he fails to take avenge as he only succumbs to grief upon the judge's appearance, "his impotent fists that were hanging limply by his sides. There was no violent rage. Only blistering pain" (Navai, 2014, pp. 89-90). His inability to react to his desire symbolizes the inexpressive nature of the Real. Additionally, Amir has lost his chance on getting in touch with the language structure in the Symbolic realm and this is shown in his hesitance to inform his romantic partner about his encounter with the judge (p. 100). As he is unable to express his desire, he is subjected towards anxiety from the disappearance of this yearning. The anxiety continues to manifest as the judge warns him of conspiring against the Name-of-the-Father, the Supreme Leader in fear that he will be captured (p. 114). Amir's reluctance to be honest with his partner and his failure to resume the anti-government supports as his friends are prisoned here and there distances him from the society while exposing him towards alienation. This notion of alienation is further reinforced when Bahar, his significant other, leaves for a study abroad program, leaving him alone with the judge who he refuses to forgive for the rest of his life (p. 127). In this manner, Amir keeps moving further away from the Symbolic and towards the Real while losing a sense of unitary selfhood as he continues to reject his reality. Hence, it is important to note that the general presumption that only men are capable of achieving full subjectivity is deflected here when Amir's development of the self is stunted, leaving him in the Real trajectory. The following section further illustrates the equal likelihood of men and women's attaining selfhood in the unconscious tensions between different psychic orders.

THE IMAGINARY ORDER: LEYLA, ASGHAR, BIJAN, FARIDEH

The Imaginary is the period during which one recognizes oneself as unified with the surrounding objects as one experiences a "fictive sense of unitary selfhood by finding something in the world with which we can identify" (Eagleton, 2008, p. 143). That is why misrecognition of a mirror image is a normal occurrence in this stage as one mistakes one's reflection to one's own selfhood. As the "self" is unified with the images and turns into an extension of the surrounding objects, it becomes fundamentally imaginary (Pourjafari and Anjomshoaa, 2013, p. 128.). In the *City of Lies*, Leyla, Asghar, Bijan and Farideh identify themselves with an image of the other instead of their real selves. All the four characters fail to recognize the Name-of-the-Father as an authority of their social world, making them succumb to the Imaginary order to avoid his governance. In the process of misidentifying their reality, Bijan and Farideh show are more likely to enter the Symbolic realm by the end of their chapters as they begin to dissolve their imaginary self and live in the moment.

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The female character of the fifth story Leyla brings into light women's struggle to survive in Iranian society without a direct male support, making her a victim of the society's expectations as she falls deeply into the category of a fallen woman. Her involvement with the prostitution industry tears her identity apart for she knows that she is committing sin in a religious sense, however the demand to stay alive is more important. The change in her selfhood takes place throughout the story when she identifies with her shifting environment. At first, Leyla strives to find a partner whom she could rely on financially so that she can give up hooking (Navai, 2014, p. 152). As the demand to survive grows within her, she starts to venture into making homemade adult videos that guarantee her more opportunity in the industry. In return, this development clouds her initial sense of identity because she now perceives herself as a rising actress, although this is a misjudgment on her part as "only a handful of people knew her real identity, for the camera never went past Leyla's mouth" (p. 181). As the Imaginary realm caters to the misidentified self, Leyla's desired identity as an actress become an Ideal-I that she mistakes as her real self. Consequently, she suffers from multiple backlashes that come with the Imaginary self for she is called *jendeh*, a prostitute, by a host during a night party (p. 185), and is later thrown into Evin prison for making adult films (p. 187). On this subject, Felluga (2015) explains that "whereas needs can be fulfilled, demands are, by definition, unsatisfiable; in other words, we are already making the movement into the sort of lack that, for Lacan, defines the human subject" (p. 152). Leyla's demands grow higher as she wants to extend her business in Dubai for more financial support (Navai, 2014, p. 186). Although the imaginary self provides a prospect for her livelihood, this development goes against the Name-of-the-Father, or the prevailing government's authority to abolish prostitution. Leyla is eventually detained for her unorthodox activities. Her selfhood goal is proven unattainable as she is executed not long after she is imprisoned. Therefore, Leyla's fragmented selfhood is forever lost in the unconscious without a chance to enter the Symbolic.

Another example of a fragmented self that is rendered unconscious is Asghar, a hoodlum-cum-gangster with the nickname Asghar the Brave that could strike fear during his teenage years (Navai, 2015, p. 237). As he grows older, Asghar's territory is wiped out by the government. As a result, he now depends on his once-famed reputation to grow his gambling den. Asghar takes pride of this Ideal-I. Such a close attachment to this reputation is revealed to us as, "He was no longer King of the Streets, but he felt the same as before, the big boss who lived by the same rules" (p. 241). That is why Asghar finds it difficult to yield to his wife Pari, who wants him to practice his religion correctly by disposing his sinful business. Asghar's reputation is his ego formation, therefore if he gives up his gambling den, he would be "subjugating himself in front of the men" who crowd his business to see him as a living legend, or as "the man who once ruled the streets of south Tehran – a real-life, living, breathing old gangster, a relic of the city's history" (p. 231). However, this Ideal-I shatters as soon as his wife dies of a heart attack. After her death, Asghar develops a fragmented self as he tries to fulfil the promises he has made to Pari. His wife's death turns her into an element of Lack, an unattainable object, for Asghar and gives meaning to his efforts to fulfil Pari's wishes as the substitutes for the ever-lost object. His sense of selfhood becomes fragmented as he fails to adapt to a new Ideal-I constructed by his wife when he still takes heroin on a daily basis (p. 250). As a result, Asghar is subjected to a forced identity that is split with his previous Ideal-I in order to satisfy his yearning for united selfhood, as per what his wife wanted him to be.

Another aspect of the Imaginary realm is the latent selfhood that has a potential to become conscious and enter the Symbolic. This psyche development is demonstrated by Bijan and Farideh, both of whom show the potential to enter the Symbolic if a signifier appears for them. However, the entry does not take place because they forever misinterpret their Ideal-I as their real self, making themselves latent to the conscious self. Bijan displays a potentiality to become conscious and united self when he moves on from a life that is involved with crimes

and prisons. As we are told, "[h]e knew all the reprobates in this neighborhood, it was his patch after all. But he had moved on from them, from these careless, lazy, in-and-out-of-jail drunks and addicts who had about as much nous as a three-year-old child" (Navai, 2014, p. 129). Even though he has a happy family at home and a legitimate business, he ventures into a shady lifestyle of keeping a mistress and building a meth factory. The separated lifestyles create a fragmentation in his selfhood that prevents him from achieving a unitary self. Additionally, Bijan has no Lack or Loss to signify an entrance to the Symbolic because he perfectly conducts not to get caught by either sides (pp. 137-138). For instance, he provides a separate mobile phone for his wife and makes sure that his mistress does not know his home address and mix in with his friends. The notion of latent selfhood is further reinforced in Bijan's favorite song as the lyric goes by; "[t]his is Tehran. A city that tempts you till it saps your soul. And makes you see you were always meant to be. Nothing more than dirt" (p. 151). The lyric suggests that the society is unchanged in nature, reflecting Bijan's situation for his sense of selfhood as latent and unable to reach full subjectivity and completeness.

A similar pattern can be observed in Farideh's account as she struggles with her selfhood in the beginning of her story. The Imaginary realm causes Farideh to alienate herself as she firmly believes that she belongs to the Persian culture as opposed to the current Islamic regime. As a result, she finds herself excluded from the mainstream society because of her perceived self. This is evident in the way she uses parties and gatherings as practices of resistance against the prevailing government, or the Name-of-the-Father. As the narrator describes, holding parties "was part of their defence; it was what lent verisimilitude to their carefully crafted lives, as well as being the only possible means they could socialize, laugh and dance like the rest" (Navai, 2014, p. 263). Out there in the real world, Farideh's gender prevents her from fully participating in the social and political activities as the dominant heteropatriarchal system invalidates her for being a woman. This is perfectly illustrated on her visits to the government officials for her deceased husband's property affair. As we are told,

> "[the] officials and judges spoke to her as though she barely existed. Sometimes the first question they would ask was: 'And where's your husband?' Even when she explained that he had died, that she was now in charge, they did not take her seriously." (Navai, 2014, pp. 253-254)

Hence, the feeling of alienation from society continues to grow in Farideh in spite of her constant efforts to fill the void by participating in yoga sessions, meditation retreats outside Tehran, a stay in an ashram in Goa and even seeking Jesus—although this last strategy did not end well as she later finds herself being protective of the faith that she has felt imprisoned by (p. 260). The escape from Tehran thus sounds to her to be the only signifier for the Lack that she has missed this whole time. However, as soon as she goes ahead with the plan, she realizes that it is not the need she has to satisfy because she still feels disconnected from the society (p. 271). This means that Farideh does not experience Lack or Loss but is simply in dormant towards the unitary selfhood under the current government. In this manner, her latent selfhood is more likely to become conscious when compared to the character of Bijan. This is clearly illustrated in her conversation with a taxi driver at the end of the chapter. When the driver refers to the undesirable situations in Tehran and says, "[a]t least we're all in it together", Farideh replies: "Yes, you and I. Who would have thought" (p. 272). Even though the conversation indicates the enduring state of alienation, the momentary sense of unification with the society—represented by the taxi driver—implies the faint possibility of her latent selfhood becoming conscious.

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CONCLUSION

This study conducted a Lacanian reading of Ramita Navai's *City of Lies* (2014) to unravel the subtle nuances of psychosexual development as contributory factors in the formation of diverse identities and complex subjectivities. The findings reveal that while three of the titular characters Dariush, Morteza, and Somayeh break into the consciousness of the social world and the Symbolic order, others such as Amir, Leyla, Asghar, Bijan, and Farideh find themselves permanently lost in the unconscious tensions between different psychic orders. Whereas Amir's life is fixated at the Real phase, Leyla, Asghar, Bijan, and Farideh all stay in the realm of the Imaginary order. Amir's encounter with his latent desires leads him to reject reality and remain in the state of the Real. Leyla and Asghar experience a similar pattern not in the Real but in the Imaginary order as they are highly dependent on their imaginary selves that drives them away from their actual realities. On the contrary, Bijan and Farideh's narratives depict their efforts to settle in their present states regardless of their placement in the Imaginary order. Bijan shows more tendency to remain in this psychic order as opposed to Farideh who is ready to venture into the consciousness. In this regard, it is concluded that while Amir, Leyla, Asghar, and Bijan remain passive in their psychosexual development, Dariush, Morteza, Somayeh, and Farideh display a certain level of willingness to move from passivity to activity in their respective accounts.

The notion of selfhood is explored in light of latent desires, anxieties, and the feelings of loss as determining factors behind the psychic development of each character within the prevailing normativities of a heteropatriarchal government. Dariush, Morteza, and Somayeh's stories illustrate how the recognition of the dominant order, or the Name-of-the-Father, is an essential condition in realizing one's subjectivity. The three stories not only describe a collective struggle for selfhood against the controlling figure of the authority but also underline the characters' individual engagement in accepting their Lack as a permanent condition within the Symbolic order. On the other hand, while Bijan and Farideh are shown to be more likely to achieve a sense of unification by acknowledging their Lack, the other three characters–namely, Amir, Leyla, and Asghar—appear to be forever lost in the unconscious of the Real and the Imaginary order as they fail to respond to their desires. In this sense, Navai's life writing essentially challenges the grand narratives about Iranians as a homogenous group of people. The stereotype that men and women are set with fixed characteristics—read men as privileged with subjectivity and women depicted as passive victims—is problematized and dismantled in the stories as the characters are shown to have equal chance of attaining selfhood and subjectivity. A Lacanian framework has thus been useful in unravelling the psychic battles that are decisive in both male and female characters' ability to alter their identities and develop their individuality. In doing so, this psychoanalytical perspective of exploring the multicolor potpourri of Iranian identity stands in contrast to the Orientalist generalizations about men and women in the Middle East. Additionally, it contributes to the Third World Feminist views that strive to challenge the misapprehension of Iran as a country with rigid gender relations and identities as a global prototype and provides an alternate depiction of individuality to the public reception.

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