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"READING LOLITA IN TEHRAN"—AN INTELLECTUAL UNFOLDING OF A PRIVATE
LITERATURE CLASS

Dr KULBHUSHAN KUMAR

Associate Prof. and Head, Dept. of English and Communication Studies, Eternal University,
Distt.Sirmuur, Baru Sahib via Rajgarh, (H. P), India



Dr KULBHUSHAN KUMAR

ABSTRACT

"Reading Lolita in Tehran" sophisticated and bursting with texture and sensuality provides a partial record of her life and friendships in Iran before Dr. Naftsi reluctantly went into exile in 1997. More precisely to say, it is a passionate and thought-provoking account of reading English literature in adverse conditions. It is at times a little wordy and somewhat sentimental. However, it must be apparent that it is still a book of extraordinary interest. The book is a multi-layered memoir about teaching Western literature in revolutionary Iran in the late 1990s. It is a description of how a group of people attempt to "recover" their personal sphere through the discussion of literature within a deliberative community. From its provoking, intriguing title to its very last page, the book, partly a narrative biography, partly a history of a nation and its people, and partly critical analysis of great American, British and Russian authors, is astonishing, enlightening, and important. However, it is not simply a memoir on the inadequacies of Iranian society. Nor is it simply a memoir about a secret literary discussion group. Every Thursday morning for two years in the Islamic Republic of Iran, the bold and inspired Nafisi secretly gathered seven of her most committed female students to read forbidden Western classics. As Islamic morality squads staged arbitrary raids in Tehran, fundamentalists seized hold of the universities, and a blind censor stifled artistic expression, the girls in Nafisi's living room risked removing their veils and immersed themselves in the worlds of Jane Austen, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Henry James, and Vladimir Nabokov. These seminars offered largely uncomplicated lessons about the power of hope, imagination, and individuality that Nafisi graciously bestows upon her dotting students. In this extraordinary memoir, their stories become intertwined with the ones they are reading.

Key words: memoir, resignation, morality, contemporary, conservative, puritanical

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Reading Lolita in Tehran, a memoir by Azar Nafisi, the daughter of a former charismatic mayor of pre-revolutionary Tehran and of a woman who won a seat in the Parliament of that country in 1963, chronicles the personal and intellectual unfolding of a private literature class she started in Tehran after she left her last teaching post. By describing her life before, during and after the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979, the author has given an interesting depiction of the life in Iran. As an expert and a teacher in literature, she coloured the autobiography with a touch of literature.

Nafisi's father was a mayor of Tehran whom the Shah imprisoned in the 1970s. He had sent her daughter abroad as a child, to study in England and Switzerland. In 1979, she received her doctorate in English and American literature from the University of Oklahoma, where she had joined the Iranian Students' Movement against the Shah. After receiving her doctorate degree, she enthusiastically returned to a new Iran, to take up a teaching position at Tehran University. But the following year, Islamic Zealots moved to purge Iran's universities, and she was expelled for refusing to wear the veil when it became mandatory in 1981. In later years, she also taught at the Free Islamic University and Allameh Tabatabai University; and this memoir weaves forward and backward in time and concentrates mainly on the period following Nafisi's resignation from the University in 1995:

Teaching in the Islamic Republic, like any other vocation, was subservient to politics and subject to arbitrary rules. Always, the joy of teaching was marred by diversions and considerations forced on us by the regime—how well could one teach when the main concern of university officials was not the quality of one's work but the color of one's lips, the subversive potential of a single strand of hair? Could one really concentrate on one's job when what preoccupied the faculty was how to excise the word wine from a Hemingway story, when they decided not to teach Brontë because she appeared to condone adultery?[1]

The purpose of my paper is to analyze and explore the memoirs of Iranian women, their problems and a true love of literature that shines through as well. The book is a worthwhile account -- though it should be read with a critical eye, aware of what is being left out, what the author is blind to, as well as the possibility that facts and characters have been twisted to her ends. But overall, it is an extremely original narrative, and a very enjoyable biography. Dr Nafisi knows how to make the reader smile while reading her discussions with her students, and cry at some of the painful incidents.

Nafisi divides her book into four sections: "Lolita", "Gatsby", "James", and "Austen" and in each section she uses the works and authors she discusses with her students to reflect on their situation in contemporary Iran, and to look back at what they all have gone through. The approach doesn't always work, but her passion for literature and the riveting stories she has to tell about recent Iranian life add up to an engaging read.

The first section is entitled "Lolita", after Nabokov's work, and plays into the title of the book itself. This section focuses on *Lolita* and *Invitation to a Beheading*, very fitting works of Nabokov to themes of oppression.

The second section is called "Gatsby", after Fitzgerald's novel, and is mostly about The Great Gatsby and its focus on the American Dream. Throughout the entire section, morality is called into question -- To what extent should immoral concepts be included in literature, especially if the society strives to rid itself of major sins? This issue is actually debated in a legal fashion when Nafisi has her university class debate in the style of a court of law. Although no verdict is specifically mentioned, Nafisi suggests that her class became more supportive of the book, even if most students were too afraid to speak out in fear of being reported of expressing anti-revolutionary ideals.[2]

Perhaps the most moving section relates to Henry James's Daisy Miller, whose heroine - in telling an emotionally reticent admirer not to be afraid - embraces her own difference and fate. It is with Daisy, in the end, that her students most identify and Nafisi's rather wonderful book touches a beauty of its own. She mentions that most of her female students identified with Daisy's character the most, from James' Daisy Miller.[3] This relation was mostly attributed to lacking something, courage in particular, to stand up for

themselves in the face of harsh times. James furthermore showed a struggle for power in his "central character's resistance to socially acceptable norms in their desire for integrity and recognition".[4] This was an important belief exhibited by the oppressed females of Iran at the time - especially Nafisi, who feels "irrelevant" following her return to Iran in the late 1970's. Also, such resistance was a key purpose for the secret class that Nafisi held with her female students.

Finally, the fourth section is called "Austen" that relates Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* to the atmosphere of post-revolutionary Iran. Nafisi held a comparative study class, which examined the relationship between the "structure of *Pride and Prejudice* and an eighteenth-century dance".[5] Dancing can be interpreted as having a metaphorical meaning of relationships, including the relationship of an individual and the ruling regime, the relationship between males and females, and the relationship between the individuals and their goals in life.

She has talked about very little on personal issues particularly about her early marriage that she dismissed fairly easily and quickly:

Later, I was insecure enough to marry on the spur of a moment, before my eighteenth birthday. I married a man whose most important credential was that he wasn't like us -- he offered a way of life which, in contrast to ours, seemed pragmatic and uncomplicated; and he was so sure of himself. He didn't value books (.....) The day I said yes, I knew I was going to divorce him.[6]

Male-female relationships are complicated throughout the book as one cannot think of dating in an Islamic Republic. But Nafisi prefers to think about her students' relationships rather than trying to explain her first, failed marriage -- despite the fact that her motives in getting married so hastily seem clear manifestations of fundamental issues faced by all Iranian women, before and after the revolution.

A gifted storyteller with a mastery of Western literature, Nafisi knows how to use language both to settle scores and to seduce. Focusing in a large part around the seven students Nafisi convinced to meet in her apartment after quitting her job at the University of Tehran, she introduces us to each of the young women and gives a thumbnail account of her life and its hardships and its joys. These women that Nafisi selected, and the regimen that was about to be administered, would be looked upon as suspicious by the state, the clergy, and their families, for they were in their own way rebels; and the class itself would be regarded as rebellious by the guardians of morality. Take, for instance, Nafisi's introduction of Yassi, the "real rebel" of the group. Nafisi writes:

She did not join any political group or organization. As a teenager, she defied many family traditions and, in the face of strong opposition, had taken up music... Her rebellion did not stop there: she did not marry the right suitor at the right time and instead insisted on leaving her hometown of Shiraz to go to college in Tehran...That day, sitting opposite me, playing with her spoon, she explained why all the normal acts of life had become small acts of rebellion and political insubordination to her and to other young people like her. All her life she was shielded. She was never let out of sight; she never had a private corner in which to think, to feel, to dream, to write.[7]

The references to the clash between conservative and liberal factions within Iranian society superficially set the book's tone and serve to connect Nafisi's memoir with how Iranian society has been commonly portrayed in Western media. It reiterates familiar themes: slogans on walls condemning Western culture, men driving around the streets of Tehran chastising women for not wearing a veil, the dismissal of professors from their university posts for teachings alleged to be contrary to Islam, the censorship of university curriculum and the media, and the harsh punishment for committing adultery and prostitution have been known for years. Taking these events into account, it is easy to understand why Nafisi invited seven of her best and most committed female students who were Manna, Nasrin, Mahshid, Yasi, Azin, Mitra, and Sanaz, all in their late teens or early twenties (though a male student was occasionally invited to attend) into her home to read, discuss, and respond to works of fiction, including some forbidden Western classics like Nabokov's *Lolita*, Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*:

Our class was shaped within this context, in an attempt to escape the gaze of the blind censor for a few hours each week. There, in that living room, we rediscovered that we were also living, breathing human beings; and no matter how repressive the state became, no matter how intimidated and frightened we were, like Lolita we tried to escape and to create our own little pockets of freedom... We tried to live in the open spaces ... Perhaps one way of finding out the truth was to do what we did; to try to imaginatively articulate these two worlds and, through that process, give shape to our vision and identity.[8]

Because Nafisi was writing with an American audience in mind, therefore, the great Persian Iranian literary legends like Sadeq Hedayat, Houshang Golshiri, Jalal Al-e Ahmad, and Simin Daneshvar whose works have been translated into English have nowhere been discussed throughout this memoir. Nevertheless, the omission is a glaring one. But over and above, it is an absolutely amazing memoir by the Iranian woman who was a professor of English & Persian Literature during, and after the revolution and war with Iraq. Once wearing the veil became mandatory and she refused to wear one, she was forced to quit teaching, and one way she came up with to fill her time was to gather seven of her "best and most committed students"[9] for a once-weekly literature class:

There, in that living room, we rediscovered that we were also living, breathing human beings; and no matter how repressive the state became, no matter how intimidated and frightened we were, like Lolita we tried to escape and to create our own little pockets of freedom... It is amazing how, when all possibilities seem to be taken away from you, the minutest opening can become a great freedom. We felt when we were together that we were almost absolutely free.[10].

Dr Nafisi called them as "children of the revolution", greatly diverse in religious and political beliefs and backgrounds, who after arriving at her house, for two years in the mid-1990s, would take off their chadors and scarves, and discuss banned Western classics over tea and dessert:

Six a.m. the first day of class. I was already up. Too excited to eat breakfast, I put the coffee on and then took a long, leisurely shower. For the first time in many years, I felt a sense of anticipation that was not marred by tension: I would not need to go through the torturous rituals that had marked my days when I taught at the university—rituals governing what I was forced to wear, how I was expected to act, the gestures I had to remember to control. For this class, I would prepare differently.[11]

During these classes, they discussed Western classics. The major writers discussed in this group were Vladimir Nabokov, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Henry James, and Jane Austen. Nafisi devoted a part of the memoir to each one of them. These young women, who outside the class struggled to live under the laws and potential daily humiliation of the Islamic Republic, made it painfully clear that they read not only for the most exalted but also for the most basic reasons. She wanted them to see that novels could transform their squashed and humiliated lives, and she seems to have succeeded amazingly. It may be odd to listen that literature could be such a solace and inspiration during years of oppression -- but it is Nafisi's strongest belief that this is true:

Our class was shaped within this context, in an attempt to escape the gaze of the blind censor for a few hours each week. There, in that living room, we rediscovered that we were also living, breathing human beings; and no matter how repressive the state became, no matter how intimidated and frightened we were, like Lolita we tried to escape and to create our own little pockets of freedom. And like Lolita, we took every opportunity to flaunt our insubordination: by showing a little hair from under our scarves, insinuating a little color into the drab uniformity of our appearances, growing our nails, falling in love, and listening to forbidden music.[12]

These weekly seminars offered the students, largely uncomplicated lessons about the power of hope, imagination, and individuality that Nafisi graciously bestowed upon her dotting students. The discussions pertaining to Nabokov's two novels highlighted their exploration of the relationship between the individual and tyranny:

What Nabokov captured was the texture of life in a totalitarian society, where you are completely alone in an illusory world full of false promises and where you no longer differentiate between your savior and your executioner.[13]

In the beginning of the session Nafisi introduces its readers about two primary texts: Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Lolita*. In so doing, she makes both implicit and explicit connections between these novels and the lives of these women living in the Islamic Republic of Iran, and by extension, explores the links between literature and reality generally:

The theme of the class was the relation between fiction and reality. We read Persian classical literature, such as the tales of our own lady of fiction, Scheherazade, from *A Thousand and One Nights*, along with Western classics—*Pride and Prejudice*, *Madame Bovary*, *Daisy Miller*, *The Dean's December*, and, yes, *Lolita*. As I write the title of each book, memories whirl in with the wind to disturb the quiet of this fall day in another room in another country.[14]

Actually, she was an idealistic young professor who had a clear insight as how her own revolutionary leanings and political innocence gave way to a growing sense of dread as she realized that the political changes wrought by the revolution were much more of the frying-pan-into-the-fire variety than anything else. Her project was meaningful and brave, or one can say that it was her faith that literature can extend some promise of alternate worlds. Her obvious valour as a teacher and mentor turned it all the more fortunate enough that her book became so important. And the guiding premise behind her memoir is that literature ought not to be kept a secret. It is only through literature that one can put oneself in someone else's shoes and understand the other's different and contradictory sides and refrain from becoming too ruthless. Outside the sphere of literature only one aspect of individuals is revealed. But if you understand their different dimensions you cannot easily murder them.... [15]

Dr Nafizi left her job at the university (a job that she loved) because she refused to wear the veil. She tells of the effects of the eight year long Iraq/Iran war on the women of Tehran, the tyranny of the religious leaders who issue their decrees as though they came directly from God. Living in the Islamic Republic was like having sex with a man you loathe.[16] As Islamic morality squads staged arbitrary raids in Tehran, fundamentalists seized hold of the universities, and a blind censor stifled artistic expression, the girls in Azar Nafisi's living room risked removing their veils and immersed themselves in the worlds of Jane Austen, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Henry James, and Vladimir Nabokov. But why Nabokov's *Lolita*? Nafisi asks. "Lolita on her own has no meaning; she can only come to life through her prison bars".[17] Nafisi could not forget of the green gate entrance to the university, through which female students were forbidden to go. Instead, they had to enter via a curtained entrance – on the other side, they would be searched from top to toe before being allowed to attend class:

Through this opening all the female students, including my girls, went into a small, dark room to be inspected. Yassi would describe later, long after that first session, what was done to her in this room: "I would first be checked to see if I have the right clothes: the color of my coat, the length of my uniform, the thickness of my scarf, the form of my shoes, the objects in my bag, the visible traces of even the mildest makeup, the size of my rings and their level of attractiveness, all would be checked before I could enter the campus of the university, the same university in which men also study. And to them the main door, with its immense portals and emblems and flags, is generously open".[18]

Nafizi escapes from this violence into the imaginative world of Western novels (from Nabokov to Dashiell Hammet) where she finds democratic ideals expressed in fiction's ability to help us empathize with other people. For her, it is the heart that has gone out of the gun-wielding moral police that want to sweep away all but complete submission to their fundamentalist form of Islam. And while she is a teacher, she must deal with classes filled with students who have been polarized by the political forces around them. All, curiously, are in single agreement that the West is corrupt and absolutely evil:

Looking back, I am glad I was unaware of my special vulnerability: with my small collection of books, I was like an emissary from a land that did not exist, with a stock of dreams, coming to reclaim this land

as my home. Amid the talk of treason and changes in government, events that now in my mind have become confused and timeless, I sat whenever I had a chance with books and notes scattered around me, trying to shape my classes.[19]

She considers herself an intellectual. She marched against the west and the USA support of the Shah of Iran. She tells of the joy that she and her colleagues felt at his fall. She tells of the changes in everyday life for intellectuals and for women as the Islamists took over the country.

Nafisi simply can't resist absurdity. So although she writes about a society in which a woman can be jailed for dancing, punished for allowing a few strands of hair to fall on her face, disciplined for revealing her singing voice, or expelled from a university for the way she might eat a peach, she also tempts Western readers to marvel at the power this atavistic Iranian regime implicitly assigns to women's sexual allure.

The charismatic passion in the book is not simply for literature itself but for the kind of inspirational teaching of it which helps students to teach themselves by applying their own intelligence and emotions to what they are reading. When the group reads F Scott Fitzgerald, for instance, there are plenty of puritanical students to argue that *The Great Gatsby* is a poor role model. Following the fashion of the time and place, she encourages them to put the book on trial. There are speeches for the prosecution and defense, but the only witness is the book itself - and she plays the book. She closes the class before a vote is taken, but not before the dialogue has demonstrated both the positive value of the book and the pointlessness of analyzing it in terms of role models.

The book closes with her decision, in the late 90s, to immigrate to the States with her husband and two children. In the final paragraph, she describes how her momentary sadness gives way to elation: "I went about my way rejoicing, thinking how wonderful it is to be a woman and a writer at the end of the twentieth century".[20] It must have been extraordinarily difficult for her to leave Tehran. Her mother, she tells us in the acknowledgments, died in Tehran in early 2003 after a long illness, and Nafisi was not allowed to visit. Whatever the faults of *Reading Lolita*, Nafisi does not offer any political message. Rather, she extends a more therapeutic solace: Great literature is there to make you feel better, regardless of how oppressive the political world can be.

So, to read Nafisi's elegantly crafted Memoir is to enter two worlds simultaneously: the world of literary imagination in the works of Vladimir Nabokov, Jane Austen, Henry James, and F. Scott Fitzgerald and life in the university against the backdrop of the geopolitical world of Tehran from the end of the Shah's regime to Nafisi's departure from Iran in 1997.

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