The Historian’s Daughter (A novel); Monsters and Memory (An essay)

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The Historian’s Daughter
(A novel)

Monsters and Memory
(An essay)

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Faculty of Education and Arts, Edith Cowan University, Western Australia, April 2015.
ABSTRACT

This thesis comprises two parts, a novel and an essay. ‘The Historian’s Daughter’ is a work of fiction based on family memories and historical research that speaks to the trauma of abandonment and displacement in an immigrant family living in Australia. The accompanying essay is titled ‘Monsters and Memory’ and is an autoethnographical text which combines theoretical, experiential and embodied research to argue that the inclusion of women’s stories, particularly those of trauma and abuse, must be foregrounded in any exploration of cultural and diasporic memory. Drawing primarily on the work of Said (1978, 1993, 1999, 2001), Bhabha (1990, 1994), Caruth (1995), Kuhn (1999), Metta (2010), Barrett (2010), Reed-Danahay (1997), Ellis (2004), Kapur (2001) and Mohanty (2004), this thesis contributes to current debates in Australia about bicultural identity, refugees and migrants. The novel is located in three countries, India, Iran and Australia, and this allows me to explore the concept of ‘home’ in a rapidly changing world when ‘home’ is no longer a place of refuge and safety. Returning home, therefore, can be fraught with political danger, as in the case of post-revolutionary Iran and post-Rajiv Gandhi assassination India.

This is a novel about what happens to a family when a loving mother abruptly walks out on them. Using a first-person narrative, the novel encompasses the narrator’s abandonment as a child in India, her subsequent relocation to Australia, her relationship with her menacing father and her attempt to locate and rescue her sister from the Islamic Republic of Iran. Using a fractured chronology, the narrative has four sections that loop back and forth as the story unfolds.

My interest in the complexities of voluntary migration or forced exile from so-called Third-World countries to a First-World country such as Australia prompted my immersion in the stories that women told of their experiences of living in a ‘safe’ country. I was consumed by a desire to ‘hear’ women’s voices, in particular, the voices of Indian and Iranian women speaking accented English. I was interested in their responses to particular written texts and whether those stories accurately represented their bicultural ‘belongings.’ Therefore, I initiated a Reading Group and invited them, over an eighteen-month period, to read four published texts written by Indian and Iranian women. The objective was to record the readers’ responses to the literature they read, with an understanding that they would also read ‘The Historian’s Daughter’ as it evolved. As cultural observer, participant and researcher in the study, I was able to discern “multiple layers of consciousness” and to challenge my own beliefs as a first generation immigrant woman in Australia (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis, 2004; Anderson, 2006).

Reconciling the divide between remaining faithful to memory in all its complexity and slipperiness as well as being mindful of the familial issues involved in recreating events from the past is one of the challenges this thesis grapples with. The dilemma of representing family uncritically is balanced by a desire to reclaim the ‘power of the text to change the world’ and make it a better place (Ellis, 2004).
This thesis investigates the power of storytelling as a framework for thinking about the world. I am aware that my personal experiences of race, identity and sexual violence have impacted on both parts of this thesis. It is these experiences, supported by theoretical research, that I offer in the context of providing insights into broader cultural issues within specific immigrant communities in Australia.
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My husband Mike and my children Sabah and Matt laughed at me when I lost perspective, and gave me information on router bits, marri trees and dodgy cars. Additionally, Mike ensured a steady supply of coffee, sympathy, books and Star Trek re-runs.

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I dedicate this thesis to my friend Mary. I miss her every day.
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Essay

Monsters and memory

Introduction

This essay discusses the impact and limitations of the methodology I chose to research and write ‘The Historian’s Daughter.’ Additionally, it explores the role of memory in ideas about home and identity. There are three chapters: The Reading Women, Identity and Home. In Chapter One, The Reading Women, I describe my theoretical, experiential, literary, embodied and historical research as well as the responses of a group of women I invited to read a set of texts I chose for my research. I note the challenges of forming a reading group, the literature we explored together, the languages in which we communicated, our relationships with one another and our resistance to some of the texts we read. I interrogate the idea that exiles and immigrants can form communities based on commonalities of language, culture and religion. I argue that the inclusion of women’s stories, particularly those of trauma and abuse, need to be foregrounded in any exploration of cultural and diasporic memory. Within an Australian context, writers such as Eva Sallis (1998), Simone Lazaroo (2000) and Randa Abdel-Fattah (2005) question Australian landscape and identity from Asian and Middle-Eastern viewpoints. ‘The Historian’s Daughter’ adds to this body of work by depicting Indian and Iranian women who create meaning out of trauma and memory and negotiate the complexities of their shifting identities in a new country.

In 2011, when I commenced doctoral research, my intention was to write a novel about an Indian/Iranian immigrant family in Australia, accompanied by an essay on displacement and identity. In Australia today, we continue to debate the incarceration of asylum seekers in detention centres both within the country and in off-shore processing centres.¹ As a nation I believe we are currently involved in the production of our history in times of global displacement, both in the case of refugees coming to our shores and a migrant workforce; therefore it is timely to question the representation of race, gender and class in our national discourse. These themes resonate with me because I was born in India and lived there until I was twenty-four. I migrated to Australia with my husband and infant daughter in 1985. My memories of India are dominated by the influx of Iranian students to my hometown, Jabalpur,

¹ See these two websites for descriptions of conditions within detention centres; www.sbs.com.au/detentioncentre/ www.amnesty.org.au/AsylumSeekers
in Madhya Pradesh. Iranians came to India from the late 1960s until the Islamic Revolution in 1979 to study English as a second language. For several years from 1970-1982 my multi-lingual family hosted some young men when they arrived until they were able to be placed with English-speaking families. One young man lived with my family for 12 years. He shared a room with my brother, went to university with him, ate with us, came on holidays with us and was treated as a member of the family. I was a curious ten-year-old when he arrived and made friends with him more easily than did my older, self-conscious sister. He reciprocated with warmth and humour when I introduced him to others as my best friend. When Saddam Hussain invaded Iran in 1980, most members of my friend’s family were killed in oil refinery explosions. He tried to go to Iran and we tried to stop him, citing danger and uncertainty. One night, sometime in 1982, he did not come home and we assumed he was with his friends in a neighbouring town. Despite repeated attempts to find him, we were unsuccessful in locating him. It is possible that he returned to Iran and like many Iranians caught up in the Islamic Revolution, either died or was imprisoned.

The memory of my friend and what happened to thousands like him haunted me as I became a young adult. When I arrived in Perth in 1985, I became aware of a small community of Iranian refugees who had fled from Iran after the Revolution. I made enquiries about my friend among this community, especially when I encountered someone from his hometown, Abadan, on the Iraq/Iran border. My enquiries did not yield results, but the memories stayed with me through the essential years of building a career, raising a family and making a home in my adopted country. I started writing stories and vignettes about my childhood in order to make sense of my experiences as a newcomer to Australia. Some of these stories involved searching for lost mothers, brothers and lovers.

As a first generation immigrant Indian woman in Australia, I am drawn to narratives of survival and identity. ‘The Historian’s Daughter’ and this essay are based on my memories and experiences, supported by theoretical, literary, historical and social research. Early in 2012, I established a Reading Group with Indian and Iranian women to read novels written by migrant women. This methodological strategy was selected as the framework for my explorations into race, identity and displacement that would enable an examination of current diasporic literature by Indian and Iranian women. The Reading Group would operate like a book club, except for one important difference. There would be no democratic rotation of book club hosts with each member choosing a novel in turn. I would choose the books on the basis of their thematic relevance for my project, and all the meetings would be conducted in
my home. The first chapter of this essay examines my reasons for initiating a reading group and reveals some insights gained from participants’ responses to the literature they read.

Azar Nafisi’s memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003), influenced the methodology for this thesis. I first read it in 2005 and again in 2011. Nafisi is a Professor of English at John Hopkins University in Washington. She taught English at the University of Tehran until 1995, when she was expelled for refusing to wear the veil. For two years after that, she gathered a group of women in her home, her former students, to discuss forbidden Western texts including *Lolita* (Nabokov, 1955), *Daisy Miller* (James, 1879) and *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald, 1925). Nafisi’s memoir is an account of life in Tehran in the mid-1990s, more than a decade after the Islamic Revolution. It describes the lives of girls and women under a religious oligarchy. The deposed Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, monarch from 1941-1979, and his father, monarch from 1925-1941, had tried to ‘modernise’ Iran by banning the veil and increasing socio-political ties with America and the West. Ayatollah Khomeini, who took over in 1979 as the spiritual leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, declared all Western influences, including its literature, evil and satanic. For Nafisi and her students, reading *Lolita* in Tehran became an act of faith in uncertain times. They had very little control over their own lives, but, once a week, for two hours on a Thursday morning, they could escape into the world of fiction they were no longer allowed to read in their universities.

Nafisi’s critics, particularly Roksana Bahramitash (2005) and Hamid Dabashi (2006), point out that she privileges the reading of Western literature over Persian literature and suggests that Muslims are dangerous and backward. Bahramitash and Dabashi claim that Nafisi is the privileged observer, and that her family benefited from its connections with the Shah because Nafisi’s father was Mayor of Tehran during the Shah’s reign. But I argue that Dabashi’s charge of neoconservatism against Nafisi on the basis of her reading choices misses the point of the memoir. A novel is an articulation of the idea that reading stories can distract from grim political reality and make room for what autoethnographer Sarah Wall (2006), refers to as ‘other ways of knowing’ (p. 148). Nafisi’s choice of Western literature was in keeping with her occupation as a teacher of English literature and her students’ desire to read works that had been summarily banned by the Islamic regime. The idea of reading as resistance has recently been highlighted in the Taksim Square protests in Istanbul, as Angela Meyer (2013) reports. Images of Turkish men and women standing silently with books by Marquez, Camus and Orwell in their hands may be read as a pictorial representation of Nafisi’s experiment in post-revolutionary Iran.
Nafisi’s memoir triggered my memories of Iranian students in India who discussed Western literature over cigarettes and tea. The young man who lived with us, and upon whom the character of Sohrab in my novel is loosely based, had studied English literature and discussed various texts with my brothers and father. The bookshelves of my father’s library hosted writers as diverse as Ruskin, Carlyle, Machiavelli, Gandhi, Shakespeare and Tagore. Hitler’s Mein Kampf in its original German, Virgil’s Aeneid in Latin and Firdausi’s Shahnama in Farsi are some of the books I remember seeing in my father’s library. As my brothers grew up they added horror, crime and science fiction and I read whatever was available. It was a particularly patriarchal collection. My introduction to women writing in English was a battered copy of Agatha Christie’s Murder on the Links when I was twelve. I realise now that the books that informed my early world-view were unusual for an avid young reader.

As I read Nafisi’s memoir, I began to reflect on the themes that would permeate my novel and define the direction of the Reading Group. The intention was not to replicate Nafisi’s experiment, but to have a group of immigrant women read stories about other immigrant women. This made sense to me at an intuitive level. I needed to hear women’s voices speaking Indian-accented English in my own home, as I had once heard, growing up in another country, as a child.

Chapter Two, Identity, discusses intersections of race, memory and trauma in the lives of women like me. In this chapter, I explore the limitations of current feminist discourses that still label women as ethnic or marginalised to explain otherness. I am mindful of Asoka Bandarage’s comment that divisions of race, class and nationality carry the potential to disunite women. ‘We can pretend that differences do not exist, or we can explore them, and in the process reformulate feminism itself’ (2010). It is not my intention to offer a detailed analysis of contemporary feminism but to signal my work’s difference from mainstream Anglo-Australian women’s writing. Arun Mukherjee (1990) refers to an ‘Indian sensibility’ in her critique of postcolonialism and postmodernism, and it is this sensibility that I wish to foreground. I do not claim ‘difference’ as a visibly different, culturally diverse woman; rather, the difference exists in the content and style of writing and in the privileging of certain stories over others, even as I accept that my ethnicity is inextricably linked with the stories I choose to write. Feminist scholar Marilyn Metta (2010), points out that the naming of non-Anglo women’s writing as ethnic or Asian-Australian is problematic and damages the idea of multiculturalism by setting up binary oppositions ‘between what is Anglo-Australian and what is not’ (p. 38). I argue that it is misleading to suppose that women who share a common
ethnicity are primarily representative of their culture or race. The responses of the Reading Group to the literature they read suggest that differences in religion, class, language and entitlement are more important to their identity than being defined as Indian or Iranian or Australian. These differences, of course, cannot be studied independently of the place and family in which each woman was raised and educated. However, familial differences aside, some of their responses resonated with me while some felt so removed from my experiences that I was surprised to find myself sharing a common ethnicity with them. For example, after living in Australia for thirty years I no longer identify myself as an Indian-Australian or Asian-Australian. These hyphenated identity-labels are ascribed to me by other people, usually Anglo Australians. I am comfortable identifying myself as Australian without denying my Indian origins. My writing explores the powerful pull of ‘home’ even as I feel I belong more to my adopted country than country of ‘origin.’ In India, where my parents and extended family still live, I am also identified as Australian. It is only in Australia that I am regularly asked where I come from. I accept that this is the immigrant reality and usually do not allow it to interfere with my life and work. However, the views expressed by one woman in the Reading Group, someone I had identified as being ethnically Indian, could not have been more different. This woman identifies herself solely on the basis of her religious beliefs as a Muslim-Australian, distancing herself from her Indian ancestry but claiming kinship with Iranian, Malaysian, African and Pakistani Muslims. Her identity is firmly entrenched in her religion while another Indian woman in the same group, also raised in a Muslim household, defines herself by her work as an artist/jeweller, suggesting differing perceptions of identity within connected cultures.

The final chapter, Home, questions the concept of home in an increasingly globalised, transnational world. Throughout this essay, the emphasis is on storytelling as a way of making sense of the world. After writing several drafts of ‘The Historian’s Daughter,’ I knew that memory and literary research alone would not suffice. I needed to visit India to authenticate my memories, challenge my lived experiences and conduct location research for the novel. However, the idea of India as home felt tenuous and brittle, while the idea of Perth as home felt contradictory. My parents had moved away from the town I was born in after an intensely traumatic period in their lives and had cut ties with friends and family still living there. Family politics meant that it would be wise not to visit my home town. I could, however, visit India, and in February 2014 that is what I did. An opportunity became available through the Asia Bound Short Term Program partly funded by my university. A
grant enabled me to spend six weeks there, hosted by two Indian universities in different cities. During this period I wrote and revised the Indian scenes in my novel and conducted on-site research for this essay. ‘The Historian’s Daughter’ is a novel about the repercussions of decisions we make when we are afraid, in the context of an immigrant family’s experience of loss and the visit to India allowed me to reflect on what I was attempting to achieve in the novel and with the depiction of some of its central characters, especially the Historian.

When I first conceived this character, the Historian, I intended him to be a mix of charm and menace. His literary forebears – Vladimir Nabokov’s Humbert Humbert (Lolita), Kate Grenville’s Albion Singer (Lilian’s Story) and Elizabeth Harrower’s Felix Shaw (The Watch Tower) are dark, troubled men. The Historian combines misogyny with an oppressive colonial legacy in his treatment of his wife, sister and daughters. The novel’s title refers to the centrality of the Historian in this narrative about a hidden aunt, a lost mother and abandoned daughters. I delved deep into my memories to excavate and give shape to the images, voices and shadows that became Hannah’s nightmares and the Magician’s silences. ‘We alter the truth on paper so as to alter it in fact; we lie about our past and invent surrogate memories the better to make sense of our lives and live the life we know was truly ours,’ says writer Andre Aciman (2000). The idea of inventing surrogate memories deepened as my novel became intensely personal and more than a quest for an Iranian boy lost inside a revolution. Although I had researched the political and historical ramifications of the Iranian Revolution and written several chapters about the trauma of war, I deleted these in subsequent drafts. I felt compelled, instead, to explore memories that surfaced disturbingly and inconveniently from my own past. The only way to make sense of events I could barely remember, events that impacted negatively on my life, was to invent what I could not possibly have known. ‘The Historian’s Daughter’ became a novel about relationships and altered truths. I moved away from trying to write a novel about revolution and allowed my memories, experiences and reading to direct me to the story that I needed to write. I began to focus on the fictional lives of women who are affected by the actions of men who remove them from their familiars, as the Historian does with Hannah, and Sohrab does with Gloria. Even though the Magician abandons her family and Gloria elects to go away with Sohrab, the choices are made from helplessness rather than agency, and it is the men, Sohrab and the Historian, who remove Gloria and Hannah from their physical and social landscapes.

In this essay I also describe the process of letting the Reading Group read drafts of my novel and my subsequent absorption of their comments, critiques and suggestions. In attempting a
new approach to writing creatively and becoming a part of the Reading Group, I chose to allow the vulnerability and serendipity of exchange. Canadian writer Barbara Turner-Vesselago (2013) uses the term ‘surrender’ to show the connection between vulnerability and writing. As soon as I stopped trying to control narrative and plot and characters, my writing became more intuitive. As soon as I handed draft versions to the Reading Group, I let go of my anxiety that they would hate it. Writing, as Turner-Vesselago concludes, ‘has its own logic and power – both greater than and different from the power of your rational mind. The only way to learn about these differences is to experience them’ (p. 3). I lived the truth of this statement in both the final stages of writing the novel and first drafts of this essay. While I had written several versions of the novel in the first two years of my candidature, and reworked some sections many times, I felt something was missing. There was a gap between what I visualised and what I wrote. In 2013 and 2014 I reflected on my progress, read writers on writing, visited India and let my rational mind disengage from controlling structure, plot and character to make room for the hard and intuitive work I needed to do. I began to write autobiographical stories alongside the novel to try and understand the messy creative processes unfolding in my mind. Ruth Behar (2008) describes this process as a desire to seek ‘connection, intimacy, and passion’ (p. 541).

My quest for an intimate connection with the stories emerging from my interactions with the Reading Group inspired me to start a blog in 2012. Initially, this was a book blog intended as a way of keeping a record of the books I was reading. It evolved into a space where I published short essays on writing a novel as part of a PhD, along with book reviews. I found myself in an online community of bloggers who were willing to share, comment on and guide my research and writing by providing links to material that might be useful. The blog acquired a following of 60 people within a year and provided me with an opportunity to publish my autobiographical and fictional writing through online journals, competitions and magazines. In 2013 and 2014, three stories and several poems were accepted by national and international peer-reviewed journals and I was shortlisted in two national writing competitions. These stories and poems grew out of the process of writing the novel. ‘Every once in a while I make a list of my obsessions,’ says writer Natalie Goldberg (2005). ‘Writers end up writing about their obsessions. Things that haunt them; things they can’t forget;

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2 http://rashidawritenow.wordpress.com
stories they carry in their bodies waiting to be released’ (p. 42). My obsessions with place and memory and family are threaded through stories I published during my PhD journey. For example, ‘The Moon Still Speaks,’ (Appendix A), published in the November 2014 issue of *Westerly*, is a short story with some of the same characters as ‘The Historian’s Daughter.’

Memory is central to this thesis – especially the role of traumatic memory in defining a diasporic identity. Cathy Caruth (1995) and Annette Kuhn (1999) reflect on the ways in which the memory of a trauma is elusive and enigmatic and represents a fundamental dislocation that manifests in flashbacks and nightmares. Caruth proposes that trauma itself may provide a link between cultures and Kuhn describes the way in which secrets of the past are only understood in the present. Metta’s intuitive feminist methodology, which encompasses personal, cultural and historical research to write ‘against, alongside and beyond memory’ reminds me of the complexity of re-engaging the past to re-imagine the present (2010). Writers Kristina Olsson (2013) and Miranda Mouillot (2015) describe their stories of silenced women as an attempt to remember something that society wilfully tries to forget. It is in a spirit of writing against oblivion that I offer this essay.

Writing this thesis has been a cathartic process, one that has allowed me to express my culture and experience of place and womanhood in the context of storytelling. Edward Said’s questions about the legitimacy of empire (1978, 1993, 1999, 2001) have influenced the construction of this thesis, as has Aijaz Ahmad’s assertion that Said’s theory of orientalism is inherently flawed (1992). It is mainly Said’s later work, especially his memoir, *Out of Place* (1999), that resonates with me because of its emphasis on writing and remembering as a way of coping with exile. Homi Bhabha’s language of resistance provides me with the vocabulary to discuss hybrid and fluid forms of identity and understand the ambivalence that accompanies any discourse of displacement. For Bhabha (1990, 1994), culture is not a unifying force and can only be represented through a process of hybridity and translation.

Practice-led researchers Jane Goodall (2010) and Estelle Barrett (2010) comment on the challenges of writing as research as well as the importance of relinquishing control in order to arrive at ‘the place where the story is breaking, where the running edge of tension is released’ (Goodall, 2010, p. 207). Deborah Reed-Danahay (1997), Carolyn Ellis (2004), Leon Anderson (2006) and Sarah Wall (2006) advocate research that starts with one’s own experiences, emphasising the writing of personalised narratives that contribute to debates about reflexivity and voice in research.
Incest lies at the heart of ‘The Historian’s Daughter’; however, an examination of the implications of incest is beyond the scope of this essay. Similarly it is not possible to include a complete analysis of my research over the past four years. I have been influenced by a wide and eclectic range of literary theories and philosophies of writing and these are woven into the body both of the novel and essay.

The following chapters provide an account of the methodological approach I chose for this thesis and some of the unexpected challenges it presented while I wrote.