

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 4. Issue.2., 2017 (April-June)

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

THE TRANSCENDENTAL POWER OF FICTION: A DISCUSSION OF AZAR NAFISI'S
READING LOLITA IN TEHRAN: A MEMOIR IN BOOKS

POOJA SINGAL

Assistant Professor, Department of Elementary Education, Lady Shri Ram College for Women,
University of Delhi



POOJA SINGAL

ABSTRACT

Nafisi's book *Reading Lolita in Tehran* chronicles the experiences of author from the year 1978 to 1997, when she returned to Iran during the revolution (1978-1981) and lived and taught in the Islamic Republic of Iran until her departure in 1997. The act of writing this memoir, gives her an opportunity to tell her own story and the stories of her students in her own words, from her perspective. By doing this, she saves herself and her girls from falling into the trap of tyrannical regimes, who in order to rule the masses take away their histories and personal stories from them, imposing homogeneity, thus, making them irrelevant and insignificant. The book is centered around a private class comprising seven students, all of them female, chosen carefully by Nafisi on the basis of their interest in literature. The class is dedicated to discussing various works of fiction by writers such as Joyce, Austen, James, Nabokov, Fitzgerald, Gold and others. The works of literature that Nafisi discusses in her class give a new insight to her girls. The purpose of this paper is to examine in detail the connections that Nafisi makes with different works of fiction to interpret her and her students' lives in the totalitarian regime, the metaphors, motifs, characters and the situations, that lend her a perspective to make sense of her surroundings. Since the memoir has been organized in sections named after works of fiction, this paper would also discuss the works in the same order as they appear in different sections chronologically.

Key Words: Totalitarian regime, Fiction, Perspective, Imagination, Conflict

Introduction

"Fiction was not a panacea, but it did offer us a critical way of appraising and grasping the world- not just our world but that other world that had become the object of our desires."

"Every great book that we read became a challenge to the ruling ideology. It became a potential threat and menace not so much because of what it said but how it said it, the attitude it took towards life and fiction."

*Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*¹ is a book by Iranian author and Professor Azar Nafisi. The book is an eloquent brief on the transformative powers of fiction -- on the refuge from ideology that art can offer to those living under tyranny, and art's affirmative and subversive faith in the voice of the individual.²

The book is a memoir which chronicles the experiences of author from the year 1978 to 1997, when she returned to Iran during the revolution (1978-1981) and lived and taught in the Islamic Republic of Iran until her departure in 1997. It narrates her teaching at the University of Tehran after 1979, her refusal to submit to the rule to wear the veil and her subsequent expulsion from the university, life during the Iran-Iraq war, her return to teaching at the University of Allameh Tabatabaiee (1981), her resignation (1987), the formation of her private reading classes (1995–97), and her decision to emigrate.

The book is divided into four parts, namely, *Lolita*, *Gatsby*, *James*, and *Austen*. The naming of the parts is on the basis of an overarching theme in the respective parts, which she discusses either by drawing a direct comparison between the events in Tehran and the characters and themes in the books or by indirect reference to the characters and events in the books she discusses with her students. The book is more thematically organized rather than chronologically. Chronologically, *Gatsby* should have been the first part, followed by *James*, *Lolita* and *Austen* according to the events in the life of Nafisi.

The book is centered around a private class comprising seven students, all of them female, chosen carefully by Nafisi on the basis of their interest in literature. The class is dedicated to discussing various works of fiction by writers such as Joyce, Austen, James, Nabokov, Fitzgerald, Gold and others. The theme of the classes is the relation between reality and fiction. While the girls, along with Nafisi discuss novels, there unfolds the life experiences of the girls themselves, caught between the tide of revolution and their own desires and aspirations.

The memoir almost has a pictorial quality for Nafisi has tried to recreate the exact atmosphere of a totalitarian regime through her words. Time and again, she invokes the imagination of the readers to picture one thing or the other. The memoir is written to preserve the memory of the troubled time, she has spent in Iran during the revolution days. The act of writing this memoir, gives her an opportunity to tell her own story and the stories of her students in her own words, from her perspective. By doing this, she saves herself and her girls from falling into the trap of tyrannical regimes, who in order to rule the masses take away their histories and personal stories from them, imposing homogeneity, thus making them irrelevant and insignificant.

Nafisi very beautifully captures the personal dilemmas and conflicts of people living in a regime, for whose existence they too are responsible. The cyclical process of the revolution eating its own children, the thin line that it blurs between traitor and patriot, the ideological apparatus of the regime to justify its functioning in a certain way, the confusion that the use of religion as a tool of power and control creates in the people of Iran, and the daily ordeals of the women in a repressive regime are the focus points of the memoir.

Many times in the book, Nafisi takes up the issue of veil and robes, the different meanings that the different generations of women have associated with it, its shifting importance in the now revolutionary regime, as well as, the propaganda attached to it by the regime itself. Life of women in Islamic Republic is discussed in detail as we see a constant attempt on the part of the regime to repress and control their sexuality.

Nafisi highlights the point that the rebellion is not just taking arms against the oppressor, it is also about continue to live your life, by not accepting the norms in small ways also count as rebellion. Thus, her classes become a space where she, along with her girls transcend the oppressive reality and seek an alternative in the world of fiction. The power of fiction, in particular, the 'novel', lays in providing the hope and possibility of a democratic space. Fiction, according to Nafisi, made her girls aware of the choices one can have, and the means to access them. She warns her girls as well as the readers, to not look for their solutions in the works of

¹ Nafisi, Azar. *Reading Lolita In Tehran : a Memoir in Books*. New York :Random House, 2003. Print. (Subsequent references from this book are cited through page numbers.)

² Kakutani, Michiko, *Books of the Times*; *Book Study as Insubordination Under the Mullahs*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/04/15/books/books-of-the-times-book-study-as-insubordination-under-the-mullahs.html>

fiction, but to keep their sense of imagination, curiosity alive which enables them to empathize with others. "Empathy" for others is what the regime is unable to feel, let it not die amongst others too.

The purpose of this paper is to examine in detail the connections that Nafisi makes with different works of fiction to interpret her and her students' lives in the totalitarian regime, the metaphors, motifs, characters and the situations, that lend her a perspective to make sense of her surroundings. Since the memoir has been organized in sections named after works of fiction, this paper would also discuss the works in the same order as they appear in different sections chronologically. It is important to throw some light on the context in which each of the work was chosen and deliberated upon by Nafisi and her students. Thus, each section would briefly summarize the events which lead to discussion around a particular Novel.

First Part: Lolita

Nafisi starts her memoir by telling us that in the year 1995, she left her teaching job at the University of Allameh Tabatabaei and decided to hold a private class with some of her most dedicated students of literature. She writes in detail about her own students, characterizing them one by one through their stories. There were seven of them whom she chose to attend her classes: Manna, "who can make poetry out of things most people cast aside", Nassrin, "a contradiction in terms", Yassi "the youngest in the group, shy by nature but getting excited by few things and having a gently mocking tone in her voice", Azin "the wild one, always outrageous and outspoken", Mahshid "with delicate feature and retreating smile", Mitra, "the dimpled one", and Sanaz, "the belly dancer"..

The overarching theme of the first part of the novel is, how can one question the totalitarian regime? What unsettles it? What are some of the ways of subverting it? What role can literature play in such a regime? What is there in the structure of the 'novels' which makes them so democratic? The various novels that she discusses expose one or the other element of the totalitarian regime, thus, enabling the girls to grasp the overall structure they were embedded in, as well as, the means to escape it. She discusses the themes of imagination and dreams as an act of subversion, curiosity as an act of insubordination and literature as an act of offering the vision of an alternative reality with respect to *A Thousand and One Nights*, *Invitation to Beheading* and *Lolita*.

Classes are interspersed with the stories and personal experiences of the girls. All of them come from very different social, ideological and religious backgrounds. There were often clashes between them, specially between Azin, the wild one, who didn't have a strict morality code, and Mahshid, who came from a very conservative family and who throughout her life has followed and observed what Islamic regime was enforcing on them. The clashes give us a glimpse into the more sensitive issues of tradition and change and the question of choice. If veil is worn out of choice and out of one's commitment to religion, it is justified in their own eyes, but once it became symbol of power and control to restrain the sexuality of women, it became meaningless for even those who used to espouse it earlier. The class kind of gave them an opportunity to consider their own lives, to scrutinize it closely, to confront the issues they were discussing in the novels, in their own lives, issues of choice, of autonomy and of voice.

Discussion around Texts:

A Thousand and One Nights:³ The first text that they discuss in the group is *A Thousand and One Nights*, the familiar tale of the cuckolded king who slew successive virgin wives as revenge for his queen's betrayal, and whose murderous hand was finally stayed by the entrancing storyteller Scheherazade.

Nafisi clearly outlines the fact that they were not looking at the texts to find solutions to their own problems, but, to find a link between the open spaces that a novel provides and the closed one which they inhabit. The emphasis here is to find a way to refashion the world they inhabit by invoking their own sense of imagination, so as to redefine the rules imposed on them as did Scheherazade in the Arabian nights. The

³ ***One Thousand and One Nights*** is a collection of Middle Eastern and South Asian stories and folk tales compiled in Arabic during the Islamic Golden Age. The work was collected over many centuries by various authors, translators, and scholars across West, Central, and South Asia and North Africa. many tales were originally folk stories from the Caliphate era, while others, especially the frame story, are most probably drawn from the Pahlavi Persian work *Hazār Afsān* which in turn relied partly on Indian elements. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/One_Thousand_and_One_Nights

importance of *A Thousand and One Nights* lies in the fact that Scheherazade breaks the cycle of violence by choosing to embrace different terms of engagement. She fashions her universe not through physical force, as does the king, but through imagination and reflection.

Invitation to Beheading:⁴ The next text discussed by her is Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*. In *Invitation to Beheading*, a world is created where everything is arbitrary; it's a world, where people are supposed to be all transparent. Since, the hero of the novel, Cincinnatus C is opaque; hence, he has been sentenced to death for this crime. It's a world made up of empty rituals. Every act is bereft of substance and significance, even death becomes a spectacle for which the good citizens buy tickets.

The same is the situation in Iran. Like the world created in the *Invitation to Beheading*, Islamic regime in Tehran has tried to impose through its arbitrary rules, homogeneity on the people of Tehran. People are supposed to shed their own uniqueness; their own desires and wishes need to be abandoned in order to comply with the dictates of the regime. Like in the world of *Invitation to Beheading*, atmosphere in the totalitarian regime of Tehran is that of perpetual dread.

Cincinnatus only escape from this dreaded world is through his writing, given to us in the form of the novel, *Invitation to Beheading*. Similarly, Nafisi, emphasizes the importance of art and literature in their own lives as the options open to them, which take them away from the drudgery of real world and shows them the door to alternative reality.

Nabokov uses the word 'Upsilamba' to describe the hero of his novel. The word is a new creation of author, to highlight the linguistic originality of the hero, in an otherwise uniform world. The word then becomes the metaphor of creativity and innovation in language for the girls too. It kind of became their code for the dreams and imageries they had in their world.

Nabokov records in *Invitation to Beheading* that a totalitarian regime exercises total control over one's consciousness, so much so, that, the prisoners in *Invitation to Beheading* are advised not to have nocturnal dreams, for, dreams too are an act of transgression, of subversion of reality, of entry into the fantasy world of wish fulfillment. On a similar note, Nafisi also recounts the story of a friend's son who reports of having "illegal dreams" that is, of dreaming about things which are banned by the regime such as merry making on a sea beach.

Lolita⁵

Discussion on *Lolita* is most important because Nafisi has named her own memoir on it. Nafisi denies the fact that there is a literal association between *Lolita* and their own situation in Tehran, "...The girls were not *Lolita*, Humbert was not Ayatollah. *Lolita* was not a critique of the Islamic Republic, but it went against the grain of all totalitarian perspectives." (35)

Humbert is the narrator of the novel *Lolita*, a novel about a man, who, in order to possess and captivate a 12 year old girl, indirectly causes the death of her mother, and keeps her as his little entrapped mistress for two years. *Lolita* is given to the reader as Humbert's creature. To reinvent her, Humbert must take from *Lolita* her own real history and replace it with his own, turning *Lolita* into a reincarnation of his lost, unfulfilled young love, Annabel Leigh. *Lolita* is the double victim, as not just her life is confiscated by the villain; her life story too is narrated to us by the villain himself. Nabokov takes his revenge by writing this novel, by exposing all solipsists who take over other people's lives. It exposes the texture of the people who confiscate the lives of other individuals.

Nafisi emphasizes that though the regime was trying to mould them according to its own laws, atleast they can save themselves from falling victim to the confiscation of their own stories. Nafisi's memoir, then, becomes an act of defiance, for she does become successful in recreating the stories of all her students and herself, their survival instincts and their forays into the alternative fictional world while inhabiting the real suppressive Islamic Republic, through her act of creation. Nafisi too, through her memoir, exposes the

⁴ *Invitation to a Beheading* is a novel by Russian American author Vladimir Nabokov, originally published in Russian from 1935 to 1936 as a serial in *Contemporary Notes*. An English translation followed in 1959.

⁵ *Lolita* is a 1955 novel written by Russian American novelist Vladimir Nabokov.

madness surrounding a political war entangled with religion and invites the readers to analyze the situation in their own way.

Nafisi discusses that Humbert was a villain in the novel because he lacks curiosity about other people. He is interested only in his own vision of other people. Once again a parallel is drawn between Humbert and the Islamic dictators, who impose their own laws without considering their impact on the lives of the people they were ruling.

"This book provokes serious thinking seriously about the value of the literary. Part of its power comes directly from the text of the memoir, from Nafisi's own pointed arguments about why one reads, and why she herself reads and teaches literature. But it also comes from the strangeness of the situation: here are these women, their lives destroyed by an unthinkable repressive regime, and their most subversive act is... to get together once a week to read photocopied (illegal) copies of *Lolita*? (Hardly, on the surface, a feminist or progressive text in the received/ conventional readings; Nafisi reads it against the grain.) All in all, it's rather improbable and anti-intuitive that Nafisi became a *less* political reader, rather than a more political one. But she makes a good case for her response: no matter what they banned or who they imprisoned/tortured/executed, literature provided the means to keep one's imagination free and open.⁶

Propagandist Literature: There is another kind of literature which is discussed in this part, that of written by Ayatollah Khomeini himself, *The political, Philosophical, Social and Religious Principles of Ayatollah Khomeini*. The text describes the way to cure the sexual appetite of a man, by having sex with animals. It also discusses the problem of who will eat the chicken if a man has had sex with the chicken. Nafisi very satirically points out how this book was actually expected to be taken seriously by all the disciples of Khomeini who in turn would then rule the country of Iran guided by the teachings in the book. Nafisi also brings into focus through the experience of her children, how the very Persian language which the regime was trying to use as the language of the propaganda for masses had become a huge turn off for the next generation because they associate it with petty politics and the propaganda and never with their idea of entertainment, leave alone identity.

Nafisi highlights the point how a despotic regime seeks to recreate history for the people by imposing arbitrary laws on them, by eradicating memory of the glorious past, and by controlling what feeds into their imagination.

"... We lived in a culture that denied any merit to literary works, considering them important only when they were handmaidens to something seemingly more urgent- namely ideology. It's the world where even the private gestures were interpreted in political terms. Television serials were condemned because some images seemed to promote homosexuality or anything espoused by western culture." (25)

Her classes as she informs the readers are an attempt to escape from this blind censorship.

Second Part: Gatsby

Part second starts with Nafisi reminiscing about Tehran, how she had always viewed Tehran as her homeland while she was away in America and U.K. for her studies. The lights on the airport had always beckoned to her as if welcoming her, but this time when she came back, she is searched fanatically in her own homeland. There is a certain duality now. While she was away on foreign lands, she had tried to Parsianize their landscape, but now that she was home, it feels like a strange place.

Chronologically, this should be the first part of the novel, as she discusses about her first year in Tehran, when she started teaching in the English Department of the University of Tehran. University of Tehran is the point of focus in the second part. University should be the ground of evolving new ideas and ideologies; it's a place where students from different socio, cultural, religious background come to interact with each other and generate new knowledge, however, Nafisi points out that Tehran University had changed its character completely. It was no longer the site for new ideas and innovations, no longer the space for unbridled dialogue; rather, it became the site for propaganda..

⁶Singh, Amardeep. 'Reading Azar Nafisi as a Literary Critic', <http://www.lehigh.edu/~amsp/2005/08/reading-azar-nafisi-as-literary-critic.html>

*Gatsby*⁷ is the novel she discusses throughout second part, and through *Gatsby*, she highlights the importance of the unsettling tendencies of a work of fiction. The importance of works of arts in regime, possibilities of dialogue that literature embodies, politics behind banning literature in a totalitarian regime, language of the revolutionaries and the specific connotations it has for the young university students, politicization of veil, debate between who is a patriot and who a traitor, the self-defeating tendency of revolution, are some of the themes discussed in this part.

First Teaching Experience: She starts her classes by writing the following lines on the board:

“Theodor Adorno: the highest form of morality is not to feel at home in one’s own home....Most of the great works of fiction was 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.” (94)

She tells her students that she wants 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.

Discussion around *Gatsby*: Nafisi writes about why she chose to teach a particular book in the course at such a time of political turmoil. How did her students take that book/ what were her initial inhibitions, fears and anticipations before discussing the book with her students. For example before taking *Gatsby*, she was slightly apprehensive if her students would understand the meaning of “sacrifice” in individual matters when in their context it is defined by masses, revolution and Islam. She makes a point about how vocabulary of a particular time and their deep conscious and sub conscious meanings are shaped by the context in which it is used.

“...My students were baffled by *Gatsby*. The story of an idealistic boy, so much in love with this beautiful rich girl who betrays him, could not be satisfying to those for whom sacrifice was defined by words such as masses, revolution, and Islam. Passion and betrayal were for them political emotions, and love far removed from the stirring of Jay Gatsby for Mrs. Tom Buchanan. Adultery in Tehran was one of so many other crimes, and the law dealt with it accordingly: public stoning.” (108). She calls *Gatsby* the quintessential American novel, because it is about the American dream.

...What's impressive is Nafisi's ability to make this quintessentially American novel a matter of quintessentially Iranian/progressive ethics. She finds, remarkably, a natural channel from *Gatsby* back to the Ayatollah Khomeini. The index is the danger of ideals, of which Nick Carraway is as guilty as the Islamic Revolution⁸.

There is a very interesting scene in second part of the novel, when one of her student Mr Nyazi challenges her to persecute Great Gatsby. ...There are speeches for the prosecution and defence, 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 analysing it in terms of role models.⁹

Nafisi leads us to the discussion as to how can an anti-hero, that is, Gatsby, who is far from the idealized image of the hero, be the ideal to be followed. ...It is Nafisi's contention that Gatsby becomes a subversive book for her students precisely because it focuses unapologetically on a single individual's dashed dream at a time when competing ideologies in Iran Marxism and Islamism--would usurp all that is private and individual. On an American campus, Gatsby would hardly be a controversial book, but in Iran at this time, F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic proves to be provocative.¹⁰

⁷ *The Great Gatsby* is a 1925 novel written by American author F. Scott Fitzgerald.

⁸ Singh, Amardeep. Reading Azar Nafisi as a Literary Critic, <http://www.lehigh.edu/~amsp/2005/08/reading-azar-nafisi-as-literary-critic.html>

⁹ Allen, Paul. Through the Veil. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/sep/13/featuresreviews.guardianreview1>

¹⁰ DePaul, Amy. “Re-Reading ‘Reading Lolita in Tehran.’” *MELUS*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2008, pp. 73–92. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/20343467.

Novel teaches us not to be self righteous about complicated issues like love, sex and marriage. These issues are not a matter of right and wrong, good and evil, black and white...it teaches us how not to see everything in absolutist terms. If that is true, then Gatsby has succeeded brilliantly.

Through the example of professor A, the head of the department of University of Tehran, and how he defended a night prisoner, Nafisi once again highlights the values embodied in Literature. It is shown as celebrating individuality. Literature allows polyglossia, it allows multiple interpretations, it stands for diversity. There is no metanarrative. By reading literature, one becomes aware of many facets of a man's personality. It permits one to identify and empathize and not just sympathize.

"...Such an act can only be accomplished by someone who is engrossed in literature, has learned 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."(118)

Nafisi, also introduces Professor R to us, who later on becomes her magician, a friend to whom she goes when in the moment of crisis. He used to teach at the Faculty of Fine Arts, a well known and controversial film and theater critic and writer of short story writer. He was expelled from the University on his insistence not to change the curriculum in the Department of Drama. He refused to teach if Racine was replaced with more revolutionary writers like Marx, Engels, Brecht and Gorky.

Third Part: James

Third part starts from the point of September 23, 1980, when Iraq breaks war with Iran. Nafisi though lists the reasons why Iraq must have launched a war against Iran, namely, the old animosity between Saddam Hussein and Ayatollah, or the old hostility between Iran and Iraq, she also informs us that the war was unexpected, unwelcomed and utterly senseless for the millions of Iranians. She outlines the fact that in a totalitarian regime, our destiny is being shaped by the forces completely beyond our control. People feel utter helplessness and are baffled by the uncertainty of their lives. Then, how do these people subvert this kind of regime?

Perspectives on personal courage, ability to feel and empathize are the themes of this part of the novel. Nafisi discusses her own feeling of becoming irrelevant in a state which refuses to acknowledge the personal choices of its citizens, how she battles with this feeling, what role does literature play in rescuing her from falling into an abyss, how birth of her own and her brother's children bring some hope of generativity in her life, how she comes to negotiate with the new teaching job she was offered, what were here dilemmas before accepting it, and how does she finally handles it; her attempts as a teacher to develop perspective in her students, the opposition she meets with from the conservative students are all chronicled. She discusses the themes of imagination, Empathy and courage with respect to characters from Henry James's novels *Daisy Miller* and *Washington Square*¹¹. The happenings of the war are recorded alongside, how does the regime treat war prisoners and the so called martyrs and what happens to the dream of revolution after the death of Ayatollah, the person who gave them this dream.

While writing this novel, she also discusses the aspects of a novel. What is a novel, what does it stand for, how does it shape mentality and all. She teaches a course on introduction to 19th century novel in the University.

"My emphasis in my introductory course was on the ways in which the novel, as a new narrative form, radically transformed basic concepts about the essential relationship between individuals, thereby changing traditional attitudes towards people's relationship to society, their tasks and duties." (194)

Nafisi brings into the light the dilemma she often felt while discussing a particular character from a text. Her students would be baffled by the unsettling characters and they would want her to present with a straight

¹¹ *Daisy Miller* is a novella by Henry James that first appeared in Cornhill Magazine in June–July 1878. *Washington Square* is a short *novel* by Henry James. Originally published in 1880 as a serial in Cornhill Magazine

forward answer. She would refuse the existence of absolutes. For her, ambiguity needs to be acknowledged. There are no black and white.

Mr Ghomi, a conservative student in her class, is a constant source of worry, for; he is the representative of Islamic Republic, the flag bearer of moral code of conduct, the strong protestor of decadent western culture,

“...You see, I have a feeling that people like Ghomi always attack, because they are afraid of what they don’t understand. What they say is we don’t need James, but what they really mean is we are afraid of this fellow James-he baffles us, he confuses us, he makes us a little uneasy.”(198)

Nafisi, in order to make her students respond in their own way, according to their own positions, teaches them about the notion of ‘perspective’, description of an object, subject or an event from the position of the beholder. This exercise does help her to understand the perspectives of her students as they all give their responses on ‘Daisy Miller; to her, in written form.

Nafisi discusses the responses of one her student, Miss Ruhy who seems to have received education of a fundamentalist kind. It reflects in her reflections on Daisy Miller in her diary. Fundamental teachings had made her absolutist; she could not take ambiguities in any which way.

Discussion on James: Nafisi recounts how despite signs from Saddam Hussein for reconciliation, Ayatollah was determined to capture the holy city of Kaballah in Iraq. This is the most undemocratic, unempathising streak in despotic rulers for they forget the miseries, wishes and desires of others while fulfilling their own missions which are often esoteric. The status of being “martyrs” is unscrupulously used to seduce people into joining the militia.

This description leads her to discuss Henry James, who also faced two war time situations, what changes did an otherwise detached writer undergo at the time of whole turmoil. Why does he want people to feel, because he was scared of people becoming resistant to feeling. Feeling is the only way to remember all those people who had lost their lives, also to stir up empathy and to remind everyone that life was worth living. The point of discussion is actually the mockery of the death of a boy by some girls in Nafisi’s class, she is surprised to see an apparent lack of feeling on the part of the girls on somebody’s death. This is what James and she fears the most about totalitarian regimes: that is total lack of empathy.

“...Lack of empathy was to my mind the central sin of the regime, from which all the others followed” (224)

Nafisi takes up a discussion on the theme of courage in James’s novels *Daisy Miller and Washington Square* with her students. Some students point out at Daisy’s unabashedness, some at Catherine. She points out the bravest person is one who has the power of imagination, who through his imagination can empathize with others, can understand their sorrows. If you lack the courage of imagination, you remain ignorant of others’ feelings and needs.

Fourth Part: Austen

Part four starts with that very famous opening line in *Pride and Prejudice*¹², which says “It’s a fact universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of good fortune must be in want of a beautiful wife”. The reading group of Nafisi has already come into existence. Girls have started feeling comfortable with each others. The discussion mostly is on marriage, that is, the theme of marriage so much celebrated in the Victorian novels. Austen is the author they are reading now.

The central theme of fourth part is the lives of women in Iran, their most private decisions, how can they be subversive while making choices, how marriage is the most important institution which also demands democratic choices and agency on part of the women, in order to be successful. Through the personal dilemmas of the girls, Nafisi draws the helpless situation of the young generation during the revolutionary period. Although, as Manna’s husband Nima points out that the regime was equally killing for the boys, condition of women is worse, as the law tries to curb their sexuality in whatever way it could. Love, which should be the reason to marry, is hardly allowed to flourish in this regime. Girls mention the regressive

¹² *Pride and Prejudice* is a novel by Jane Austen, published in 1813.

tendency that the Iranian society has acquired. They reminisce about their own mothers and grandmothers, who breathed in a more liberal atmosphere. Nafisi too brings into focus, the Persian style of dancing, that is, belly dancing known for its seductive moves. She points out that Iranian culture must have been very permissive for women for such a dance form to flourish. She laments the present retrogressive tendencies in Iran today. By emphasizing 'multivocality', space for self reflection and self criticism in Austen's novel, Nafisi brings into light the total absence of these in totalitarian regime, thus, making them the most undemocratic spaces to inhabit.

Part four deals with the personal crisis of the girls, as well as, the author in great detail. Nafisi informs us of the death of Mrs. Rezvan, the changing intellectual and socio-cultural climate of Iran, the various circumstances in which she and her other students decide to leave Iran, their lives afterwards

Condition of Women in Iran and the New Marriage Acts:

Considering the condition of Iran and the new laws that have come into existence after the regime, girls discuss the marriage scenario for an Iranian girl. They play around with the opening line of *Pride and Prejudice* and contextualize it in their own context as:

"...It's a truth universally acknowledged that a Muslim man regardless of his fortune must be in search of a nine year old virgin". (257)

Though the girls laugh out at this, the tinge of sadness and irony reverberates with this line. It's a poignant situation for Iranian girls, who are reduced to the status of objects. The situation is tragic – comic where the girls' only escape to happiness is to laugh at their own pathetic situation.

The point of discussion is one of Nafisi's student Sanaz who is about to get married to her childhood friend. Sanaz is apprehensive about whether the boy would like her now or not. Nafisi makes her understand that she should be more worried about if they both will get along well with each other or not. But Sanaz's apprehension points out to the very few options available for woman in terms of choice of a husband.

Nafisi mentions her own peculiar habit of asking married couple if they fell in love with each other. Her girls respond to the question of love in very pessimistic ways. Azin answers, "Who thinks of love these days?" She outlines the condition of Iranian girls:

"...Nowadays, girls marry either because their families force them, or to get green card, or to secure financial stability, or for sex- they marry for all kinds of reasons but rarely for love." (258)

Manna points out that Iran is well behind Jane Austen's time. Her mother could choose whom she wanted to marry, she had less choices and her younger sister even less.

The discussion leads to the law of new Temporary Marriage Act which was an Islamic law peculiar to Iran, according to which, a Muslim man may have four official wives, and as many temporary wives as he wished. The logic behind this was that they had to satisfy their own needs when their wives were unavailable or unable to satisfy now. They can enter into such marriages for as long as 10 min or 99 yrs. Girls called it the sanctified version of prostitution.

Nafisi talks about how the laws have drastically changed during the new regime. She discusses the four generation of women and how she was fortunate to see two women rising to the status of cabinet ministers. But with the revolution, how these women had to suffer with the regime.

Nafisi informs us that Sanaz's fears come alive as the boy called off the marriage citing his own inability to come to terms with Sanaz. While discussing Sanaz's wedding, Azin becomes a little emotional and breaks down in front of the class. Azin represents the wild sort of a woman, who likes her independent spirit. She divorced her first husband. But her second husband would not divorce her. He called her names. Told her she is secondhand, he can marry a fresh young virgin but nobody would take her, he would beat her but would not divorce her. Nafisi, then, goes into the legal aspect of the marriage, where in Islamic religion. Women were considered the causes for arousing their husband's anger. Mental and physical abuse is not considered the grounds on the basis of which a woman can claim for divorce.

Discussion Around Austen: Nafisi declares it at the outset that Austen is so liked by ladies because she seems to have come at a resolution of marriage, at the heart of which lies the individual freedom.

Nafisi talks about how after discussing Austen in one of her classes, she told her students that the structure of *Pride and Prejudice* is almost like a dance. And she makes them all do ballroom dancing. Sanaz starts doing belly dancing, which Nafisi explains in great detail. Here the purpose of discussing this dance was to show that Islamic culture has never been as restrictive for woman as the revolution has made it to be. For otherwise, how can such a seductive dance form become a part of Persian art?

She discusses the main feature of *Pride & Prejudice*. It is its multivocality, the possibility of dialogue that Austen has created, the variety of voices that it embodies. There are so many different forms of dialogue. Between several people, between two people, internal dialogue and dialogue through letters. This multivocality that she creates, is a stupendous example of the democratic structure of the novel.

In Austen's novels, there are spaces for oppositions that do not need to eliminate each other in order to exist. There is also space- not just space but a necessity- for self-reflection and self-criticism.

In her novel, self-reflection is the cause of change. It is not accidental that the most unsympathetic characters in Austen's novels are those who are incapable of genuine dialogue with others. They rant. They lecture. They scold. This incapacity for true dialogue implies an incapacity for tolerance, self-reflection and empathy.

Nafisi discovers one day that her students differentiate the two kinds of love: love which is spiritual, love which is physical. Nafisi is outraged at this. She can't take this idea of her students discussing the most revolutionary novelist on one hand and not knowing what to do with their bodies.

"... We have always segregated sex from feeling and from intellectual love, so you were either pure and virtuous, ...or dirty and fun. What was alien to us was eros, true sensuality." Pg (304)

Nafisi then decides to discuss *Pride and Prejudice* in relation with their own bodies, with them. She provides the following conclusion:

"The nineteenth century novel placed the individual, her happiness, her ordeals and her rights at the centre of the story. Thus marriage was its most important theme. They put at the center of our attention what Austen's novels formulate: not the importance of marriage but the importance of heart and understanding in marriage; not the primacy of conventions but the breaking of conventions. These women, genteel and beautiful, are the rebels who say no to the choices made by silly mothers, incompetent fathers (there are seldom any wise fathers in Austen's novels) and the rigidly orthodox society. They risk ostracism and poverty to gain love and companionship, and to embrace that elusive goal at the heart of democracy: the right to choose." Pg: (307)

Changing Climate in Iran: Nafisi mentions how after the end of war with Iraq, the attention of the revolutionaries turned towards the internal enemies of the regime that is those who followed western culture. But the irony was that that even the children of the revolution were disillusioned with the revolution. So they too turned towards western culture and democracies for inspiration. Enlightened people came to the fore for a short period, bringing changes in the scene. Some banned books were now available in the market. Movies were being shown.

The focus towards the end of this part shifts to the stories of Nafisi's girls. How in different circumstances some of them decided to leave Iran, and some of them because of their religious and personal affiliations to Iran decide to continue living in Iran. Nafisi discusses in great detail her own decision to leave Iran.

Nafisi ends the Epilogue with a positive note. She informs the readers with hope and optimism the changing climate of Iran, informs us of the little acts of subversion that the girls have started showing by wearing more colours, informs us of the students' constant struggle for democracy and the protestations against blind following of clergy. She also informs us of her girls, who are all settled now and are trying to imbibe what literature has taught them in their own lives.

Conclusion

Nafisi notes in one of her essay, "Reading literature has not at anytime in history been a mass phenomenon. But we need to guard the quality of our knowledge; otherwise we will become a very empty culture."¹³

The memoir is an existential quest to make sense of the days that Nafisi spent in Tehran, to give shape to the people who helped her out of abyss that surrounded her, it is also to an extent a kind of tribute to her students who added so much meaning to her life by coming to attend her classes.

The novel is about her love for literature, how in the most adverse circumstances, literature saves her from falling into the trap. How it kind of provided her with the strength to keep going through the hell which Iran had become at that time. One wonders, if she tries to justify herself too in the novel, by first leaving the job at Tehran University, rather than fighting from inside, then later on, by leaving Iran when there were some positive happenings, but, ultimately my heart goes to her for giving new hopes to her students.

Nafisi's book has come under sharp attack by Iranian scholar Hamid Dabashi who locates her text as an 'instrument of neoconservative imperialism'. ... "It is in part the book's focus on Western literature (from Austen to Fitzgerald) that is the source of the accusation that Nafisi is suppressing Iran's indigenous culture in favor of Western culture".¹⁴

The basic accusation against *Reading Lolita* is that in detailing the most egregious abuses of power by Islamic authorities in Iran, painting all Iranian women as helpless and miserably oppressed, and celebrating Western canonical literature as a refuge for clear-thinking Iranians, the book serves neoconservative foreign policy interests, subtly reinforcing arguments for American intervention in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran...."The book fed into a fantasy of what the Middle East should be," says John Carlos Rowe, a professor at the University of Southern California. The fantasy, he explains, is a depiction of the Middle East as "scary and exotic" and ultimately "orientalist," a term typically used to describe essentialist Western stereotypes of Eastern exoticism. For Rowe and others, the concern is that *Reading Lolita* highlights Iranian oppression to instill receptivity to neoconservative foreign policy....Not only did critics claim Nafisi's book legitimized neoconservative foreign policy, *Reading Lolita* was also challenged on feminist grounds. Some accused Nafisi of exploiting women's hardships in Iran to promote the need for American interference, whether political or military.¹⁵

Perhaps the best reply to these charges against her would be one of her remarks in, *Three Women, Two Worlds, One Issue*, "I do not consider myself Western, but rather modern"¹⁶. Nafisi notes in one of her other essay, "Part of the reason people liked my book, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, was because they could experience through reading it what a young girl experienced in a country called an Islamic Republic. And they realized that her desires and aspirations were not very different from their own. As a result the rather homogenized image of women from Iran has partly changed.

The media have tended to reduce Iranian society into the Khomeini Era or the era of the Shah. The Iranian society was there before the revolution and before the Shah. If we gained certain liberties at the time of the Shah—whether women's rights or the openness to literature from Byron to Wordsworth to Victor Hugo—it was mainly because various forces in Iranian society wanted it. Before the fatwa, Salman Rushdie was a very popular writer. His first two novels were translated into Persian and became best-sellers. That's why this Islamist system cannot force the Iranian people to give them up.¹⁷

¹³ Nafisi, Azar. "Fiction: Open Space in a Closed Society," in *New Perspectives Quarterly*, Vol. 22, No. 3, Summer 2005, pp. 12-14.

¹⁴ Hibbs, Thomas. s. "What's the Matter with Reading Lolita in Tehran" <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/219127/whats-matter-reading-lolita-tehran-thomas-s-hibbs>

¹⁵ DePaul, Amy. Orientalist Fantasy? Neoconservative Propaganda in a literary guise? The Debate over Reading Lolita in Tehran. <http://www.popmatters.com/feature/fighting-words/#>

¹⁶ Nafisi, Azar. "Three Women, Two Worlds, One Issue", *SAIS Review* (Summer-Fall 2000), 37

¹⁷ Azar Nafisi, "Fiction: Open Space in a Closed Society," in *New Perspectives Quarterly*, Vol. 22, No. 3, Summer 2005, pp. 12-14.

Back in the book, One of her class is dedicated to answering why we love works such as *Madame Bovary* and *Lolita*.

"Each fairy tale offers the potential to surpass present limits, so in a sense the fairy tale offers you freedoms that reality denies. In all great works of fiction, regardless of the grim reality they present, there is an affirmation of life against the transience of that life, as essential defiance every great work of art, I would declare pompously, is a celebration an act of insubordination against the betrayals, horrors, and infidelities of life."

Nafisi also demonstrates the unique ways that literature speaks to readers according to their particular circumstances, asserting that the setting in which they read a book helps determine its meaning. Early in the book, Nafisi describes the story she is about to tell as that of *Lolita* in Tehran, "how *Lolita* gave a different color to Tehran and how Tehran helped redefine Nabokov's novel, turning it into this *Lolita*, our *Lolita*" (6). The effect of time and place on literary works lies at the heart of Reading *Lolita* in Tehran, and explains why the book was not titled simply Reading *Lolita*.¹⁸

Works Cited

Allen, Paul. "Through the Veil."

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/sep/13/featuresreviews.guardianreview1>

DePaul, Amy. "Re-Reading 'Reading *Lolita* in Tehran.'" *MELUS*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2008, pp. 73–92. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/20343467.

DePaul, Amy. "Orientalist Fantasy? Neoconservative Propaganda in a literary guise? The Debate over Reading *Lolita* in Tehran". <http://www.popmatters.com/feature/fighting-words/#>

Hibbs, Thomas. S. "What's the Matter with Reading *Lolita* in Tehran" <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/219127/whats-matter-reading-lolita-tehran-thomas-s-hibbs>

Kakutani, Michiko, "Books of the Times; Book Study as Insubordination Under the Mullahs", <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/04/15/books/books-of-the-times-book-study-as-insubordination-under-the-mullahs.html>

Nafisi, Azar. "Fiction: Open Space in a Closed Society," in *New Perspectives Quarterly*, Vol. 22, No. 3, Summer 2005, pp. 12-14.

Nafisi, Azar. "Reading *Lolita* In Tehran : a Memoir in Books". New York :Random House, 2003. Print.

Nafisi, Azar." Three Women, Two Worlds, One Issue" , SAIS Review (Summer-Fall 2000), 37

Singh, Amardeep. "Reading Azar Nafisi as a Literary Critic", <http://www.lehigh.edu/~amsp/2005/08/reading-azar-nafisi-as-literary-critic.html>

A Brief bio of corresponding author: Pooja Singal is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Elementary Education, Lady Shri Ram College for Women, University of Delhi, since the year 2010. She teaches courses related to Language Education such as Language Across the Curriculum, Teaching of English as a Second Language, Story Telling and Children's Literature, Material Development for Language, Pedagogy of Language and Curriculum Studies. Besides taking these courses, she has also been involved in guiding Action Research Projects along with Planning and Supervision aspects of the School Internship programme for the fourth year students in the department.

PoojaSingal holds a Masters degree in Education from Central Institute of Education along with a Masters degree in English Literature from Delhi University. Her areas of research interest are Language Education, Literacy, Language and Cognition and Use of Literature in Language Classrooms. She has been involved in syllabus revision and curriculum development of Language related papers in different universities, and has taken workshops for the professional development of the teachers in schools. She has also been on selection panel for PGTs and PRTs for different schools. She can be contacted on poojasingal1985@gmail.com.

¹⁸ DePaul, Amy. "Re-Reading 'Reading *Lolita* in Tehran.'" *MELUS*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2008, pp. 73–92. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/20343467.