

## Intellect defeats tyranny in Azar Nafisi's Reading Lolita in Tehran (2003)

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### Abstract

This paper aims at analyzing Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003) which was republished in 2015 as an e-book to cope with the digital world in which we live. In the novel Nafisi tells us a large part of her autobiography before and during the Islamic Revolution (1978-1981) that took place in Iran, and how she presents herself along with other female characters as alienated in their own country. Throughout the duration of the story these women are fighting to retain their individuality and beliefs. This novel is divided into four sections: "Lolita," "Gatsby," "James," and "Austen." The first shows us the reading group including the professor and her students; "Gatsby" and "James" shed light on Nafisi's years teaching at universities in Iran, through the revolution and the war against Iraq. These two middle sections contain violent and cruel trials against professors; air raids; the regular fights in class between Marxist and reactionary Muslim students; the death in prison of a particularly talented student, who as a child stole books from the houses where her mother worked as a servant; a young soldier who went to war and then returned to a university where he'd never belonged and finally committed suicide by setting himself on fire. In the last section, "Austen," we finally learn about the personal lives and the different experiences of the girls. The "fairy-tale atmosphere" of these Thursday mornings spent talking about books allowed the eight women to share so much of their secret life with one another. Feeding their intellect is the only way by which they can defeat and conquer their fear from tyranny. Their readings are a psychological escape from the dark reality they aspire to leave forever.

Keywords: Intellect, alienation, reason, conquer, tyranny, extremism, fundamentalists, salvation.

## Introduction

Azar Nafisi is an Iranian writer who currently lives in the United States. Nafisi was born in Tehran, the capital city of Iran; her father was the mayor of Tehran from 1961-1963. Her mom was one of the main female individuals from the Iranian Parliament during the 1960s, setting a case of elevated requirements for ladies just as men in the family. Nafisi studied in England and Switzerland in her initial teenager years before coming back to Iran for the rest of her secondary school years when her father was captured. In the wake of completing school, Nafisi taught English Literature at the University of Tehran, the Free Islamic University, and Allameh Tabatabai University in Iran until she was ousted from the University of Tehran for declining to wear a veil in 1981. Nafisi left Iran for America in 1997; she worked as a visiting professor and the official executive of Cultural Conversations at the Foreign Policy Institute of Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, DC. Nafisi's significant works incorporate *Anti-Terra: A Critical Study of Vladimir Nabokov's Novels*, *Things I Have Been Silent About: Memories*, and the smash hit novel *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* which went through 117 weeks on the New York Times Best Seller list.

## Method of Study

The study is intended to analyze Azar Nafisi's masterpiece and autobiography *Reading Lolita in Tehran* which raises a number of questions including: Was the writer able to depict the reality of the Iranian society at that time? Was she able to show the real sufferings that women faced at that time? Was reading a good way to escape from their violent reality? Was the writer able to plant the seeds of reading into the hearts of her students as a way of resisting fear? Can reading really be a way to defeat tyranny? In order to answer the questions of the study, the social realistic approach will be adopted to highlight the real situations and incidents that frequently happened in Iran during the Islamic revolution as well as shedding light on the role of the intellectuals to enlighten the minds of people around them.

The term social realism is used to refer to works produced by artists, photographers, writers and filmmakers that has the main goal of drawing attention to the real socio-political circumstances of the working class, represented in the professor and her students, as a way to critique the power structures behind these circumstances represented in the Iranian regime. Alice Guillermo in her *Protest/revolutionary art in the Philippines* 2001, notes that:

(social realism) Taking its roots from European Realism, Social Realism aims to reveal tensions between an oppressive, hegemonic force and its victims. (5)

In taking up these issues, it is clear that, as Eleanor Bryne and Martin McQuillan propose in *Deconstructing Disney* 1999 in an alternate setting, describing the realistic texts as 'drastically uncertain regarding their importance, [and] any perusing of a book must be dictated by factors not endorsed by the content itself'.(3) simultaneously, I embrace the conclusions that James Proctor and Bethan Benwell draw from the examination they describe in *Reading Across Worlds* 2015, an investigation which evaluates to what degree, and in what way, the creation of significance grows by the writings being drawn closer by different 'sorts' of readers and other 'genres' of reading, past those standardized inside the academy.(6) In their part "Reading and Realism", they show how fiction relating to social authenticity is seen/read both inside scholarly community and outside of it. Featuring in the process that the 'disembodied subject' of 'the reader' could be 'the reader critic, the Western reader, [or] the gullible reader', in other words, that there is no particular model reader, the writers recommend that:

[T]he effects of realism are contingent upon how, where, when and by whom the text is decoded [. . .] [This suggests] not just that different readers and reading acts prompt a re-thinking of the category "realism", but that realism exposes reading formations as, if not incommensurable, than certainly irreducible to a singular notion of 'the reader'. (136)

*Reading Lolita in Tehran* text does not simply serve as entertainment as Henry Giroux emphasizes in his reading of the film *Fight Club* (2001), such text has the ability to 'articulat[e] knowledge into effect' and become 'important as public pedagogies because they play a powerful role in mobilizing meaning, pleasures and identifications'. (23), this book had a profound effect on the minds of its readers as it showed Iran in its true colours.

We can safely say *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is structured in a way that creates favorable meanings that support the dominant ideology of the adopted country. Pieter Jacobus Fourie, in commenting on Stuart Hall's theory of preferred reading, says that:

culture is a constant site of struggle between those with and those without power. Hall argues that while social practices and all

forms of expression may offer a variety of meanings, their structure generally prefers a set of meanings that works to maintain the dominant ideology. (376)

Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, in which the reader is passionately provoked to sympathize with the alienation and self-isolation of the female characters, which is a direct result of human rights abuses in Iran, such that it becomes highly unlikely for the reader to create an oppositional reading to the compelling cause of female emancipation adopted by the novel. Eventually the heroine leaves her country of origin because as Nafisi mentions in her novel she is 'very American' and she yearns for her days in the US, thus enhancing the American dream as the symbol of freedom." (175)

Azar Nafisi's using the words "reading", "Lolita" and "Tehran" has several implications, first reading is the only weapon to fight tyranny. Lolita The title refers to Vladimir Nabokov's novel, *Lolita* (1955) Nafisi implies that, like the principal character in *Lolita*, the regime in Iran imposes their dream upon people's reality, turning them into its figments of imagination, and by mentioning the capital of Iran explicitly refers to lack of intellectuals in this area of the world, these people have a great role to end the nightmare and darkness that prevail Iran. In order to defeat that tyranny, the heroine of her masterpiece creates a group of reading in her house as she already knows that reading gives life and independence of thought. The "fairy-tale atmosphere" of these Thursday mornings spent talking about books allowed the eight women to share so much of their secret life with one another. She goes on emphasizing how women and girls have to live in oppression for whatever the reasons are and all the time there is punishment for any behavior. She always tries to relieve the feeling of suffering of her students:

The pressure was hardest on the students. I felt helpless as I listened to their endless tales of woe. Female students were being penalized for running up the stairs when they were late for classes, for laughing in the hallways, for talking to members of the opposite sex. One day Sanaz had barged into class near the end of the session, crying. In between bursts of tears, she explained that she was late because the female guards at the door, finding a blush in her bag, had tried to send her home with a reprimand. (Nafisi 9)

Sometimes girls have to lie because if they tell the truth, they won't get what they want, especially when girls want to attend the literature class with their professor, the students don't have the right to read or discuss the

literature of other countries because reading will enable them to think and breathe freedom. Oppression forces the students specially the girls to adopt bad morals in order to escape punishment. Although all of them are of the same sex, the regime doesn't allow any gathering of people even if they are women and helpless. The girls justify lying by saying that they can't face the regime with truth even their fathers sometimes lie in order not to expose their families to punishment. In fact, all forbidden things are available inside homes but in secret:

How did you convince him to let you come? I asked. I lied, she said. You lied? What else can one do with a person who is so dictatorial he won't let his daughter, at this age, go to an all-female literature class? Besides, isn't this how we treat the regime? Can we tell the Revolutionary Guards the truth? We lie to them; we hide our satellite dishes. We tell them we don't have illegal books and alcohol in our houses. Even my venerable father lies to them when the safety of his family is at stake, Nassrin added defiantly. (17)

The professor together with her students decided to have a regular literary meeting as a kind of escape from the prison in which they live, they lived in isolation from the outer world. They just needed to breathe freedom even once a week. Their weekly meeting is the only passage for freedom. They not only read but they also practice all the forbidden things banned by the government like listening to music, growing their nails or even talking about love. Once a week they feel like humans before getting back to slave beings:

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. (26)

For the purpose of securing their own individuality, Nafisi and the girls try their best to situate themselves away from mainstream Iranian society,

creating their smaller community constituted by their own kind of people. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann emphasize in *The Social Construction of Reality* 1991 that The 'self' loses its sensibility when it is in solitude standing on its own; because it is social, its relation to other individuals in a larger community plays a vital part in its construction." (15) So as to recreate the feeling and sense of the self, the girls join the narrator in her 'special Thursday mornings'.

They talk about the problems that face each one of the girls to offer advice or at least to show sympathy. The wildest one, the divorcee with red nails, is beaten by her third husband, who calls her "used" because she has been married before. She cannot easily leave him, because the courts routinely grant child custody to husbands, and she has a young daughter. She lives in prison for the sake of her child. She wants to cry and shout but there is no one to hear or help her. Two of the girls are happily enough married. One of them got to know her husband in a university class of Nafisi's. "Did you fall in love?" the teacher asks, as she seems relentlessly to ask everyone. "Well, yes, of course," the girl says, in an answer as revealing as a line of dialogue written by Austen. Sanaz, an eye-catching young woman from a good family, is rejected by the boy to whom she has been engaged since childhood, apparently because after living in England for five years, he no longer wants the sheltered Muslim girl his parents have nominated because she no longer copes up with his aspirations. And when Sanaz goes on vacation with five girlfriends, the Revolutionary Guard arrests and jails the six of them for "Western attitudes," and the girls are subjected to two virginity tests the second because the first, conducted by a woman, is considered suspect. The vacation turns to a terrible dream when they are locked in a dark room as if they were criminals:

Sanaz and five of her girlfriends had gone for a two-day vacation by the Caspian Sea. On their first day, they had decided to visit her friend's fiancé in an adjoining villa. Sanaz kept emphasizing that they were all properly dressed, with their scarves and long robes.... There were no alcoholic beverages in the house, no undesirable tapes or CDs. She seemed to be suggesting that if there had been, they might have deserved the treatment they received at the hands of the revolutionary guards... They took all of them to a special jail for infractions in matters of morality. There, despite their protests, the girls were kept in a small, dark room, which they shared the first night with several prostitutes and a drug addict.... They were held in that room for forty-eight hours. Despite their

repeated requests, they were denied the right to call their parents. Apart from brief excursions to the rest room at appointed times, they left room twice-the first time to be led to hospital, where they were given virginity tests by a woman gynecologist, who had her students observe the examinations. Not satisfied with her verdict, the guards took them to a private clinic for a second check.” (Nafisi 72-3)

Another of the book-group members is being presented with a series of suitors for an arranged marriage; at the same time, she is considering immigrating to the United States to continue her studies and as a way of her emancipation. To go or not to go is the question that seems to hover in the air for all these women to escape from their destined submission except one, who is a sincere Muslim and has decided to stay in Iran, not to marry, and to pursue a career in publishing. All women participating in the reading group have a strong desire to leave that place where they suffer all colors of humiliations. They need to live like humans, they need room for their dreams to release. Like all other creatures, freedom for them is more important than food. The professor was the first to leave looking for a place where she could shout and be heard and responded. Although she went to a new place where she could practice all her hobbies freely, she didn't completely get rid of the deep impact of Iran on her life:

I left Tehran on June 24, 1997. I write and teach once again... I still teach Nabokow, James, Fitzgerald, Conrad as well as Iraj Pezeshkzad, who is responsible for one of my favorite Iranian novels... I left Iran, but Iran didn't leave me. Much has changed in appearance since Bijan and I left. (342)

Although she left, she still thinks of what has happened in Iran. She is quite sure that nothing will defeat tyranny except reading more and more as a cultured person never dies and if he dies his ideas remain and ideas never die. She keeps pursuing any news of emancipation or freedom for women back there in Tehran:

There is more defiance in Manna's gait and those of other women, their scarves are more colorful and their robes much shorter, they wear makeup now and walk freely with men who aren't their brothers, fathers or husbands. Parallel to this, the raids and arrests and public executions also persist. But there is a stronger demand for freedom (342)

Although she is now far away from her students, she keeps in touch with them. She finds out that most of them followed up her footsteps and decided to escape from the prison where they used to live in quest for their emancipation. Most of her girls left Tehran in search of their self. All of them are looking for a place where women are treated as a human being, a place where women are respected and their shouts matter. From time to time she contacts them to know what changes come to their life. She is relieved to know that they are finally able to shout and breathe the air of freedom:

Marta left for Canada a few months after we moved to the US. She used to write me e-mails or call me regularly, but I have not heard from her for a long time. Yassi tells me that she enrolled in college and now has a son. I heard from Sanaz, too, when I first came to the States. She called me from Europe to inform me that she was now married and intended to enroll at the university. But Azin tells me she dropped that plan and is keeping house, as the saying goes. When I first came to America, I didn't hear from Azin often, she usually called me on my birthday. (343)

She left, but before that she had planted the seed of freedom in the hearts of her students which is represented in reading and education that's why most of them enrolled on universities as they were taught that life ends when one stops reading . She never stopped thinking about them, as Walid Abdallah states in his book *Shout of Silence* 2015 that "She is keen to know if her teaching to these girls will change them or not. She taught them that emancipation is more valuable than life itself, and if the bird is caged, it must escape one day and shout with freedom or die in silence" (37)

She was really excited when she hears about the seeds, she planted in them of loving of reading, imagination and music are now complete trees of knowledge and intelligence:

A former student had told me that Azin was teaching at Allameh, the same courses and books that I once taught. The last she had heard of Azin, she added mischievously, she was moving into the room next to my old office on the fifth floor. I often thought of her and her beautiful little Negar. (Nafisi 343)

Even the last girl who decided to live and stay in Iran despite the oppression and aggression she faces every single day, suddenly she had to leave her homeland too after her husband divorced her and forced her to leave her pretty daughter. She suddenly found herself alone and broken. She



had no other solutions than travelling and escaping from the cage in which she had to live in bondage, only through reading and education, she will find her salvation:

A few months ago, she called out of the blue, from California. Her voice was filled with that buoyant and flirtatious tone whose notes I seem to have memorized. She has remarried, her new husband lives in California. Her former husband had taken Negar from her and there was not much else to stay in Tehran for. She was full of ideas about enrolling in classes and starting a new life. (Nafisi 343)

In order to chase her dream, she had to take the hardest decision ever, she had to leave her young daughter whom her father used to use as a tool of humiliation for her. Despite the very hard decision, she must cope with the new life. The new place is like a new birth for her and she has to start the new life with all the things she used to be deprived of in her first life in Tehran. Finally, all her students are able to shout and make the whole world listen to them.

It is worth noting that Reuel Marc Gerecht cites *Reading Lolita in Tehran* as a tool that serves as one of the reasons for waging a US military strike against Iran in the shape of a cultural catalyst. He states in *Revising Adorno's Politics of Education* 2004 : '[a]lthough some Western female journalists have tried to depict Iranian women as liberated under their head scarves and veils', 'the phenomenal and global success of Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* has also made it more difficult to view the Islamic Republic's internal ethics and morals, especially regarding women, benignly'.(9)

Hilary E. Davis, Catherine Burwell, and Lisa K. Taylor, in their article 'Reading Nafisi in the West: Feminist Reading Practices and Ethical Concerns' 2011, confirm that Nafisi's position and depiction cannot be read as 'neutral'. (63) It leads to the flow and continuity of 'Islamophobic discourses' and expose Muslim females to a 'neo-Orientalist pity, fear and fascination'. (64) The reviews that form the understanding of Nafisi's novel are those that assert the 'Clash of Civilizations' [mostly influenced by Bernard Lewis] and 'global sisterhood'. (65) The reading sessions with the girls, for instance, are used to show her 'visceral distaste of Iranian cultural life—both contemporary and historical', rather than to 'denounce clerical

political rule'.(85) as suggested by Saba Mahmood in *Religion, Feminism, and Empire* 2011.

Nafisi's sole goal of showing alienation in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is to protest against oppression and, by implication, to call for freedom and democracy, yet her call for freedom and democracy is compromised because of the binary opposition she supposes between the oppression of the Islamic republic of Iran and its obvious, unique, alternative of Western principles and life style. If the freedom called for in the text is intended to interrogate and challenge hegemonic ideology, such as that of Iran's dictatorial theocratic regime, then the text contradicts itself, for its suggestion that freedom lies in the Western lifestyle merely replaces one totalizing ideology with another.

In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Nafisi writes a life narrative in a semi-fictionalized memoir – a style that automatically moves the text's generic status outside of the basic categories of memoir and fiction, such that the text appears to belong wholly to neither. Nafisi's text reads as fiction but is suggested to be a true story that tells not only the story of her life but of her own female peers as well.

### **Conclusion**

Azar Nafisi's message in her masterpiece is that in spite of the current disappointing conditions, there is still aspiration for reform and improvement. Nafisi notes that although the younger generation did not have the opportunity to get benefit from the first establishment of women's rights, the knowledge that such rights were there in the not-too distant past, encourages and inspires them to work for more in the future and take reading as their sole path to achieve such a dream and if they can't achieve physical escape from the tyranny, they can do so by reading. It is precisely for this reason that the question of leaving Iran for the West is so tantalizing, and yet vexing for these women. Not only Nafisi, but nearly all the girls in the group, struggle with the question of whether to flee the country to achieve greater personal freedom or stay and fight for change at home using the sole weapon which is represented in reading.

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