

ISLAMOPHOBIA AND GENDER AWAKENING IN AZAR NAFISI'S
'READING LOLITA IN TEHRAN'

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ABSTRACT

The writings of memoirs by Iranian women contains a personal and historical dynamic. These memoir's have become increasingly popular in the west. As an effect of 9/11, a burgeoning genre in the west about Muslim women. These memoir's focus on Islam, a patriarchal society and the state's oppression on women. Islam in these texts is represented as a misogynist religion, hence, they create Islamophobia, an abhorrence of Islam and Muslim. In this article, an attempt to study of *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003) is a work by Iranian author and professor Azar Nafisi. The book chronicles the experiences of author about returning to Iran during revolution (1978-1981) and lived under the Islamic Republic of Iran government until her departure in 1997. The book also discusses issues concerning Iran's post – revolutionary politics, the fate of women under Islamist rule. The purpose of this study to explore personal experiences of Muslim women, and their problems. This paper mainly focuses on Muslim women largely concern religion and gender.

Keywords: 9/11, Islamophobia, Muslim women, The Veil, Oppression, Freedom.

Iranian women's memoirs have emerged in the West in two waves. The first of the memoirs appeared immediately after the 1979 revolution, after the mass migrations of Iranians from Iran. The second wave of Iranian women's memoirs appeared after 9/11 in the light of Iran's renewed conflict with the west. The post 9/11 era has witnessed an upsurge in the number of memoirs penned either by Muslims, mostly from the middle East or by Americans of Muslim/Middle Eastern origins.

Reading Lolita in Tehran, a memoir by Azar Nafisi, the daughter of a former charismatic mayor of pre-revolutionary Tehran and of a woman who won a seat in the Parliament of that country in 1963, chronicles the personal and intellectual unfolding of a private literature class. She started in Tehran after she left her last teaching post. Nafisi's father was a mayor of Tehran whom the Shah imprisoned in the 1970s. He had sent his daughter abroad as a child, to study in England and Switzerland. In 1979, she received her doctorate in English and American literature from the University of Oklahoma, where she had joined the Iranian Students' Movement against the Shah. After receiving her doctorate degree, she enthusiastically returned to a new Iran, to take up a teaching position at Tehran University. But the following year, Islamic Zealots moved to purge Iran's universities, and she was expelled for refusing to wear the veil when it became mandatory in 1981. In later years, she also taught at the Free Islamic University and Allameh Tabatabai University; and this memoir weaves forward and

backward in time and concentrates mainly on the period following Nafisi's resignation from the University in 1995.

The book is divided into four parts namely Lolita, Gatsby, James and Austen. In Part I, "Lolita," Nafisi recalls discussions she had with private students about women's rights under Islamic law while they discussed Vladimir Nabokov's novel Lolita. In Part II, "Gatsby," Nafisi remembers teaching English literature at the University of Tehran when she assigned *The Great Gatsby* for class discussion. Finally, in Parts III and IV, "James" and "Austen," respectively, Nafisi focuses on the period between 1990 - 1997 while discussing F. Scott Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* (1920) with private students before returning to Iran for a secret class on Western Literature despite its illegality under Islamic law.

The book is centered around a private literature class with students Mahshid, "with delicate feature and retreating smile", Yassi, the youngest in the group, shy by nature but getting excited by few things and having gently mocking tone in her voice", Mitra, "the dimpled one", Nassrin, "a contradiction in terms", Azin, "the wild one always outrageous and outspoken", Sanaz, "the belly dancer" and Manna, "who can make poetry out of things most people cast aside". The class is about to discussing various works of fiction by writers such as Joyce, Austen, James, Nabokov, Fitzgerald and others.

Gender identity is one of the most applied notions to the veil in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Nafisi offers sharp insights into the significance of the veil in Islamic Iran. She opens her book by comparing two photographs she still has of the young women in her reading group, one in which, in accordance with Iranian law, the women are covered in black robes and head scarves, and the other in which her students, in the relative security of Nafisi's apartment, are unveiled. Each student removes the Islamic dress after arriving at her place and reveals the casual/smart clothes (western clothes). Nafisi describes her notion of unveiling: "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". unveiled. In the second photo, Nafisi observes, "each has become distinct through the color and style of her clothes, the color and length of her hair; not even the two who are still wearing their head scarves look the same".

Nafisi's account of Mahshid's life, Mahshid's father as a devout Muslim, her meticulous observation of veiling practice and that she wore the scarf even before the revolution put veiling in contestation as faith or a political force. Nafisi writes about Mahshid: "Before the revolution, she had worn the scarf as a testament to her faith. Her decision was a voluntary act. When the revolution forced the scarf on others, her action became meaningless."

Nafisi has been conveying the actual situation of women in Iranian society through the female character Sanaz. As Iranian Society says "women like Sanaz wear their veil properly, do not wear makeup, do not walk in public with men who are not their fathers, brothers or husbands." In Iranian society, when a woman walked in public places, "not to be seen, not to be heard or noticed. She doesn't walk upright but she bends her head towards the ground and doesn't look at passers-by". Militia patrolled the streets of Tehran and Iranian cities to enforce all these rules. Militia, who ride in white Toyota patrols, four gun carrying men and women, sometimes followed by a minibus. There are called the Blood of God. We can see the quotations from Khomeini, "A MEN WHO WEAR TIES ARE U.S. LACKEYS. VEILING IS A WOMEN'S PROTECTION". "MY SISTER, GUARD YOUR VEIL. MY BROTHER, GUARD YOUR EYES".

Martin Luther King Jr. once stated, "freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed." In the text, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, people were segregated and treated unfairly. As Nafisi says "if she gets on a bus, the seating is segregated. She must enter through the rear door and sit in the back seats, allocated to women." In this piece of evidence, Sanaz, who is the girl, sits in a segregated bus, and has very limited freedom. This is significant because her freedom is very limited, and this proves that freedom is not given voluntarily because nothing happens if it is not demanded from. Another example is, when the author asks, "Does she compare her own situation with her mother's when she was the same age? Is she angry that women of her mother's generation could walk the streets freely, enjoy the company of the opposite sex, join the police force, become pilots, live under laws that were among the most progressive in the world regarding

women?" Based on this evidence, readers can assume that this example is talking about the times when freedom was available to women, when they could do what they wanted without having their options limited by others. This piece of evidence is important to note because during the time of the older generations, they had freedom because other people demanded for equal rights for women.

The revolution was reintroducing the Shari'ah as a counter to Western philosophies and decadence. This helped serve as a basis of controlling women's rights. They monitored everything, the way they looked, talked and acted. Yassi is talking about her experience at the green gate every time she enters the university. As she describes, "I would first be checked to see if I have the right clothes: the color of my coat, the length of my uniform, the thickness of my scarf, the form of my shoes, the objects in my bag, the visible traces of even the mildest makeup, the size of my rings and their level of attractiveness, all would be checked before I could enter the campus of the university."

Azar Nafisi tells a story related by one of her female students, Yassi, who had attended a lecture at Tehran University on the differences between Islam and Christianity. The professor had drawn a line down the middle of the board, and then, on one side, had written in white chalk "MUSLIM GIRL," while, on the other, he had written in pink "CHRISTIAN GIRL." He then asked the class if they knew the differences between the two.

"One was a virgin, he said at last, after an uncomfortable silence, white and pure, keeping herself for her husband and her husband only. Her power came from her modesty. The other, well, there was not much one could say about her except that she was not a virgin. To Yassi's surprise, the two girls behind her, both active members of the Muslim Students' Association, had started to giggle, whispering, No wonder more and more Muslims are converting to Christianity."(30)

When the author's "secret class" turns to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, one student declares that if the novel had been set in Iran, its famous first sentence would read: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a Muslim man, regardless of his fortune, must be in want of a nine-year-old virgin wife". Another student agrees, "The Islamic Republic has taken us back to Jane Austen's time. God bless the arranged marriage!". *Pride and Prejudice* inspires a bitter discussion about the consequences for women of the laws instituted by the Ayatollah Khomeini, which stipulate that girls can be married off at nine and that polygamy is permissible for men. As a result, one of the students scoffs, Islamic Iran is a "paradise for men." Even some secular Iranian men, she complains, have availed themselves of the opportunity to take more than one wife.

Throughout her memoir, Nafisi stated the real condition of Iranian women. Women can be seen living as slaves under the strict rules of Iranian society without any freedom, equality, and rights. While there were strict rules for women, there were no rules for men. This shows the gender bias of Iranian society. John Stuart Mill, philosopher who argued that the inequality of women was a relic from the past. As he says "The legal subordination of one sex to another – is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a system of perfect equality, admitting no power and privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other".

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