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Book Review: Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir of Books

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Nafisi, Azar. *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. New York: Random House, 2003. 356pp. \$13.95 (paper).

Azar Nafisi, now the Director of the Dialogue Project at John Hopkins University, does a fine job in this book of piecing together her life as an academic, especially the last two years of her residence in Tehran when she embarked on an adventure to supplement the education of a select group of university students. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is a multi-layered memoir about teaching Western literature in revolutionary Iran in the late 1990s.

The first layer covers the hardships that both professors and students face in post-Khomeini Iran. The references to the clash between conservative and liberal factions within Iranian society that surface set the book's tone and serve to connect Nafisi's memoir with how Iranian society has been commonly portrayed in Western media. It iterates 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 (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*.

The class was meant to be a means by which a neutral and safe space would be created for truthful and honest discussion, a space within which the women could be "themselves" while becoming more educated. The university was no longer such a place: "how 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?" (p. 11). Thus the need for Nafisi's "home schooling." The class was successful in creating the space for open dialogue and, in some ways, a very liberating endeavor. Nafisi's illustrations are quite informative in this regard. Near the beginning of the book she notes her shock

of seeing them shed their mandatory veils and robes and burst into color. When my students came into

that room, they took off more than their scarves and robes. Gradually, each one gained an outline and a shape, becoming her own inimitable self. Our world in that living room...became our sanctuary, our self-contained universe, mocking the reality of black-scarved, timid faces in the city that sprawled below. (pp. 5-6)

And:

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. (pp. 25, 28)

However, it is not simply a memoir on the inadequacies of Iranian society. In fact, I do not read *Reading Lolita in Tehran* as an indictment of the Islamic Republic of Iran per se, but rather of the Republic's political and religious leadership that gives truth to Nabokov's claim that "curiosity is insubordination in its purest form" (p. 45). Nor is it simply a memoir about a secret literary discussion group. Nafisi's work creates a deeper, more reflective layer of thought that goes well beyond the contingencies of its Iranian context. There is something that speaks to what it means to become an autonomous person in situations where governments work to "blur the lines and boundaries between the personal and the political, thereby destroying both" (p. 273). It is in situations like these that life becomes increasingly more capricious or arbitrary, even unbearable. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is a description of how a group of people attempt to "recover" their personal sphere through the discussion of literature within a deliberative community.

Being a professor of literature at the University of Tehran, and then later at the University of Allahem Tabatabai, which was singled out as the most liberal university in Iran, Nafisi understood the importance of the university and the power possessed by works of fiction. Unfortunately, the revolution eventually began to insert its political, religious, and cultural ideology into the institutions of higher education. The restrictions that the cultural purists placed on faculty and students became such that Nafisi eventually left

the academy in Iran, and eventually left Tehran for the United States in 1997. But her last two years in Tehran, when she conducted her “underground” classroom, were a time when Nafisi was driven by the power of literature.

Literature can be used in a variety of ways, but according to Nafisi, “do not, under any circumstance, belittle a work of fiction by trying to turn it into a carbon copy of real life; what we search for is not so much reality but the epiphany of truth” (p. 3). The idea was to use the great imaginative works of fiction not as portals for dealing with the dominant ideology that attempted to define and identity each citizenship in a certain way, making his or her existence a canvas on which the state can decide what to paint, but as a means to engage truth and the good, to become a more autonomous person. *Lolita*, *The Dean’s December*, and the other works of fiction that were to be read, were not merely intellectual exercises or works with which to pass the time of day, but were to be read in order to reclaim the personal sphere from the Islamic state, a way to take back their personal identities and once again make their histories relevant to who the women were as persons.

It becomes clear that the women that Nafisi selected, and the regimen that was about to be administered, would be looked upon as suspect 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, for it commandeered a vehicle of expression—literature—that was used by writers, the handmaidens of ideology and 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. (pp. 31–32)

What better candidate for the class than Yassi, the young rebel? However, many questions remained to be answered:

Could she [Yassi] ever live the life of someone like me, live on her own, take long walks holding hands with someone she loved, even have a little dog perhaps? She did not know. It was like this veil that meant nothing to her anymore yet without which she would be lost. She had always worn the veil. Did she want to wear it or not? She did not

know...She said she could not imagine a Yassi without a veil. What would she look like? Would it affect the way she walked or how she moved her hands? How would others look at her? Would she become a smarter or a dumber person? (p. 32)

Answers to these and many other questions would be sought by the women under Nafisi’s guidance. It was a challenging experience, not only because each of them would have to lead a double life, but because great literature asks a person to contemplate the life worth living and demands the additional burden of critical thinking. How is this so? What is the connection between literature and morality? To begin with, Nafisi’s quote of the German philosopher Theodor Adorno is worth repeating: “the highest form of morality is not to feel at home in one’s own home” (p. 94). Nafisi believes this feeling of displacement, of perhaps exile, is indicative of the imaginative works of literature, which

were meant to make you feel like a stranger in your own home. The best fiction always forced us to question what we took for granted. It questioned traditions and expectations when they seemed too immutable. I told my students I wanted them in their readings to consider in what ways these works unsettled them, made them a little uneasy, made them look around and consider the world, like Alice in Wonderland, through different eyes. (p. 94)

The connection between morality and literature becomes clear when Nafisi relates this dyad to the experience of empathy. It is this discussion that amplifies the importance of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. I noted above that this work has something to do with personal autonomy, and autonomy has everything to do with morality. If morality deals with the good, then increasing one’s autonomy has something to do with choosing good over evil. Nafisi’s contribution is the acknowledgment that this is made easier through the use of literature. According to Nafisi, empathy is at the heart of the novel. Putting yourself in the shoes of the characters is crucial to reading a novel. By becoming engrossed in works of literature, one learns that

every individual has different dimensions to his personality...Those who judge must take all aspects of an individual’s personality into account. 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.... (p. 118)

Serious reading of literature is a courageous act of empathy that awakens a person to the significance of another’s feel-

ings and needs. The “fictional character” acquires a sense of being alive, at least insofar as the imagination is concerned.

Literature also does something that is rare among political and religious ideologues. It allows you to heighten “your senses and sensitivity to the complexities of life and of individuals, and prevents you from the self-righteousness that sees morality in fixed formulas about good and evil...” (p. 133). Whereas good is all about “seeing” others and empathizing with them, evil is the inability to “see” others and to empathize with them. It is when we become blind to others that evil enters into our lives and we begin to impose our dreams and desires on others. The means by which Nafisi resists evil is through reclaiming the human within the great imaginative works of literature. Contact with the imaginatively human reawakens and refreshes our own lived humanity.

The reader’s attraction to Nafisi’s understanding of literature and imagination in defense of humanity, however, may also be what unsettles the political and religious leadership who favor a closed rather than an open society. This

is because the use of literature to stir the imagination in “seeing” others also promotes the freedom that is necessary for genuine democracy. It is to retain and to consolidate the “private” as opposed to the “public,” to lay claim to there being a distinction between the two worlds rather than accepting a conflation of the two.

This book is a fascinating read. It is a refreshing change from the diatribes lodged against the conservative leadership in Iran, including Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Such criticisms only solidify the “us” vs. “them” dichotomy, and creates an atmosphere for xenophobia and chauvinism. Nafisi, on the other hand, reawakens the importance of autonomy and democracy. Although this reviewer, schooled in political philosophy and ethics, did not appreciate the discussions of the various classics, he did value how the author meshed those discussions with her inclination to engage in soulcraft. This is a must read for those interested in learning about the problems as well as the possibilities of guiding students under conditions such as those in the present-day Islamic Republic of Iran.

