

## Finding Her Voice Through Scriptotherapy: Marina Nemat's Journey of Reclaiming Subjectivity after Trauma

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**Abstract**

*Scriptotherapy, a form of writing therapy proposed by Suzette Henke, is gaining recognition in literary research but remains underrepresented in studies of Iranian diasporic literature, which often focus on identity crisis and Orientalist discourse. This paper explores the application of scriptotherapy in Marina Nemat's memoirs, *Prisoner of Tehran* (2007) and *After Tehran* (2010), revealing the significant role of therapeutic writing in reclaiming subjectivity fragmented by trauma. As a teenager advocating for legislative reformation in 1980s Iran, Nemat faced legal consequences and two years of imprisonment, leaving enduring psychological wounds. Years after her release, disturbing memories and enduring silence compelled Nemat to utilize writing for catharsis. Through writing, Nemat confronts and transcends her haunting past, embarking on a transformative journey of healing and reclaiming her voice within an intersubjective realm. This paper emphasizes the importance of an audience as witnesses to trauma and discusses obstacles faced by women who bear witness, particularly when their testimonies involve institutional abuse and patriarchal constraints. This analysis demonstrates scriptotherapy's transformative potential, empowering trauma survivors like Nemat to heal from the wounds of their traumatic pasts, ultimately enabling them to regain a profound sense of subjectivity, despite doubts about the authenticity of their narratives.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Writing therapy refers to “the process in which the client uses writing as a means to express and reflect on oneself, whether self-generated or suggested by a therapist/researcher” (Ruini & Mortara, 2022, p. 23). As Julia Gálvez argues, writing therapy is often employed

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during times of traumatic events or significant concerns due to the potential benefits it offers for both psychological and somatic well-being (2024, p. 10). The emergence of therapeutic writing can be attributed to the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, a time when psychoanalytic therapies were thriving (Moy, 2017). During this epoch, significant strides were made in our understanding of trauma, with psychotherapy assuming a pivotal role (Walker, 2017). As Walker (2017) elucidates, these therapeutic approaches, commonly referred to as the “talking cure,” sought to aid trauma patients in uncovering and addressing hidden unconscious information associated with their traumatic experiences. The early iterations of psychotherapy relied on the abreaction theory, which suggested that suppressing traumatic memories could have negative consequences on one’s well-being, and these detrimental effects could be reversed by recalling and processing these memories through techniques employed by psychotherapists, such as free association and talking (Lepore & Smyth, 2002, pp. 3-4).

In her book, *Shattered Subjects*, Suzette Henke questions the role of the mediator or psychotherapist by asking whether the analyst is truly necessary if we accept the basic premise of this method (1998, p. xi). That is, she argues that “the doctor-patient scenario is not the only method for working through trauma” (Stanley, 2006, p. 395). This inquiry reflects an important advancement in trauma practice. While talk therapy remains the conventional mode of therapeutic communication, psychotherapists acknowledge that individuals have “different expressive styles—one individual may be more visual, another more tactile, and so forth” (Malchiodi, 2005, p. 1). Therefore, to accommodate a wider range of people, a range of non-verbal therapeutic approaches, such as writing and storytelling, are employed to support the rehabilitation of individuals affected by trauma (Moy, 2017, pp. 21-22).

For Iranian women in diaspora, writing is a way “to make sense of their changing lives,” “help them gain agency,” “make the personal political,” and “show that the political is personal as well” (Abla, 2020, p. 7). Thus, through their writing, authors can reclaim power over forces that previously silenced them. According to Leila Samadi Rendy’s observations on Iranian women, “writing helps the female subjects preserve their psychological health through confessing their inner feelings” (2017, p. 137). As such, the act of writing becomes a healing process—to heal and be heard. Analyzing Nemat’s work through the lens of scriptotherapy, or writing as therapy, facilitates a deeper investigation of self-exploration, growth, and healing embedded in the text. Also, this framework places greater emphasis on the rhetorical, semiotic, and social implications of trauma. This entails understanding “the particular social components and cultural contexts of traumatic experience” (Balaev, 2014, p. 3). This paper intends to apply a similarly contextualized lens to Nemat’s trauma testimony. Rather than focusing on the deficiencies of language in representing trauma, we show that her trauma testimony reflects both psychological wounds and broader collective forces, political debates, and power structures of the time.

Marina Nemat’s memoir, *Prisoner of Tehran* (2007), offers a thorough life story encompassing pre, during, and post-Islamic Revolution. The book follows a distinctive narrative structure, with chapters alternating between these different periods. Nemat provides necessary context by briefly discussing her life prior to the revolution, including her engagement in activities that challenged the status quo and ultimately led to her arrest. On January 15, 1982, she was taken into custody on charges of “activities against the Islamic government” (Nemat, 2007, p. 10). During her imprisonment, just like many other prisoners

from around the world, Nemat endured numerous hardships and personal challenges, including torture and harsh living conditions. However, her life took an unexpected turn when she established a unique connection with someone involved in her interrogation, which eventually played a role in her release. Afterwards, Nemat sought refuge in Canada, hoping to leave her past behind. However, she discovered that the memories of her imprisonment continued to haunt her. To address these experiences and find healing, Nemat turned to writing as a therapeutic outlet.

In her subsequent memoir, *After Tehran: A Life Reclaimed* (2010), Nemat delves deeper into her personal story, as she is no longer just an ordinary woman living an ordinary life. After enduring a transformative two-year prison sentence, she continues to grapple with haunting memories of trauma. While society may have perceived her life in Canada with her husband and two children as materially comfortable, Nemat reveals her inner struggles with debilitating flashbacks that threatened the stability she had worked so hard to build. This memoir reflects on the motivations behind her initial book, and the things she went through in more depth, and explores how the process of writing and sharing her experiences allowed her to confront and transcend her past traumas to a significant extent. Nemat's journey of recounting her past and sharing it with others serves as a therapeutic process, aligning with the essence of scriptotherapy. In the upcoming sections, this paper aims to highlight the profound connection between Nemat's narrative process and the healing potential of scriptotherapy.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Nemat's memoirs have faced sporadic critique for what some perceive as Orientalist discourse in her narrative. Marandi and Pirnajmuddin (2009), for instance, discredit her work in their paper on Orientalist discourse in memoirs written by diasporic Iranian writers in the West. They argue that Nemat's memoir, along with the writings of other authors, belongs to a group of writers who are not considered true intellectuals but rather "examples of the Iranian intellectual comprador class or members of the gharbzadeh" (2009, p. 23). In another example, Zeiny and Yusof (2013) contend that Nemat's discourse reflects the adoption of Western Orientalism. They analyze the covers of her books and its peritexts, highlighting how she portrays Islam as wicked and exotic while glorifying everything associated with the West as good and noble. According to them, Nemat's work is "a fiction created in favor of Western imperialism and neo-conservatism," projecting her homeland and its predominant religion, Islam, as "weird and unfavorable to the foreign gaze" (p. 130). Zeiny and Yusof argue that such treatment of her subject matter "serves politics and it is employed in favor of imperialism" (2013, p. 130). Nima Naghibi (2016) contributes to the discussion by employing the term "Harlequin/desert romance." This term sheds light on the anxieties that emerge in response to the perceived "sexual threat posed by the figure of 'swarthy' men" (Naghibi, 2016, p. 52). Naghibi suggests that Nemat unrealistically presents herself as fragile in the hands of certain male figures in her life.

Despite facing criticisms, an often-overlooked aspect of Nemat's memoirs is their ability to provide the author with a means to reclaim her subjectivity and find healing from traumatic experiences. This significant aspect has been highlighted in passing by scholars such as Sanaz Fotouhi and Nima Naghibi. Fotouhi's book, *The Literature of the Iranian Diaspora* (2015), and Naghibi's work, *Women Write Iran* (2016), shed light on the therapeutic nature of

Nemat's memoirs. Fotouhi (2015) explicitly refers to Nemat's memoir as a form of "scriptotherapy" (p. 104), emphasizing that it serves as "a personal narrative of survival, healing, reconstruction, new beginnings and possibilities" (p. 105). Naghibi also briefly mentions Nemat's memoir as a form of scriptotherapy, highlighting the importance of autobiography as a means of witnessing that "matters to others" (L. Anderson, 2001, as cited in Naghibi, 2015). Naghibi and Fotouhi lay important groundwork for further exploring the therapeutic dimensions of Nemat's memoirs. Their analysis leaves space to delve deeper into her process of recovery through writing.

The theoretical framework of this research is primarily based on Suzette Henke's influential work, *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing* (1998). Her book establishes a strong connection between scriptotherapy and literature, providing ample evidence from women's narratives to support the healing potential of writing and sharing trauma. In her description of "scriptotherapy" or "narrative recovery," Henke explains that it "pivots on a double entendre meant to evoke both the recovery of past experience through narrative articulation and the psychological reintegration of a traumatically shattered subject" (1998, p. xxii).

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's *De/Colonizing the Subject* (1992) explore the complex relationship between subjectivity, trauma, and colonialism, emphasizing the impact of historical and ongoing colonization on marginalized women's subjectivity. Elizabeth Grosz's *Volatile Bodies* (1994) challenges oppressive frameworks that seek to control women's bodies, deconstructing traditional notions of the body as fixed and exploring the body's relationship to power, gender, and sexuality. Grosz highlights the transformative power of resistance and reclaiming ownership over one's body and experiences through writing about trauma. Lili Pâquet's "The Corporeal Female Body in Literary Rape–Revenge" (2018) analyzes rape-revenge narratives, showcasing how these stories empower women to articulate their trauma, assert agency, and challenge patriarchal norms. In her work, Pâquet underscores the transformative potential of reclaiming one's body and disrupting narratives of victimhood, especially through writing: "Writing is an act in itself" (Pâquet, 2018, p. 398). Leigh Gilmore's *Tainted Witness* (2017) delves into the dynamics of witnessing, highlighting how societal norms and biases cast doubt on women's testimonies in cases of sexual assault and violence, perpetuating a culture of disbelief and silencing survivors. In her description of the condition of women who bear witness, Gilmore asserts that "norms of justice and personhood do not fully include women, and their agency, value, and even existence are often denied through this exclusion" (2017, p. 25).

In exploring the central themes of subjectivity and its recovery, this paper draws upon a rich body of groundbreaking scholarship in the field. Notably, the works of Donald Hall (2004) and Nick Mansfield (2000) provide invaluable insights into the nature of subjectivity and its implications within the context of the writer's relationship with societal norms and conventions. Their works offer a comprehensive overview of subjectivity, shedding light on its intricate connections to the status quo.

### **3. OVERVIEW OF SCRIPTOTHERAPY**

As early as 1996, Richard J. Riordan introduced the term "scriptotherapy" to describe the beneficial effects of writing for therapeutic purposes. According to Riordan (1996),

scriptotherapy shares the underlying premise of bibliotherapy, which suggests that “the written word can be a powerful therapeutic tool” (p. 267). Riordan highlights several advantages of this approach, as he discusses, writing about a trauma “allows an individual to cognitively process the event and gain a sense of control, thus reducing the work of inhibition” (p. 263). Correctly used, “writing is thought to assuage obsessive internal ruminations and continued negative emotions that can exacerbate health and psychological problems” (Riordan, 1996, p. 263).

However, in the realm of literature, while there were successful examples of scriptotherapy demonstrated in works such as the novel *The Shutter of Snow* (1930) and the seminal text *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), the most significant and comprehensive systematic study of scriptotherapy in life writings occurred with Suzette Henke's influential work, *Shattered Subjects* (1998). In 1998, Henke emerged as a pioneering scholar who advocated for the effectiveness of “scriptotherapy” within the domain of feminist literary criticism (Blanch, 2008). Her study focused on 20th-century women's life-writing and explored the therapeutic benefits of this approach for recovering from psychological trauma.

In her examination of feminist autobiographies, Henke (1998) reveals a consistent theme of trauma repression and a fragmented psychological state. Her research delves into the sudden emergence of repressed traumatic memories in these life narratives and how authors have found solace in utilizing personal testimony to confront episodes of psychological fragmentation. According to Henke, scriptotherapy involves “the process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic reenactment,” establishing a discursive realm where “the authorial effort to reconstruct a story of psychological debilitation could offer potential for mental healing and begin to alleviate persistent symptoms of numbing, dysphoria, and uncontrollable flashbacks” (1998, p. xii).

A significant aspect of Henke's approach to scriptotherapy is her challenge to the prevailing belief that the transference scene, proposed by early psychotherapists like Freud, is the exclusive pathway to resolving trauma. In her book, *Shattered Subjects*, Henke (1998) raises thought-provoking questions about the role of the mediator or psychotherapist, questioning whether the analyst is truly essential if we embrace the fundamental premise of this method (p. xi). Departing from conventional practices, Henke advocates for a profound paradigm shift, suggesting that witnesses to the writer's trauma, through their engagement with the written testimony, can replace traditional therapists in the therapeutic process (p. xii). This perspective represents a transformative departure and opens up new possibilities in the field of scriptotherapy.

### **3.1. Intersubjective Recovery and the Authenticity of Narrative**

As already discussed, contrary to earlier methods, Henke believes that in scriptotherapy, a sympathetic audience can fulfill the role of the therapist by witnessing the writer's trauma and validating their testimony (1998, p. xii). She states that “a surrogate transference process can take place through the scene of writing that allows its author to envisage a sympathetic audience and to imagine a public validation of his or her life testimony” (p. xii). As discussed by Nima Naghibi, this means that scriptotherapy is not just an act of writing, but instead “the testimonial relies upon an exchange between the speaker and the listener, the traumatized and the witness” (2016, p. 56).



At the outset of her first memoir, Nemat (2007) discloses to readers that following her immigration from Iran, she grapples with distressing PTSD symptoms stemming from her past life there. Describing this, she reveals that after nine years of residing in Canada, the first symptom emerged: “This was when I lost the ability to sleep” (Nemat, 2007, p. 2). Nemat describes the onset of additional symptoms, including fleeting flashbacks that disturbed her attempts to sleep. She recalls, “It began with snapshots of memories that flashed in my mind as soon as I went to bed. I tried to push them away, but they rushed at me, invading my daytime hours as well as the night” (2007, p. 2).

To address this condition, Nemat underscores the imperative of directly confronting her haunting past and the memories that have inflicted psychological harm. In her own words, she emphasizes, “I had to face it or it would completely destroy my sanity” (2007, p. 2). However, she soon grew disillusioned and deeply disturbed by the lack of acknowledgement and understanding of her past by her family. As she explains, “My past was a ghost that I, like my family, had chosen to ignore, even though its presence was undeniable” (2010, p. 24). When she attempted to share her experiences with them, “they also made it clear they wanted the experience forgotten” (Nemat, 2010, p. 25). Thus, writing became Nemat’s vehicle for this confrontation, as she elucidates, “I began writing about my days in [prison]—about the torture, pain, death, and all the suffering I had never been able to talk about. My memories became words and broke free from their induced hibernation” (2007, p. 2).

However, Nemat soon realizes that the mere act of writing her past and keeping it to herself didn’t grant her the healing powers of writing her trauma. In her explanation, she reveals, “I believed that once I put them on paper, I would feel better—but I didn’t. I needed more. I couldn’t keep my manuscript buried in a bedroom drawer. I was a witness and had to tell my story” (2007, p. 2). Thus, Nemat overtly addresses her use of her memoir as a form of scriptotherapy. As Sanaz Fotouhi argues, despite Nemat’s emphasis on the significance of writing as a deliberate therapeutic practice for the preservation of her sanity, her stress on the need to share her manuscript indicates her realization that intersubjective acknowledgement is necessary to fully reconstruct her sense of subjectivity (2015, p. 105). Drawing on Suzette Henke, Fotouhi (2015) argues that recognition by others plays a pivotal role in enabling the oppressed to reclaim their sense of subjectivity. Therefore, “When someone, like Nemat, writes a memoir, a significant part of their healing takes place only when they are read and acknowledged by others” (Fotouhi, 2015, p. 115).

Recognition from others plays a vital role in trauma healing. Research shows that a lack of “social acknowledgement” can exacerbate PTSD symptoms. Wagner, Keller, Knaevelsrud, and Maercker (2011) define social acknowledgement as “a victim’s experience of positive reactions from society that show appreciation of the victim’s traumatic experience and acknowledge the difficulty of their situation” (p. 382). As they argue, empirical studies have demonstrated that “a subjective lack of social acknowledgement predicts higher trauma-related symptoms,” which may also negatively “impact how trauma survivors process their traumatic experiences emotionally and cognitively” (p. 382). Blumenfeld (2011) echoes this viewpoint, emphasizing the importance of care, support and nurturing in trauma recovery. She writes that “Our capacity to hold and listen to the unbearable is part of nurturing the possibility of a healed and whole world in our individual and collective spirits” (p. 75). Therefore, while being in a state of despair and lacking hope has the potential to erode one’s spirit, especially when fueled

by a lack of listeners, these can be “countered by the power of voice and being witnessed” (Blumenfeld, 2011, p. 75).

Nemat's memoirs demonstrate the importance of social acknowledgement in her healing process. A significant part of her recovery occurred when others read and acknowledged her written accounts of trauma. Nemat explains, “I did not want pity, but I needed acknowledgment—not only of my own experience, but also of all I had witnessed” (2010, p. 127). This aligns with the arguments that recognition from others can help survivors process their experiences in healthy ways. However, in cases like Nemat's, when institutions allegedly caused the trauma, the authenticity of articulated experiences can become intensely disputed. Meg Jensen (2020) explains that the power and perceived truth of a testimony depend on the social and cultural context of both the narrator and the listener. Testimonial narratives reflect the influence of historical and cultural conditions on survivors, while also being “informed,” “impacted” and “sculpted” by those very forces.

Effectively communicating traumatic experiences requires navigating the political, social, and cultural filters that shape how history is interpreted and received. As Nemat herself experienced, the authority granted to a testimony stems from the narrator's positioning within these overlapping contexts. In recounting her experience writing *Prisoner of Tehran*, Nemat states that she “could never have predicted the venomous personal attacks that would be unleashed against” her narrative, questioning her account's authenticity (2010, p. 265). For instance, during one interview the interviewer probes Nemat, inquiring “how much of your book was really the truth and how much of it was the result of your imagination?” (Nemat, 2010, p. 278). Subsequently searching herself online, Nemat discovers negative comments branding her a “liar” and “traitor” for disputing her portrayal of Iran and the prison (Nemat, 2010, p. 280).

In *Tainted Witness*, Gilmore (2017) adopts a feminist lens to explore these challenges further, examining how women who bear witness are disproportionately subjected to judgment and various methods employed to discredit their testimonies. According to Gilmore's research, women's testimonies are frequently discredited through doubt, gender and racial stigmatization, and shame, undermining their credibility and “smearing” the subject herself. This is particularly evident for women testifying about sexual assault. In other words, according to Gilmore, “When the witness is a woman, and especially when the harm includes sexual violence, she will be subjected to practices of shaming and discrediting that preexist any specific case” (p. 5). Hence, women's testimonies underscore “both the symbolic potency of women's bodies and speech in the public sphere and the relative lack of institutional security and control to which they can lay claim” (Gilmore, 2017, p. 1).

In her first memoir, Nemat recounts instances of sexual abuse by her first husband, whom she felt indebted to for facilitating her release from prison. She also sheds light on the coercive environment within the prison, providing insights into its oppressive nature. Additionally, she highlights the failures of her school in ensuring the safety and well-being of its students, as it failed to provide proper guidance to prevent their imprisonment. However, in her subsequent work, *After Tehran*, Nemat reveals that she faced criticism for using her platform to testify against the institutions that failed her. There were even those who accused her of fabricating the entire story to gain acceptance into Canada (Nemat, 2010, p. 274). Nemat

adds, “My critics called me a liar, a tavyab, and a traitor, and claimed that I had written *Prisoner of Tehran* for money” (2010, p. 331).

This pessimistic way of approaching trauma testimonies is criticized by Smith and Watson (2012), who contend that “reading through the lens of verification is ultimately inadequate to adjudicate the truth claims made in heterogeneous cultures and specific contexts of witness” (p. 618). As they argue, interested parties can manipulate the process of verification in order to erode the reliability and authority of witnesses, ultimately weakening their assertions to uncover violence and suffering. Nemat firmly believes that in the face of doubters and perpetrators, there is only one course of action to take: “The only way to stop the cycle of violence is to speak out. As long as victims do not bear witness, their suffering will be forgotten” (2010, p. 600). Thus, Nemat addresses the issue of giving voice and countering silence and violence in her narrative. This, in turn, creates critical ways to challenge hegemonic power and patriarchal practices and to produce counterhegemonic discursive practices in order to maintain the power of re-writing one’s subjectivity.

Smith and Watson (2012) argue against relying solely on verifying claims of authenticity for ethical reading practices in testimonial narratives. They suggest an alternative approach to reading that aims to “rescue” the conventional interpretation of testimonial narratives. This approach focuses on diminishing “the subject’s position as a victim” by emphasizing the “survivors’ potential for agency” (Smith & Watson, 2012, p. 620). Additionally, as they further argue, it involves taking into account the “geopolitical contexts and constraints” that shape these testimonial narratives (p. 620). Eventually, by shifting the focus to survivor agency and recognizing the limitations of identification and belief, these frameworks challenge the power dynamics inherent in cross-cultural communication. As such, testimonies could continue to play a crucial role in illuminating social injustices and advocating for change. Therefore, navigating the complexities of witnessing is essential while recognizing the significance of testimonies in amplifying marginalized voices and fostering a more equitable society. Nemat’s purpose aligns with this. Towards the end of *Prisoner of Tehran*, she humbly requests forgiveness for her “long silence” in reference to her cellmates (2007, p. 306). Furthermore, she articulates the significance of writing her book as follows: “those who had survived [prison] needed to be acknowledged in a human way” (2010, p. 579).

Gilmore (2017) proposes the concept of the “adequate witness” who can be receptive to testimony without “deforming it by doubt, and without substituting different terms of value for the ones offered by the witness herself” (p. 5). She argues that such a witness avoids “the rush to judgment and learns how to attend to accounts of gendered harm and agency made by impure victims in conditions of complexity” (p. 5). As she further contends, the presence of an adequate witness not only establishes a supportive environment for testimony but also has the potential to preempt judgment and alter its practice, undoing associated stigma (pp. 5-6). Such approaches allow testimonies to reach audiences who will receive accounts with sympathy rather than scrutiny. This balanced approach acknowledges both the subjective nature of testimony and its significance in advocacy by amplifying marginalized voices and restoring their agency. It recognizes that responsible verification has value but should not be the sole lens through which testimonies are interpreted or judged.

### **3.2. Subjectivity Recovery**



As described, Nemat's writings and subsequent engagement with others about her experiences can be viewed as all leading toward the overarching goal of recovering her subjectivity and reclaiming her voice and agency. As Nick J. Mansfield explains, subjectivity can be defined as "an abstract or general principle that defies our separation into distinct selves" and inspires us to envision that "our interior lives inevitably seem to involve other people, either as objects of need, desire and interest or as necessary sharers of common experience" (2000, p. 3). That is, subjectivity refers to the state of the subject as always connected to something beyond itself, be it an "idea," "principle," or "other subjects." Therefore, the concept of the "subject" encapsulates the recognition that our daily experiences are deeply entwined with complex political, social, and philosophical aspects that hold shared significance within our broader community (Mansfield, 2000).

In her memoirs, Nemat delves into her personal experiences, navigating various relationships and social dynamics. These interactions include her parents, law enforcers, school teachers, and the principal who turned her in, as well as individuals expressing romantic interest. Nemat's story sheds light on the challenges faced by a female prisoner in 1980s Iran, a turbulent socio-political juncture marked with cultural and patriarchal hegemony. Moreover, the lack of support from her parents served to compound her struggles, as she found herself entangled in the complex interplay of power structures. Despite these difficulties, Nemat discovers a glimmer of hope—a chance for healing—through a significant aspect of subjectivity.

In his work, Donald E. Hall (2004) argues that subjectivity, while circumscribed by political and social forces, still allows for human agency. He contends that though our choices are highly constrained as subjects, we are not simply victims of external constraints. As he explains, processes of subject formation like interpellation are "numerous, always partial, often recurring and reinforced, but also potentially lapsing" (p. 129). Therefore, even within the constraints of societal influences, the subject can still exercise agency by being open to alternative perspectives, recognizing the potential for change, and engaging in contestation when possible (Hall, 2004, pp. 127-128). As he states, "We are not automatons, and despite our many and various interpolations and sometimes active, sometimes passive identificatory choices, the terms of subjectivity itself remain malleable, even if never free-floating or open to anything approaching unfettered control" (p. 128). Most significantly, Hall underscores that this "very small degree of agency, attended often by acute anguish a profound distress, is subjectivity as we continue to experience and live it today" (p. 15).

However, a traumatic incident shatters even this limited sense of subjectivity and agency. The trauma flashbacks keep intruding on the consciousness, and a sense of emotional numbness starts during or after the event (Henke, 1998, p. xvii). As Henke describes it, "There seems to be little doubt that trauma precipitates a violent fragmentation of the (perhaps fantasized) image of the integrated subject" (p. xvi). Nemat encountered difficult and distressing experiences throughout the demanding process of interrogation and imprisonment. However, her adversities did not end there. As a prisoner, despite her existing affection for another person, she made the choice to enter into a marriage of convenience in order to safeguard her safety and well-being. Nemat reflects on her suitor's perspective, saying "He believed he was doing me a favor" (2007, p. 150). In Nemat's account, this marriage resulted

in her effectively being regarded as his “property” (2010, p. 97). This perception left her vulnerable and open to the influence of patriarchy and power dynamics, eroding her autonomy and diminishing her to a mere object. Thus, rather than being a female subject, she became a male object.

In trauma narratives, Henke outlines three subject positions: “First, the authorial consciousness, or subject of enunciation, narrating the autobiographical story in a series of recollected, sometimes discontinuous episodes; second, the early, fragmented (and often traumatized) version of the self; and, finally, the ostensibly coherent subject of utterance evinced through the process of narrative disclosure” (1998, p. xv). Nemat’s authorial consciousness assumes the role of the subject of enunciation as she recounts her story, recalling episodes from her life before, during, and after her imprisonment. The self portrayed in the narrative is initially fragmented and frequently traumatized but gradually undergoes a transformation into a coherent subject through the use of narrative disclosure or scriptotherapy. This process of reconstruction through writing is vividly demonstrated in Marina Nemat’s experience. Prior to her imprisonment, Nemat (2007) remembers herself as a carefree teenager enjoying youthful pleasures—holidays by the Caspian Sea, lively evenings with friends, and adventures of love. But imprisonment and loveless marriage disrupted her subjectivity. Trauma held sway as fragmented flashbacks intruded on an otherwise numbed consciousness.

In the case of women, the term “colonialization” is employed to describe “a relation of structural domination and a suppression—often violent—of the heterogeneity of the subject(s) in question” (Mohanty, 1984, as cited in Smith & Watson, 1992). The focus is specifically on the condition of women as colonized subjects, deprived of their voices due to patriarchal oppression. Similarly, Nemat was colonized during her abusive first marriage, where her husband oppressed her so severely that she became, in her words, a “prisoner of silence” (2010, p. 41). This silence permeates her marital life later on with the person she loved, as well as her relationships with her parents and friends, ultimately casting a shadow over her present with echoes of her past. Her narrative demonstrates how patriarchal power dynamics can operate to colonize and silence women through violent denial of their subjectivity and right to determine their own lives. In her second memoir, she reflects that “after trauma, silence sets in” (2010, p. 201). This compels Nemat to contemplate reclaiming her subjectivity through writing, regaining her voice and taking control of her life. She states, “Now everything was different. I had taken charge. I had stood up” (2010, p. 163).

This approach aligns with a remedy proposed by Smith and Watson (1992) for oppressed women. They argue that autobiographical practices can be productive in resisting dominant structures and exploring issues of identity, particularly for marginalized women. Through the language of autobiography, they can enter social and discursive spaces, resisting negation and employing alternative practices. This creates a space for creative and political intervention, challenging the apparent hegemony of identity discourses. It acknowledges that marginalized individuals are not merely objects of colonization/oppressive forces but active agents in a complex social and cultural world, allowing for agency in autobiographical practices. In other words, by employing autobiographical practices that diverge from dominant models, individuals can position themselves as active “agents of a conflicted history, inhabiting and transforming” their environment (Smith & Watson, 1992, pp. xix-xx).

For Nemat, the process of scriptotherapy was not without its challenges. As she describes it, “While writing about the past, I sometimes felt so terribly overwhelmed that I locked myself in the bathroom and screamed for a few minutes until I felt better” (2010, p. 185). Writing about her prison experiences triggered harsh flashbacks. Among these memories, one pivotal event that profoundly affected her sense of subjectivity was the traumatic experiences of non-consensual sexual activities within her first marriage of convenience. Nemat vividly recounts the night of her wedding, describing her futile attempts to resist her husband’s advances:

I gathered all my strength and struggled to push him away, but it was useless; he was too big and strong. Anger, fear, and a terrible sense of humiliation twisted, turned, and rose inside me like a storm that had nowhere to go, until I had no energy left until I accepted that there was nowhere to run until I surrendered. (2007, pp. 204-205)

Drawing a comparison between this night and the challenging period of her life spent in prison, Nemat reflects on how she managed to maintain “a sense of authority” during her incarceration and interrogations (2007, p. 205). However, on that first wedding night, she acknowledges, “I was his. He had me” (2007, p. 205). In Nemat’s sense, her marriage equaled becoming an object, overlooked, and controlled, which left enduring subconscious memories for her,

When I married him, I felt I had become an object. Property. Something the world had completely forgotten and didn’t care about. [He] had unlimited power over me and could do to me as he pleased. That was how I felt on my wedding night, and even though I got to know [him] better and began to feel some compassion toward him, the memories of our wedding night and the nights that followed have remained in my subconscious. (2010, p. 151)

Nemat’s experience of being tied and reduced to her sexuality, and stripped of her subjectivity in regards to her body, echoes key aspects of Elizabeth Grosz’s theory of corporeal feminism. In her 1987 article “Notes Towards a Corporeal Feminism,” Grosz develops her theory that corporeal feminism emerged in response to patriarchal oppression. A key tactic of this oppression, according to Grosz, is perpetuating the notion that “women, more than men, are tied to their fixed corporeality” (1987, pp. 5-6). By casting women as more defined by their physical bodies, patriarchal thought aims to rationalize granting men relatively greater autonomy over both mental and physical realms. As Grosz elucidates, patriarchal ideology “confines women by tying them to a biologically and logically necessary dependence on men, ensuring its own continuity through the ascription of a biologically determined female ‘nature’” (1987, pp. 5-6). In other words, by essentializing women as inherently more physical, natural and biologically governed than men, misogynistic frameworks restrict women’s social roles and possibilities. They do so under the guise of an immutable female nature requiring dependence on the male sphere.

In her seminal work *Volatile Bodies* (1994), Grosz further critiques how past philosophical binary systems established by male thinkers tended to associate concepts like “culture,” “reason,” “subject,” and “self” with the mind and masculinity. Meanwhile, these systems linked femininity and the female body with opposing notions of “nature,” “passion,” “object,” and “other” (Grosz, 1994). Specifically, masculinity came to represent the positively

valued attributes of mind and culture, whereas femininity represented their supposed opposite—the negative connotations of nature, passion, and the passive, objectified body. Nemat’s objectification and lack of subjectivity echoes how these problematic dualisms served to restrict and define women primarily in terms of their physical forms and sexuality.

According to Lili Pâquet (2018), the connection between femininity and corporeality allows men to reside in what they mistakenly perceive as a purely intellectual realm while simultaneously satisfying their denied desire for physical contact through women’s bodies and services. This intricate relationship enables men to navigate their longing for physical intimacy within the context of patriarchal systems. Nemat’s personal account further exemplifies this phenomenon. From the very first moment they met, Nemat discerned a yearning in her husband’s gaze (Nemat, 2007, p. 120). Despite initially professing admiration for Nemat’s captivating personality (Nemat, 2007, p. 206), her husband persistently disregarded her boundaries to gratify his own desires. This aligns with Grosz and Pâquet’s arguments that men, within patriarchal structures, perceive women’s bodies as objects of desire and control.

Pâquet (2018) suggests that memoirs have the potential to remedy this issue, as they provide survivors of sexual assault with a powerful medium to share their personal experiences on their own terms, allowing them to reclaim control over their narratives. This genre allows for an unrestricted platform, free from institutional constraints. In a sense, memoirs allow survivors “to regain control of their experience and explore the complex truths of rape without altering their narratives to fit seamlessly into culturally sanctioned scripts” (Roeder, 2015 as cited in Pâquet, 2018). Through memoirs, survivors reclaim agency over their accounts and delve into the nuanced realities of sexual violence without prescribed social confines. In this way, memoirs depicting sexual assault serve as a unique form of testimony, empowering survivors. It enables them to author their own stories and examine the multifaceted nature of rape, while liberating themselves from pressures to conform to societal norms and expectations.

Nemat’s experience of sexual assault within her marriage exposes the oppressive dynamics of patriarchal structures in her life. Her decision to write about her experiences is an act of resistance, reclaiming her subjectivity and challenging dominant narratives. As Nemat explains, “my writing *Prisoner of Tehran* had been like throwing up; the story had exploded out of me when I couldn’t hold it down any longer. It had been an urgent telling of events” (2010, p. 594). Reflecting on her traumatic past, she writes, “I know that silence, the silence of trauma quietly and carefully handed down to the next generation ... a package of secrets that changes hands ... silence saddens me. It breaks my heart. I want to scream, Tell! Tell! Tell!” (2010, p. 596). Still, it took Nemat years to confide in someone about her imprisonment memories, during which she created a fictional identity to cope: “After the prison, I created a new ‘Marina,’ a carefully constructed fictional character. She had never experienced torture ... and humiliation, and she was going to live happily and normally ever after” (Nemat, 2010, p. 612).

As the title of her book *Shattered Subjects* suggests, Henke proposes that experiencing trauma can fragment one’s sense of subjectivity. However, she views autobiography as a potent means of “scriptotherapy.” Henke argues autobiography offers the opportunity to “reinventing the self and reconstructing the subject ideologically inflected by language, history, and social

imbrication” (1998, p. xv). Through narrating their personal stories, individuals who underwent trauma can reclaim their voice and assert agency. As Henke notes:

As a genre, life-writing encourages the author/narrator to reassess the past and to reinterpret the intertextual codes inscribed on personal consciousness by society and culture. Because the author can instantiate the alienated or marginal self into the pliable body of a protean text, the newly revised subject, emerging as the semifictive protagonist of an enabling counternarrative, is free to rebel against the values and practices of a dominant culture and to assume an empowered position of political agency in the world. (1998, pp. xv-xvi)

In Henke's view, autobiographical writing ventures into the realm of therapy. The author utilizes the text as a medium to explore their socially shaped sense of self and establish a potentially counter-hegemonic narrative (Hejaz & Singh, 2023). Nemat relies on scriptotherapy in her journey, breaking her silence and reflecting on her suffering (2010, p. 591). The following excerpt underscores the profound impact of scriptotherapy on Nemat's recovery of subjectivity:

It [i.e., imprisonment] shattered my life, and I spent the eighteen years that followed pretending nothing was broken. Only after I began to write *Prisoner of Tehran* did I start to put myself back together. My book became a candle that I lit and placed in the window of my life, a light that helped me find myself. (Nemat, 2010, p. 260)

According to Leena Kurvet-Käosaar, “Life-writing can alleviate the symptoms of the post-traumatic state and facilitate the reconstruction and recreation of selfhood threatened or shattered by the experience” (2020, p. 310). For Nemat, writing her story had this empowering effect. By putting her experience down on paper and sharing it with others, she was able to regain subjectivity and agency over her narrative. As Nemat herself describes, “By putting my story on paper and sharing it with others, in a way I marched back inside [prison] and reclaimed myself” (2010, p. 183). In doing so, she demonstrates resilience in facing the trauma of her past imprisonment. While the institution aimed to strip away her sense of subjectivity, in writing her story she was “finally free, because [she] ... faced the past and accepted that [she] cannot alter it” (Nemat, 2010, p. 183). Nemat's experience underscores how life-writing can allow those who have endured trauma and loss of agency under structures of power to reclaim their subjectivity and assert some power over how their story is told. She states that she still holds onto the core elements of herself that endured despite what she was forced to go through – “the girl I once was is still inside the experienced woman I have become” (2010, p. 183).

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

This examination of Marina Nemat's memoirs has highlighted the profound healing power of scriptotherapy for individuals recovering from traumatic experiences. Through writing her memories and openly sharing her testimony with readers, Nemat is able to confront the fragmentation caused by her trauma and regain a sense of coherence and agency over her own life. Her journey demonstrates how scriptotherapy supports the reconstruction of subjectivity shattered by violence and oppression. By articulating her pains, Nemat begins the process of validating her truths and reclaiming ownership over events that, in her view, reduced her to an object. Her testimony stands as evidence against the denial and doubt she faced from skeptics.



Her experiences echo concerns that women face disproportionate judgment and attempts to discredit their stories. Although a substantial amount of literature scrutinizes the authenticity of autobiographical accounts, as explored in this article, it is undeniable that life writing can have a therapeutic impact on the individuals who engage in it. In essence, the challenges surrounding the authenticity of life writings and their potential for healing are separate matters and do not conflict with one another. Therefore, through memoirs, survivors can explore the nuances of violence on their own terms without conforming to narrow expectations. This underscores the potential for life writing to empower marginalized individuals. Ultimately, Nemat triumphs over her past by directly confronting and transcending it through her writing. She emerges empowered, liberated from the “silence” that once gripped her, and reclaims control over her fractured subjectivity and life. Her story stands as a testament to the transformative power of scriptotherapy. Her process of scriptotherapy enabled her to piece herself back together and re-establish her subjectivity after it was shattered by trauma.

Her case highlights the precarious path survivors must navigate in gaining recognition for trauma implicating power structures given the social and political incentives for dismissal or denial. Recovering subjectivity does not necessarily mean completely removing all limitations or achieving absolute freedom but rather finding ways to assert agency and personal autonomy within the existing constraints. It is a process of self-discovery, growth, and empowerment, enabling individuals to actively shape their lives and make choices that are authentic and meaningful to them.

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