

# Reading Lolita in tehran english language essay

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## **Summary of Main Points**

Reading Lolita in Tehran is a memoir about the author, Azar Nafisi, and her journey through the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the Iran/Iraq war and her decision to leave her home permanently. She did her studies at a university here in the United States and when she returned back to her native Iran, she was greeted with a change, a revolution. Throughout the book, there are main ideas that Nafisi concentrated on: 1) The cultural changes and how she viewed and tried to resist them, and 2) How each book she taught relates to a different time period in her memoirs.

## **Cultural Changes**

" I was home, but the mood in the airport was not welcoming" (Nafisi, 2003, p. 82). This statement tells a lot about how Iran was before she left for America to study and when she returned to Iran to live and teach. She returned home at a time when the Ayatollah Khomeini had risen to power and the revolution was in full swing. Many of the freedoms she had before

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she left are now gone. Women are not allowed to wear lipstick in public, women cannot walk or talk with another man except for family and husband, and women now need to wear the veil and robe. Naturally, with her prior freedoms to choose, she decided to resist the changes as much as possible. She went so far as to resign from her teaching job at the University of Tehran because she did not want to wear the veil during class. Eventually, all women had to conform to the rules or face jail or even execution. The chador was a long robe that would hide all features of the woman to prevent temptations from the man (Nafisi, 2003). Over time, these new rules of Islam wore her down to the point that she wanted to leave the country. The country decided to choose religion over freedom without understanding the impact this would bring (Nafisi, 2003). The Islamic Republic would eventually ban all Western influences from their culture, including the books that Nafisi loved to teach about.

## **Memoir in books**

The book is divided into four different sections that represent a different period in time. At the same time, Nafisi discusses books in each section that relates to the events going on in Iran. The first book that is discussed is "Lolita" by Nabokov. This is during a time when the Islamic Republic is cracking down on the woman's position in society by enforcing the dress code. While the dress code was being enforced, Nafisi decided to quit her job at the University of Tehran rather than to comply with the new rules. Nafisi compared this book to the Islamic regime and made the analogy of a "victim and jailer" (Nafisi, 2003, p. 37). This is also when Nafisi's dream of holding a private class in her home with selected students was born. All seven

students have fictitious names associated with them to protect their real names. Her students would come to her home and take off their robes and veils and revealed who they were and they all felt acceptance doing this (Nafisi, 2003). The second section takes the reader back to Iran in 1979 during the Islamic Revolution. Nafisi just started working for the University of Tehran when the revolution started. Many bookstores and Western style stores were forced to be closed. Many teachers were forced to leave and also the Islamic rulers wanted to drastically change the curriculum by getting rid of all immoral subjects. This is where "Gatsby" is put on trial in her classroom by Mr. Nyazi because of the immoral nature of the characters in the story. Nafisi compared Gatsby's dream to that of the Islamic Republic where the dream would in actuality hurt the people (p. 144). This discussion drew a lot of passion in the classroom for both sides of the argument. She would eventually be forced to leave her job because she did not wear the veil. The third section is during the Iran/Iraq war and the people's search for courage during a bleak future. Nafisi was offered a job at another University and her confidant, "The Magician", told her to "go ahead and teach" (Nafisi, pg 182). Nafisi goes back into teaching, but she agrees to wear the veil and chador despite her hatred of it. This is where books by Henry James are studied, particularly "Daisy Miller". These books were about being courageous and having self-respect. Nafisi used the theme to help her students' through the rough times of the war and how life should continue after the war despite high unemployment and uncertainty. The final section of the books deals with the personal lives of her students and the decision for Nafisi to leave Iran. "Pride and Prejudice" by Jane Austen is discussed to

correlate with relationships and how to deal with them. All of the students and Nafisi wanted one thing in common: Freedom. They all wanted freedom from something. Nafisi uses the book to help guide each one. Nassrin, Yassi and Sanaz all wants to leave Iran while Azin wants freedom from her abusive husband. The quote " Living in the Islamic Republic is like having sex with a man you loathe " really sums up her feelings toward Iran (Nafisi, 2003, p. 329). Finally the rules of the Republic were just too much for Nafisi, so she left for America. Until her departure, her only salvation was the private class.

### **Critical Analysis**

I wanted to read this book because of my lack of knowledge on the culture in Iran and felt this is a good opportunity to have a better understanding of them. My immediate thoughts to the events in this book were " wow, this really happened?" I knew there was oppression going on, but not that much against women, and to think that it is still going on to this day. In America, the woman plays an important role in society from work to the home life and in Iran the government decided to take that freedom away. The Islamic Republic of Iran turned their women back into servants and forbade them to walk in public without being covered up from head to toe. The women all were described as being featureless. One thing that struck me in the book is when Nafisi described the women as they disrobed into their casual clothes. She continued to describe Nassrin as a woman who was curvy and sexy but did not know how to handle it (p. 296). They were so used to being forced to wear the chador that when they took it off, they did not know how to display their look. Nafisi would try to blame the change on religion and the fanatics who ran the country, but the " magician" (who I really liked) would always

keep her in check. He would try to tell her to stop blaming others because it was not what she believed. I like this because she started to fight for what she believed in. I believe trying to take away all Western literature drew the line for Nafisi. When she taught at the University of Tehran, she was allowed to use any books she wanted to. Eventually these same books became targets for the Revolutionary Guards that felt the books were immoral and negatively influenced the students. I started to enjoy how she would compare the books to the period of time in Iran history. I believe this is why she decided to write her memoirs so she can condemn the regime and to show them that these books do not promote immorality, but promotes courage, hope and the desire for people to find their own freedom in life. For example, she discussed Gatsby with her students and even put the book on trial in order to prove the book wasn't about adultery, but about one man's quest to find happiness and his own ideas of "the American Dream". The same goes for Daisy Miller by Jane Austen. Her focus was to prove that Daisy was not immoral, but a courageous woman. This book was really to help her private students in their own personal lives and to be courageous towards finding their own dream. I did feel bad for her students towards the end of the book because they were going through some very tough personal times and Nafisi announced she was leaving Iran permanently. I think Nafisi inadvertently persuaded them to try and find their freedoms by leaving Iran and ended up being the first to announce her departure. Many, at first, felt lost about having to continue life without their mentor and teacher. Actually, they soon found their own courage and made the best with what they had. Some students left, but many stayed. By the end of the book, I was really

pulling for each student to find their own happiness, no matter where that would be. When I saw women from Iran in the classroom or on the street before I read this book, I just saw a normal looking woman living in this country. After reading this book, I now think how happy they must feel to be able to walk down the street in casual clothes with their hair down and lipstick on without the fear of being thrown into prison or worse.

## **Applications to Teaching**

The information that I read in this book was enlightening and " eye-opening" because of its detailed descriptions of how women's role in Iran changed before and after the Iran Revolution. Now I have a better understanding and can apply this knowledge in the classroom when having to teach students from that country. Being able to understand the cultural background of a student is such valuable information because it helps both the teacher and student to adjust to the classroom environment. Being able to understand cultural beliefs and traditions of a student will help that student to feel more at ease in the classroom. There are other factors that will determine success for the student, but to feel comfortable and welcome means a lot to them. Understanding a student's culture will also give some insight to the attitude of the student. Instead of the teacher wondering why the Iranian woman is quiet and will not have eye contact, knowledge of her culture will show that there is a reason for that. It is not that she does not want to learning, but her cultural traditions are to not look others, especially men in the eyes when talking. Attitude and motivation are all personal factors, but they do derive from their culture and background. This may answer questions as to how they learn, especially the English language. This knowledge can help the

teacher to formulate strategies and activities that can best benefit the students and actually make learning English fun. On another note, I think the information from Reading Lolita in Tehran can be used in classroom activities. What better way to understand a person's culture than to have an activity where the student can talk about their homeland? Icebreakers at the beginning of class or semester are an awesome way to get students involved and to display their love of their own heritage. Teachers are not mind readers even if they are familiar with a culture, so the best information about the student can come from these types of activities. One Iranian woman may see their culture as oppressive and demeaning like Nafisi describes it and another Iranian woman may just see it as their cultural ways and not oppressive. This book was a total joy to read and I think that the information will be insightful and helpful in the classroom.