

Empowerment through Reading: A Study of Nafisi's Reading Lolita in Tehran

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Abstract

Iran is a country known for the restrictions it has placed on its people by virtue of its strict shari'a laws. This has become the norm following the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Women have been some of the main targets. They have faced crackdowns simply because they were women. Some of the measures imposed on them included mandatory veiling, no make-up, covering from head to toe, being escorted by a male guardian, being asked to step down from top positions in the government and so on.

In such a scenario, Azar Nafisi, finding it difficult to teach at the university, quit her job. She then called seven of her most promising students to her home every Thursday evening to discuss literary works. All seven of the women were from different backgrounds, none of them alike. But they would come, armed with the books in hand, some of them forbidden, sometimes even photocopied, to spend some time discussing and analysing these works. The works, ranging from *The Great Gatsby* to *Emma* would be discussed and scrutinized by the eight of them and compared to their own situations, prodded and checked to see what gems could be found between the pages. They would try to find inspiration and answers to their own situation through reading. Thus through these sessions they unknowingly sought empowerment. It is this aspect that they left these sessions with that made these classes exceptional and different.

Key words: Iran, Nafisi, reading, empowerment, books

Living in Iran has become by no means easy. Being governed by strict laws and rules has made life in the Islamic Republic of Iran, rather difficult. When this is coupled with various difficulties such as high rates of unemployment, poverty, inflation and so on, living in this country becomes a difficult task in itself.

It is difficult to imagine that this was not always the case. Iran is home to the first human rights charter in the world. It is home to the great Persian Empire. It too was, in the previous century, home to some of the most advanced women in the world.

Yet following the Islamic Revolution of 1979, affairs took a drastic turn in Iran as contrary to popular belief, the people were not given the promised changes they thought they would see happening. Instead a new code of laws was brought in based on the Shari'a. These laws were outdated, existing from the time of Prophet Muhammed. Yet the code was made mandatory and replaced the modern laws of the deposed Shah. Militia such as the basij were brought in to enforce the laws especially upon women. Women in high position such as top government posts and judges were asked to resign/ step down from their posts. Many were the measures enacted against the female gender simply because they happened to be women.

One such woman was the teacher Azar Nafisi. She was reluctant to wear the veil at the university where she taught. Since it had become mandatory and she was against the idea, she finally resigned from her post at the university. The university officials would not accept her resignation and she would not wear the veil, but eventually she left her post.

Nafisi, being the teacher she was, decided to call seven of her students home every Thursday. The class consisted of seven of her most promising students. The class met to discuss literary works but they also discussed their everyday troubles as well as life in Iran under the regime. Despite being from different backgrounds, they came together under the banner of literature and Iran. For them as Adrienne Rich explains, "it is an act of survival" (18). Without it, life became a series of hopeless events. The class brought myriad personalities together to discuss literature. In addition it helped them also to survive everyday reality.

Manna, Mahshid, Nassrin, Yassi, Azin, Mitra and Sanaz were the seven students whom Nafisi had chosen for her class. They were as similar as chalk and cheese yet they managed to stay together for the sake of the class. The books they studied varied from *A Thousand and One Nights*, right down to *Pride and Prejudice* and *Lolita*. Often these books were not available and they had to turn to even Photostat copies to continue their classes unhindered. Yet their enthusiasm for literature remained unwavering as they continued their journey into the world of books.

As Nafisi explains, "We were not looking for blueprints, for an easy solution, but we did hope to find a link between the open spaces the novels provided and the closed ones we were confined to" (19). In literature, they hoped to find if not solutions, at least the space to think about how to cope with the kind of reality that had been handed to them on their platter.

"That room, for all of us, became a place of transgression. What a wonderland it was! Sitting around the large coffee table covered with bouquets of flowers, we moved in and out of the novels we read. Looking back, I am amazed at how much we learned without even noticing it. We were, to borrow from Nabokov, to experience how the ordinary pebble of ordinary life could be transformed into a jewel through the magic of the eye of fiction". (Nafisi 8)

With each writer they encountered they found nuggets of wisdom to face reality. When they read the *Thousand and One Nights* they came across women characters who were married to the king and killed before he got a chance to know them. These women have no voice in the story. We as readers do not know about them because they never voice themselves or protest or leave a mark behind. But when the king marries Scheherazade, she changes the pattern by telling stories. "She fashions her universe not through physical force, as does the king, but through imagination and reflection. This gives her the courage to risk her life and sets her apart from the other characters in the tale". (Nafisi 19)

In Scheherazade the class thus finds the inspiration to move on. Scheherazade breaks the cycle of violence that the king had begun, through story telling. She enchants him so much with her stories that he then comes to realize the foolishness of his decision. Her stories took him to another world - one that abounded in wonder and amazement. Through her stories, Scheherazade was able to end the violence that pervaded the kingdom and restore peace and happiness. It brought hope to the class that they too could find change in their lives without resorting to violence.

In Nabokov's *Lolita*, they found more nuggets of wisdom. It is not clear what would have become of Lolita had Humbert not taken off with her. "Yet the novel, the finished work, is hopeful, beautiful even, a defense not just of beauty but of life, ordinary everyday life, all the normal pleasures that Lolita, like Yassi, was deprived of" (Nafisi 33). They found they could relate to the character of Lolita, who was confined to the company of Humbert. They were trapped by the laws of their country as Lolita was trapped by the rules of Humbert. The class found similarities in their lives: "like Lolita we tried to escape and create our own little pockets of freedom. And like Lolita we took every opportunity to flaunt our insubordination: by showing a little hair from under our scarves, insinuating a little color into the drab uniformity of our appearances, growing our nails, falling in love and listening to forbidden

music". (25-26) What Nafisi talks about in these lines also applies to the rest of Iran. The women of Iran were opposing the law in whatever way they could, often being inspired by Iranian writers to take up the challenge and express themselves.

Nafisi ascribes this idea to all great works of fiction - "an affirmation of life against the transience of that life, an essential defiance" (47). By doing so, the author creates a new, imaginary world - one in which the reader can transform the self in anyway they desire and be what they wish to be. This is most likely why we tend to have such a great love for fiction - because it gives us a chance to be what we cannot be in real life, what we cannot have in reality.

Nafisi observes that fiction offers 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" (282). Nafisi is referring to the world of fiction. This world offered the "possibility of a boundless freedom when all options are taken away" (23). Considering how in the Islamic Republic of Iran, the laws posed very little freedom especially for women, the world of literature opened vast vistas for the women in Nafisi's class. More importantly, in Manna's terms they called this space "a space of our own (12)" as it gave them a chance to unveil and be themselves for a short while. As Nafisi declares: "It is amazing how, when all possibilities seem to be taken away from you, the minutest opening can become a great freedom. We felt we were together that we were almost absolutely free". (28)

In the freedom of the space that turned out to be Nafisi's living room, they explored the possibilities of the world of fiction. As they became engrossed in Scheherazade and Lolita, their own lives were also changing. What the class realizes is that they "must create spaces within that culture of domination if we are to survive whole, our souls intact". (hooks 31)

It is when they read Austen, most interestingly, that they find such spaces being created. Austen does not write about the politics of her time or the latest gossip that abounded then. Instead she writes about the kind of life she was more familiar with. Yet the women in her novels are not lackadaisical. "Boundaries are constantly threatened by the women in Austen's novels, who feel more at home in the private than the public domain, the domain of heart and of intricate individual relations." (Nafisi 307) It is also these women that are the centre of the novel and without them the novels' plots do not move forward. In their own quiet way, these women make their way forward, carrying the story with them. That is why Nafisi's secret friend known only as the magician urges her to stop everything else and "start focusing on your Austen (282)." By doing so, it would enable the class to see how their situations were in some senses similar and they could locate coping strategies from Austen, as well as the way to advancement.

As mentioned before, living in the Islamic Republic of Iran had become a difficult affair for the Iranian. With the number of restrictions placed on them, life has become increasingly difficult in the country. To live is not easy under such circumstances. Nafisi asks the essential question - "How does the soul survive?" (315) and comes up with the answer "through love and imagination" (315).

The world of fiction is thus the key to finding hope in a hopeless situation. Reading provides the entry to an alternate universe - the one of imagination. Through imagination the reader in Iran can access what is beyond their scope in everyday life. As Nafisi points out, "A good novel is one that shows the complexity of individuals, and creates enough spaces for all these characters to have a voice" (132) thus providing the reader ample space to imagine universes.

Each time the class read a work, they left feeling a little different, a little stronger than before. We might call this empowerment for it enabled them to cope with their lives. It gave Nafisi the ability to design a new class each day. It helped Yassi to continue to hope to go to USA where her uncles were though no female member in her family had done so. The rest of the class also hoped to go beyond the confines of the country which most of them did.

In effect, the books they read, be it *Invitation to a Beheading* by Nabokov or *Emma* by Austen, eventually got them to think beyond the confines of the book and start thinking into the realms of imagination. Their thoughts soared there and that is probably why they too soared and left the country as well. What mattered in the end was that they were able to transform with the help of the books they read not just their minds, but their lives as well.

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