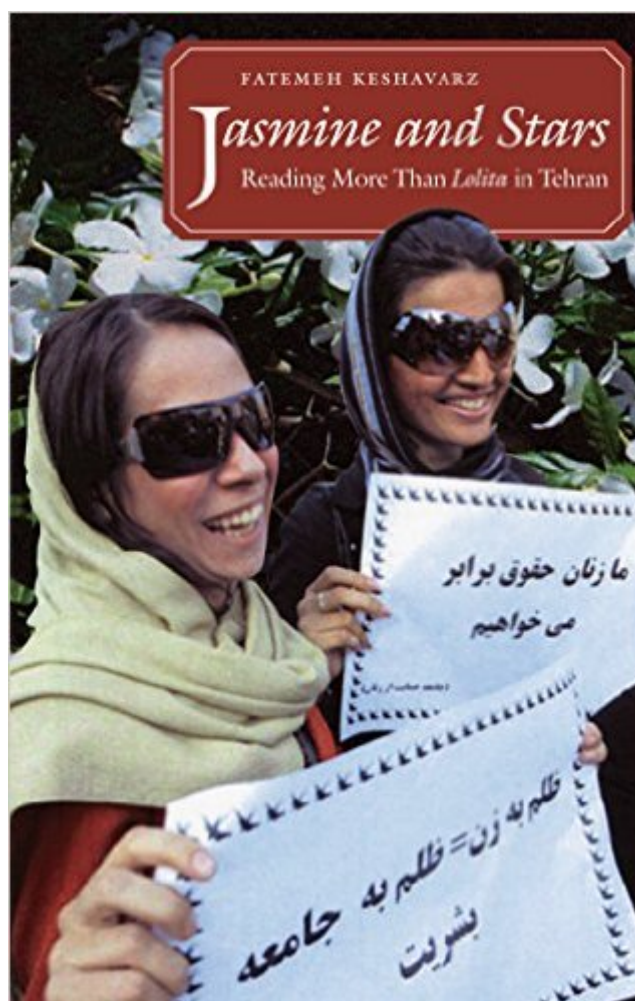


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# Jasmine And Stars: Reading More Than Lolita In Tehran (Islamic Civilization And Muslim Networks)



## Synopsis

In a direct, frank, and intimate exploration of Iranian literature and society, scholar, teacher, and poet Fatemeh Keshavarz challenges popular perceptions of Iran as a society bereft of vitality and joy. Her fresh perspective on present-day Iran provides a rare insight into this rich culture alive with artistic expression but virtually unknown to most Americans. Keshavarz introduces readers to two modern Iranian women writers whose strong and articulate voices belie the stereotypical perception of Iranian women as voiceless victims in a country of villains. She follows with a lively critique of the recent best-seller *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, which epitomizes what Keshavarz calls the "New Orientalist narrative," a view marred by stereotype and prejudice more often tied to current geopolitical conflicts than to an understanding of Iran. Blending in firsthand glimpses of her own life--from childhood memories in 1960s Shiraz to her present life as a professor in America--Keshavarz paints a portrait of Iran depicting both cultural depth and intellectual complexity. With a scholar's expertise and a poet's hand, she helps amplify the powerful voices of contemporary Iranians and leads readers toward a deeper understanding of the country's past and present.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I am very happy that I took the time to read "Jasmine and Stars: Reading More than Lolita in Tehran" by Fetemeh Keshavarz. It was definitely worth the effort and provided me with many vivid

positive images of life in modern Iran. I recommend it highly to all who seek a clearer understanding of the people and culture of modern Iran. The larger part of this book relates loving tales of life in modern Iran. These are deeply personal tales taken from the author's own life, and each is told in a gently loving and almost magical style. These are uplifting, liberating tales of everyday heroism, achievement, and humanity. But other parts of the book were, for me at least, far less interesting. These parts are written in dense, academic prose and their purpose is to refute, from every detailed angle possible, all that the author found objectionable in Azar Nafisi's recent bestselling book "Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books". She finds fault with much of that book, and, personally, I sense genuine intolerance and psychological blindness in much of her criticism. It was only recently that I read Nafisi's book, "Reading Lolita in Tehran", and that is why I picked up a copy of Keshavarz' book, to see what she had to say from a different point of view. I, like many people in the West, are extremely curious to understand the people in this part of the world. If Keshavarz had a different point of view, I wanted to hear it. Keshavarz is an Iranian-American. She loves both countries and very frequently makes visits to Tehran to visit friends and family. She is welcome there and easily adapts to both cultures. She is a scholar of Persian and Comparative Literature at Washington University in St. Louis. Recently, she has become an outspoken voice for a large Iranian-American community living productive and happy lives in America. This community is fearful about what they see as a "New Orientalist" narrative arising in the West. Let me explain. The old (primarily 18th- and 19th-century) Orientalist narrative sought to justify the colonial presence of Europe in the Eastern Hemisphere. The authors were European philologists. Keshavarz goes to great lengths in this book to argue that a "New Orientalism" has emerged in the West in the last few years, particularly since 9/11. "The emerging Orientalist narrative has many similarities to and a few difference from this earlier incarnation. It equally simplifies its subject. For example, it explains almost all undesirable Middle Eastern incidents in terms of Muslim men's submission to God and Muslim women's submission to men. The old narrative was imbued with the authority of an all-knowing foreign expert. The emerging narrative varies somewhat in that it might have a native--or seminative--insider tone. Furthermore, as the product of a self-questioning era, it shows a relative awareness of its own possible shortcomings. Yet it replicates the earlier narrative's strong undercurrent of superiority and of impatience with the locals, who are often portrayed as uncomplicated. The new narrative does not necessarily support overt colonial ambitions. But it does not hide its clear preference for western political and cultural takeover. Most importantly, it replicates the totalizing--and silencing--tendencies of the old Orientalists by virtue of erasing, through unnuanced narration, the complexity and richness of the local culture" (p. 3). Keshavarz' purpose is

thus twofold: first, to refute in detail all that she finds objectionable in Nafisi's book; and second, to provide abundant examples of the common humanity shared by the peoples of Iran and the West. In this manner she hopes to expose the irrelevance of prevalent stereotypes about Muslim culture that have recently been exacerbated by bestselling "New Orientalist" narratives such as: "Reading Lolita in Tehran" by Azar Nafisi, "The Hidden World of Islamic Women" by Geraldine Brookes, "The Bookseller of Kabul" by Asne Seierstad, and "The Kite Runner" by Khaled Hosseini. To Kashavarz, and others in the wider immigrant Muslim community in the West, these books foster otherness and difference. What Kashavarz and this wider community of Muslim want is clear and simple: The West needs to learn to better understand and then fully to respect their culture. In Kashavarz' words: "Flying airplanes into buildings, keeping prisoners of war out of reach of the law, beheading those who might vaguely sympathize with the 'enemy,' setting off bombs in subway cars, and dragging the largest army of the world halfway across the globe to fight imaginary weapons of mass destruction are signs of big trouble. This environment festering with suspicion and hatred needs a more sophisticated global perspective, one geared toward respect, recognition, and healing" (p. 113). Evidently, many in the immigrant Muslim American community are fearful that these "New Orientalist" narratives are providing the West with insider "evidence" that people from this part of the world are, in large part, the underdeveloped "Orientals" that everyone thought they were. Daily, they see the mass media enforcing this simplified image: that all that Muslims "do is pray, suppress women, and grow angry at the West" (p. 71). Throughout the book there are numerous examples of great modern Iranian literature--literature that flies in the face of current stereotypical images of what we in the West may believe possible within their supposedly much more restrictive culture. For me, this was one of the best reasons to read Kashavarz' book. I came away from this book with a strong desire to read many of the titles she suggests, all of which are available in English translation. In my estimation, both Kashavarz' and Nafisi's books, offer great insight. If there is truth, it must be found somewhere between the two. Kashavarz' main mistake in criticizing "Reading Lolita in Tehran" is that she does not validate Nafisi's right to have negative views about some aspects of her former country. Nafisi lived through the Iranian Revolution. She was teaching at Tehran University at the center of radicalism during the heart of the conflict. She was witness to many atrocities on a very personal level. These are events that have carved a deep scar on her psyche. Where was Kashavarz during the upheaval and chaos of the Iranian Revolution? Well, she left Iran in September of 1979 "to carry out her graduate studies at London University" (p. 47). On the same page, she reveals: "When I left Iran, I left Ati with my parents, hoping I could bring her over after I settled into my new environment. Little did I know that a war would break out between Iran and Iraq

and I would not see my daughter, only eight years old at the time, for another seven years." That, I am afraid, is perhaps the only negative statement about Iran that Kashavarz allows herself to make in this entire book! It speaks volumes for what has been left out of her narrative. Need I say more? But, please, DO consider reading this book. I recommend this book highly. It will open your eyes.

I just finished "Jasmine and Stars". I have recommended it to many of my friends and relatives. Keshavarz weaves anecdotes from her own life with excerpts and summaries from Persian literature. It is simply a fascinating and humanizing text especially if you are not familiar with Persian literature. It is a great introduction. After finishing it, I went back and wrote down the names of the text and authors Keshavarz cites. I am excited about reading these works in the future thanks to this text.

Jasmine and Stars is a compelling novel, warmly presented through the very personal narrative of Fatemeh Keshavarz, who explores the different voices of Iran, including two modern Iranian women writers and people of many statures. It does so in response to novels whose narratives present a paradigm of the world by which the existence of such people is improbable. "What does the elephant look like?" poses Keshavarz. Jasmine and Stars begins by recounting the ancient Persian fable about villagers encountering an elephant for the first time and in the dark. One feels its trunk, the other its legs, and the other its ears. Later, when asked what the elephant looked like, one says the elephant is like a thin pole. The other says, "No, it is thick like a tree." The third says that the elephant is neither - instead the elephant is flat and round like a fan. Unable to see the whole picture, no one had truly learned what the elephant was. If only the villagers had a single candle, notes Keshavarz, they could have begun to learn its true nature. And so her book begins, in sincere search for a candle to help enlighten for us America's own elephant - Iran and the broader Middle East. What is it about Iran that seems to elude our grasp? Why are we having so much trouble understanding the elephant? In fact, to many it would seem that there is nothing to understand beyond that which we already know. The media is filled with stories covering Iran, its president, the nuclear standoff, and - most significantly - the possibility of war. The internet is even more densely packed with stories and opinions. So, what is the problem? The problem is that while there is a lot of monologue from twenty-four hour news feeds of sound bites and talking heads, there is almost no dialogue. The voices of Iranians themselves have been shut out. This essential humanizing factor of one culture speaking for itself to the other is strangely absent. How do they live? What do they

value? And what is the interplay of their culture upon their lives? Iran is always spoken for instead of listened to. The product of this is a very distorted and narrow perception of what the elephant is. Even worse, it creates the grounds for the dehumanization of a nation, facilitating the path to conflict. These missing voices, the cause of their absence, and the anecdote for their return are the subjects of *Jasmine and Stars: Reading more than Lolita in Tehran*. The author, Fatemeh Keshavarz, is an accomplished professor of Persian and comparative literature at Washington University in St. Louis, currently serving as the chair of the Department of Asian and Near Eastern Languages and Literatures. An Iranian American, she was born in the city of Shiraz, Iran, and has lived and worked in the United States for nearly three decades, visiting Iran every year. Keshavarz describes herself as "a Muslim, a feminist, a literary scholar, and a poet, though not always in that order." I highly recommend this book to anyone who wants to better understand Iran and the Middle East.

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