

A native's traveler's tale: reading Lolita in tehran



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Azar Nafisi was born and raised in Iran, and her credentials as an Iranian woman and scholar are not in question. Her book, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, is a memoir of a certain part of her life lived in Iran, but many features of it are shared with historical travelers' tales that can be seen to "expose subtexts beneath the apparently innocent details of journey in other lands that enable us to see more clearly the ways in which travelers [in this case a native Iranian, but speaking in a similar vein] construct the cultures they experience. From travelers' accounts of their journeys, we can trace the presence of cultural stereotypes, and the way in which an individual reacts to what is seen elsewhere can reflect tendencies in the traveler's home culture." (Bassnett 93, brackets mine). It is this similarity with historical travelers' tales that helps create the illusion that Dr. Nafisi only visited Iran, as much as she called it home, and was never truly at home there. Roland Barthes, in his book *Mythologies*, wrote a short chapter about the "Writer on Holiday". In it he pokes fun at the details newspapers give us of what famous writers do on vacation. It seems that *Le Figaro* is fond of relating details of writers' "vestmentary and gustatory functions" (Barthes 31), as if this would humanize them and make them accessible to their readers. Barthes rebels against this, stating that "Far from the details of his daily life bringing nearer to me the nature of his inspiration and making it clearer, it is the whole mythical singularity of his condition which the writer emphasizes such confidences." (31) In Nafisi's work, she is quick to add details of food and clothing, and at certain times, details of houses and interiors. This quirk of writing, in a memoir filled with incomplete narratives of her own and other people's lives, serves, it is assumed, to bring the reader closer to the subject discussed, and to understand them better. For example, we are told many

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times the author's liking for coffee ice cream, with coffee poured on top of it, with walnuts (Nafisi 314). She even says this is her only way of dealing with problems. Add to this the detailed descriptions of her students' clothing when they first come to her house, and the care with which she dressed herself for that first day of class (12-18). With these details she attempts to humanize the girls, and make them real and recognizable to the reader, and not make them simply "Iranian female students". Interestingly enough, however, Nafisi gives us very incomplete information on each young woman, and it is quite difficult to tell them apart. Because none of their stories are told from the beginning (and perhaps this reader's inexcusable unfamiliarity with Persian names), it is easy to get their details mixed up. Was this intentional? Did Nafisi mean to strip them of their identity and "replace them with a cipher of [our] own imagination" (Stringer-Hye 209)? Nafisi wants us to "imagine us, we won't exist unless you imagine us" (210) but she gives us such incomplete information about each woman that it is difficult to imagine any of them as a real person. There are snippets of reality, such as the conversation between Nafisi and Nassrin in her office when Nassrin is ready to leave the country (321). During that passage, the reader sees a real dialogue between two people, which has a coherent beginning, middle, and an end, unlike most of the book-club-like conversations of Nafisi's classes, in which the action switches back and forth from the students' conversation and the parallels to the literature they are reading. This trope could be entirely stylistic, but it bears a resemblance to the type of synecdoche used in travel writers' stories. It is not unlike Tacitus, making his experience with some Germanic men and women enough of an experience to make generalizations about their "chastity" and "nobility"

(Shaffer 47) without knowing any statistics or having any proof of this as a truly general characteristic of those tribes. From Nafisi, we have these snippets of Iranian women's experience – Sanaz's unhappy love affair, Azin's nail polish, Nassrin's lies to her father – but we don't have the fullness of their experiences, or stories. It is true that we hear of their imprisonments, and their difficulties with husbands and brothers and parents, but since we are not given a complete picture of any one woman, we are left with an incomplete composite that we, as American readers uneducated about Iran, should consider with care. There are no complete stories here; not even Azar Nafisi tells us the entire story of her own life, so we are left with details such as pastries and cafes and the strange habits of Nafisi's "magician", of whom we know nothing other than he was a former professor and writer who has, under the Islamic regime, withdrawn from the world. In Nafisi's defense, there are two reasons for the fragmentary nature of the narrative; one political, the other formal. In the "Author's Note" (ix) Nafisi explains that events in this story have "been changed mainly to protect individuals" and that "The facts in this story are true insofar as any memory is ever truthful." There is a good reason for not giving the entire story of these young women, for they could be easily found out and prosecuted under the current regime. The other is that Nafisi has titled this "A Memoir in Books". This is not an autobiography, a multi-biography, or even a personal history or partial life-story. A memoir, a form which is often about the people the writer has known more than it is about herself, is not meant to tell life stories or perform complete character studies of human beings. And Nafisi adheres to this form, with the exception that we find out more about her life than any of her students' lives. The focus, as the title informs us, is to weave an intertext

through the main books studied by the group of women and their lives, and in this Nafisi is largely successful. However, the resemblance to travel remembrances is strikingly real and a bit unsettling. Nafisi, though she does explain that these women became part of her family life (especially Nassrin) still gives us the impression that she was "just visiting" these women. We hear telling tales of domestic abuse, and difficulties in love, and tensions in friendship, but we are not really invested in any of these women because they are "ciphers" - nothing more than names with attributes attached to them. As J. B. Scott on his trip to France and Italy said "The women of Leghorn are singularly fair in general...They wear a kind of white veil hanging from the top of their heads...Their earrings are generally of immense size." (Bassnett 93) While we certainly get more details out of the students' lives than Scott gives us of Northern Italian women in the early nineteenth century, the effect is the same. At the end of the book the reader feels no empathy with these women, for they are too lightly drawn, and too much a collection of anecdotes and details rather than a story for us to consider them characters. What does that do to the reader's perception of these women? If we briefly consider a transactional reader-response criticism to the text we could say that the stimulus of empathy with characters is shared suffering or striving, or some experience with which the reader is able to identify. Certainly these women don't give us any shortage of suffering or difficult experiences, but it is so lightly told, and so quickly brushed away in favor of literary criticism or Nafisi's own reflections that it is very difficult to read in the "aesthetic mode, [when] we experience a personal relationship to the text that focuses our attention on the emotional subtleties of its language and encourages us to make judgments." (Tyson 173). For example,

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when Nafisi recounts the emotional discussion she has with Nassrin the young woman is about to leave the country, Nassrin alludes to the “illness” that she contracted in jail, but Nafisi doesn’t even ask her what the illness is (322). This is an instance where perhaps her professorial detachment came in, or maybe a desire not to pry into Nassrin’s life, but if this is how this conversation truly occurred, then the truth is not in the service of the aesthetics of this book. A much more effective dramatic device would have been to put a name to Nassrin’s illness, or give us an explanation of why we are not told, but either the truth of the episode or the detachment of the narrator prevent it, and the pathos of the moment is subverted. Granted, this is nonfiction, and perhaps dramatic intensity was of little or no interest to Nafisi, but it also serves to detach the reader from the emotions and events occurring in the narrative. And what is the consequence when the reader is detached? It becomes easier to make assumptions, and to read this as a light gloss of a life in Iran rather than a true memoir whether in or out of books. This detachment makes it easy to dismiss characters and to make generalizations about Iran and its people. There is less identification with individuals here than a collection of victims and the wrongs done to them. In addition Nafisi’s teaching of Western classics such as *Daisy Miller*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *Pride and Prejudice* smacks unpleasantly of “Westernizing” a culture in the traveler’s mind, or “creating” that culture in your own image while traveling through it. As Bassnett reminds us, Mr. Scott was pleased to find the people of Northern Italy hated the French as he did. Is not the discovery that these young Iranian women, though from a culture far removed from that which produced these books, appreciate, like we do, novels like *The American* and *Lolita*? There is an element of commonality

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that would be appealing to readers in the US, to have their favorites explored and extolled by women from a culture which is, considering the history between the two nations, both threatening and frightening to the United States. As Ramazani explains " ...a reader unfamiliar with Persian literature will reach the last page of this book without any inkling that there exist many contemporary works written by Iranian women the reading of which could have been an equally subversive act as reading Nabokov." (278) " Nafisi thus seems to make the reading of Western [sic] literature the necessary requisite for redemption and liberation of the mind." Ramazani goes on to comment that Edward Said, (whom Nafisi disagrees with in the memoir) " contends that the nineteenth-century novel unwittingly but systematically helped to gain consent for British imperialist policies of which Iran had had more than its share – a fact that was, in part, responsible for the virulent anti-Western policies of the Iranian revolutionaries." (279) To consider that Nafisi taught some of the novels that perhaps helped to contribute to the oppression of herself and her students is irony indeed, and makes the reader wonder at her choice of literature. If that opinion was known and explored by her students, would they have embraced these Western writers so enthusiastically? Finally, the mysterious " magician" to whom Nafisi makes frequent visits adds a flavor of unreality and the " superstitious East" that could be construed as condescending. He is almost a faceless entity, portrayed as reclusive and otherworldly, in a way not unlike a genie in a bottle appearing and reappearing with wisdom for the hearer. He has less the character of a human being than an oracle (again, this is probably for his protection) and serves as Nafisi's conscience and her inner voice to speak to when she needs guidance. But he is so shadowy and underdeveloped that it

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is difficult to invest anything in him. Ramazani points out that the educational and medical status of women and children has improved during the years since the fall of the Shah, so there is doubt cast upon her rosy picture of the Iran before the revolution. What Nafisi doesn't say is that the "liberated women" under the Shah were a small group of the wealthy elite, and that, taken as a whole, the plight of women and children is better than it was in the 1970s. These bald facts of improved conditions (see Britannica article fact sheet) cast doubt on Nafisi's ability to assess the true state of her country. She chronicles only the woes of herself and her students, and never the improvements which did take place especially among the rural poor. Some of that can be considered part of the improved access to technology that has occurred since 1979, but the regime must be given some credit for distributing it. For Nafisi, an educated woman and a teacher, the improved education of the majority of the Iranian people should be a topic of great interest to her; in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* it is never mentioned. This also lends the air of a "travelogue" to her book, since a major aspect of change that, though possibly not visible from her living room window or in the halls of the University of Tehran, nevertheless affected most of the people in the country. (This is not to say that the regime was or is beneficent or just, but certain key human rights indicators improved under it, a fact that Nafisi doesn't mention or acknowledge.) Nafisi's work is definitely not a traveler's tale in any true sense, but it bears a resemblance through its transient characters, its incomplete and sometimes inaccurate portrayal of the country itself, and its metaphor of Iranian women by using only a select sample from a particular group. And the extended discussions of English and American literature, while in the midst of huge social and political change and

upheaval in the Islamic Republic of Iran, has the air of " Gide ... reading Bossuet while going down the Congo" (Barthes 29). The unreal quality of the narrative, the lack of social involvement other than with her students, and her unique and perhaps slightly skewed view of Iran gives the reader the impression that Nafisi " stopped over" in Iran for a few years, but never really immersed herself in it. While the reader may get a few facts, and certainly some true stories of injustice and oppression, he or she comes away with very little real knowledge of Iran or Iranians.

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