

## **THEMES OF MEMORY, TRAUMA AND IDENTITY: AN ANALYSIS OF THE MEMOIR *READING LOLITA IN TEHRAN* BY AZAR NAFISI**

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### ***Abstract***

The aim of this paper is to prove how the themes of memory, trauma and identity are intermingled in the memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by Azar Nafisi. The book is a memoir of the author's experiences about returning to Iran during the revolution and living in the Islamic Republic of Iran government. Events are interlaced with the stories of book club members consisting of seven of Nafisi's female students who meet weekly at her house to discuss works of Western literature including the controversial *Lolita*. Nafisi's experience in Iran, which she described in this work provide opportunities to discuss several key themes like personal freedom, social obligations, tyranny and democracy, love and commitment, ethics and moral courage. This paper tries to prove that women had freedom prior to the Islamic revolution in Iran. People were free to do what they wished to do. But after the revolution, as mentioned in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, people were forced to do what the government wanted them to do. People had to hide themselves to read literary works. They were under the fear that they will be arrested or punished if they read these banned books. So people are living in the memory of the past when they were living in the land with total freedom and now they are undergoing the traumatic experience whereby they are not able to live a life as they wish. The paper explores the status of

**Keywords :** *Trauma, identity, social obligations, tyranny*

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women in the war. They were affected by the trauma of the revolution. Women were affected by identity crisis. Iranians' dreams including Nafisi's become shattered through the government's imposition of new rules. Nafisi introduces her private students and largely focuses on their discussions of the restrictions put on the lives of women, especially at schools and universities, following the revolution. This paper tries to show how the experience of women before, during, and after the Iranian Revolution is discussed through the author's memories in the work *Reading Lolita in Tehran*.

## Introduction

*Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* is a book by Iranian author and professor Azar Nafisi, published in 2003. Azar Nafisi is an Iranian-American writer and professor of English literature. She was born in Tehran, Iran and resided in United States and became a US citizen. Nafisi witnessed the 1979 Iranian revolution. During this time, she was a professor of English at a University in Tehran. She stopped teaching at the university in disagreement with faculty authorities over her refusal to wear the veil. After resigning from the university she invited her female students to attend regular meetings at her house every Thursday morning. They discussed the fate of women in post revolutionary Iranian society and studied many literary works including the controversial *Lolita*.

Trauma studies explores the impact of trauma in literature and society by analyzing its psychological, rhetorical, and cultural significance. When an individual experiences a traumatic event, whether physical or psychological, their memory can be affected in many ways. For example, trauma might affect their memory for that event, memory of previous or subsequent events, or thoughts in general. In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Azar Nafisi intertwines her memories and experiences with the traumatic experiences of other people in Iran. The impact of revolutions and the wars can be found in her description. Iranian's traumas are recollected and described in this book.

This paper attempts to prove how the themes of memory, trauma and identity are intertwined in the memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. The book consists of a memoir of the author's experiences about returning to Iran during the revolution and living under the Islamic Republic of Iran government. Unlike a biography, which tells the story of a person's life, a memoir provides the author's recollections of a particular period in his or her life. 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 Tabatabaei, her resignation, the formation of her book club, and her decision to emigrate. This book clearly portrays how the people of Iran had undergone the

traumatic experience of the war. Events are interlaced with the stories of book club members consisting of seven of her female students who met weekly at Nafisi's house to discuss works of Western literature, including the controversial *Lolita*, and the texts are interpreted through the books they read. The memoir is set in Tehran, Iran, from the late 1970s to the late 1990s. That period of time marked extreme changes in Iranian society as the monarchy, headed by the Shah of Iran, was overthrown in favour of a revolutionary government that put its interpretation of Islamic law at the centre of society. The experiences that Nafisi has are a direct result of the memoir's setting. The book is divided into four sections: "Lolita", "Gatsby", "James", and "Austen". In each section Nafisi recalls discussions, she and her students had about the works of literature and describes her memories of life in Iran before, during and after the Iranian Revolution. Nafisi's account flashes back to the early days of the revolution, when she first started teaching at the University of Tehran amid the swirl of protests and demonstrations. In 1980, Nafisi claims she was dismissed from the University of Tehran for refusing to wear a veil. The book also discusses issues concerning the politics of Iran during and after the Iranian revolution, the Iran-Iraq War, and the Iranian people in general.

Nafisi also describes how her freedom was restricted and why she had to leave Tehran University. The book focuses on the experience of women before, during, and after the Iranian Revolution, and as in this quote, often shows that regardless of education, religion, or social status, all women were negatively affected by the laws on veiling and meeting with men outside one's family, in addition to the the attacks and university closures. Nafisi fought against veiling at two universities, leading to her eventual expulsion from both, and many of her students placed themselves in the line of danger by attending protests and violating rules in small ways. Veiling should be seen not only as a religious and political issue in itself, but as a representation of the confining laws enforced upon women's bodies and identities. Nafisi writes from memory rather than promising to tell the exact truth, is important to the story, as Nafisi gives herself room for the same imagination and creativity she lauds in fiction. Nafisi's most intricate moments of imagery and metaphor are often written to represent the way memories from Tehran still crowd Nafisi's head and suddenly wash over her at times in her later life in America. It is useful to note that the word "memoir," as in "A Memoir in Books" comes from the Latin *memoria*, originally meaning memory and then a written account of a person's life. Nafisi takes this more literally than most, explicitly interweaving memories from different times in her life, narration, literary analysis, and direct notes about things she has created or changed in the presentation of her memories. Though it is impossible to read the novel fully without understanding the political climate and progression before, during, and after the Iranian Revolution, Nafisi obscures the logic and timeline of this progression by skipping around in time throughout the novel and

focusing on the social impact of political leaders and decisions. This narrative choice allows the reader to juxtapose different issues surrounding the Iranian Revolution, focus on the experience of political changes rather than the leaders and changes themselves, and experience a sense of anxiety and confusion that helps create the emotional landscape of the story itself.

The theme of identity is also important. Nafisi often tries to help her students in developing their identities. She wants her students of both genders to gain an appreciation of literature and its importance. While she faces difficulties with the restrictions she is under and is sometimes the subject of harassment, Nafisi will not compromise her teaching methodologies. The kind of inspirational teaching helps students to teach themselves by applying their own intelligence and emotions to what they are reading. Nafisi found nearly every aspect of her life was constrained by the social, cultural, and political conditions under which she lived. Though she was demoralized by her increasingly diminished status as a woman and by the restrictions placed on her as a university professor, Nafisi never lost her love and appreciation of literature. Nafisi intertwines her group-based discussions and own interpretations of novels such as Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Henry James's *Daisy Miller*, and Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* with her impressions, memories, and stories of the Iran in which she and her students, friends, and family lived. Nafisi emphasizes the way literature relates to daily life in Iran and the indignities its citizens, especially women and academics, face. She has admitted that one reason she wrote the book was to help release the anger she still felt over those situations.

Nafisi relates Nabokov's depiction of "the nightmarish quality of living in an atmosphere of perpetual dread" to living in Iran's totalitarian society at the time. She describes how the Iranian government censored films, television, and books, only allowing those that reflected their ideology. Nafisi's home-based class allows her and her students to escape the absurdities of everyday life for a few hours. After relating several stories of how women are humiliated in Iran, Nafisi draws a parallel between the world of fictional shadows in many of Nabokov's novels and the world she is creating with her students. In her class, the women discuss *Lolita* in terms of immorality and their own lives, experiences, and beliefs. Though there are differences between the students, Nafisi also emphasizes the commonality of their experience in Iran, primarily in terms of what they cannot do and the importance of their Thursday morning class. Political unrest and uncertainty remain part of life in Iran. Nafisi attends a few meetings, sees the restrictions on life and culture increase, and tries to concentrate on teaching; however, the violence touches her life as people she knows are being persecuted and sometimes executed. Her classes often become forums for discussions of politics and current events. Her students were from diverse backgrounds, had different political beliefs, and varied in age, marital status, and

personality. There was often conflict between them over the books, opinions, and life choices. Yet the women could be themselves in that classroom in ways they could not in general Iranian society. They took off their robes, veils, and chadors, and revealed who they were to each other and the professor. Each woman found acceptance and belonging, and was allowed to grow and develop intellectually and socially. she feels a sense of loss, especially of personal life, in her mother country. When Iran becomes the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1981, women are forced to wear headscarves all the time in public, something Nafisi does not want to do. The government forces Iranian women to wear scarves with long robes, or chadors, garments that cover both the head and the body. The government also regulates their interactions with the opposite sex. Nafisi grows uncomfortable with the new regulations and the limitations on women's rights. The constant violence and harassment, as well as the loss of her sense of self, trouble her deeply. She uses ideas from the books they discuss to underscore her impressions of life in the totalitarian society. She continually tries to resist restrictions the Iranian government. Throughout the text of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Nafisi often describes her world through gender roles, primarily focusing on women in Iranian society. The traumas faced by women are clearly portrayed. Nafisi is very aware of the change in women's status in her native country. For much of the twentieth century, women could not marry before the age of eighteen, but by the mid-1980s, after the revolution, age of marriage-ability was lowered to only nine. Women faced many newer restrictions, including the requirement that they be veiled in public. Women who committed adultery or prostitution were stoned to death. They only had half the legal value of men. They could only be seen in public with men who were family members. In Nafisi's opinion, women had become irrelevant in Iran.

In this book, Nafisi describes in detail the difficulties of life under the totalitarian regime and how it deeply affected her and her sense of self. The traumatic condition of women is portrayed through various characters. Although the new Islamic rules of behaviour affected all Iranian citizens, Nafisi explains that after the revolution, women's position in society was significantly curtailed specifically due to the implementation of the so-called Islamic dress code. women were active participants in the Islamic Revolution in Iran, their rights were significantly restricted after Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution Party took power. Women were legally regarded as inferior to men, and could be married off at the age of nine. Men could have as many as four wives and were in charge of making decisions for the family. Men controlled where their wives and daughters could go. Women could not be in the company of a man who was not her husband or a relative. A husband had to give his written permission for a woman to travel or obtain a passport. Men also had custody of their children. All women had to follow a public dress code-the hejab-which included completely covering of one's hair and body while outside the home.

Makeup was forbidden. Anyone ignoring these rules could face corporal punishment or imprisonment. Women's education, work, and sporting opportunities were also limited. On the college and university level, women could only pursue restricted studies. Women were also limited in the kinds of jobs they could take. Women could not be judges that presided over trials or issued verdicts, for example. They could only work with permission of their husbands. Recreationally, women could not play sports if there was a chance they could be seen by men. Women could also not watch men participate in sports in which their legs could be seen. Women lost their identities. Nafisi tried to portray this condition of women of those times and recollect their situations from her memories. she teaches a handful of young women how to survive.

Women in Tehran, when the Iranian revolution began, had little or no freedoms out of their houses. Nafisi took an enormous risk by inviting these seven women into her house to discuss literature. If caught she and her students could face jail time because the books were banned in fear of conspiracy against the new revolutionary Iran. In the memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, the extreme risks these women take are due to the reoccurring theme of oppression throughout the story. The book offers great challenges to young readers, and promises to enlighten them in a myriad of ways. Nafisi's experience in Iran will provide opportunities to discuss several key themes in class, such as: personal freedom, social obligations, tyranny and democracy, love and commitment, ethics and moral courage.

The coming of the war directly upon the heels of the revolution impacted life in Iran thoroughly. The new regime used the war as a weapon against anyone expressing dissident political views; anyone critiquing the government was labelled a traitor. In addition to traditional military battles, the civilian populations of Tehran and Baghdad were subjected to a brutal campaign of missile and rocket attacks. In much of this section of the book, Nafisi describes their experiences of blackouts, sirens, air raids and deaths as well as the psychological impact and coping mechanisms of living under such pressures; e.g. after missile attacks there would be a regular round of phone calls amongst family and friends confirming everyone's safety. Nafisi and her husband struggled to decide the safest location in the apartment for their children to sleep, and moved them several times. For entertainment and diversion, many people watched movie videos procured on the black market or from banned satellite dishes. The anxiety and threat of constant attacks were frequently compounded by the pro-war propaganda of the regime. For instance, Nafisi specifically describes the revolutionary motorcycle squads who would circle missile attack sites, sometimes barring help to the victims, so that they could chant victory slogans. The end of the war unfortunately does not bring relief to the people of Iran. For those not in the war it was a kind of anti-climax. Although the ceasing of missile attacks was certainly good, there was a prevalent feeling of "disillusion and

disenchantment" (239) since Iran lay in ruins, and the nation suffered from rampant unemployment. For many of those young men who truly believed in the war, it was even worse. Nafisi gives a brief history of marriage laws in Iran to make the irony of women's position in Iran clear. The main point is that they are living in a time warp, where four generations of women have had wildly different experiences. In the early twentieth century the age of marriage had been raised to 18; women were being elected to parliament, and women enjoyed rights comparable to those of women in Western democracies. However, after the revolution, the family protection law was repealed, thus negating many of the rights of women both at home and work. The age of marriage was lowered to nine, the punishment for adultery and prostitution was stoning, and women were considered to have half the worth of men. Whereas Nafisi and her mother enjoyed a relative degree of freedom, her young daughter's position in society has regressed. In fact, it is more akin to that of her own great-grandmother.

Nafisi presents many other problems commonly faced by women. She describes the condition of her students. Each of them were undergoing some kind of oppressions. She demonstrates the difficulties of open courtship through the experiences of Sanaz and Yazzi. The narration of the plight of Azin exposes the discriminatory divorce and child custody laws. Nafisi even touches on the ambiguous psychological effects of Iran's oppressive laws by describing Nassrin's fundamental alienation from her own body. Thus, through the memoir Nafisi mentions of the injustices suffered by women in the Islamic Republic of Iran, such as marital rape, physical violence, gynaecologic exams to prove virginity; anxiety resultant of war-time bombing; the government praising death and war. She tries to explain the Iranian Revolution and its pre-war society.

This memoir weaves together many important stories concerning Iran's post-revolutionary politics, the fate of women under Islamist rule, and the difficulty of teaching literature in a climate of political upheaval. However, the narrative strand used most frequently to describe the book involves seven young women who meet clandestinely at Nafisi's house from 1995 to 1997 to discuss western literature that was considered counter-revolutionary, starting with Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. In effect, the women constitute a subversive book club--a free space where they are shown removing their government-mandated shawls and overcoats and sitting down together, with books in hand, to savour language and discuss outlaw literature in a deliberately all-female setting; in this space they also commiserate over their loss of freedoms, drink tea and eat sweets, and tell the stories of their own lives. The tone in the novel is more like rebellious because the woman is under oppression and they want to be free so they try to go "against the man" most of the time and it relates a lot with the characters since most of them are female.

The book itself is an expression of individual thought and the feeling of accomplishing from the creative process. Nafisi wish to share her experiences with readers, her understandings and observations. In conclusion the book *Reading Lolita in Tehran* was a good read, it talked about the struggles Nafisi had in her life how she became a teacher moved to the united states then came back to her home town of Iran to find out it's at war and she can't teach anymore so she starts her own "club" where she picked some of her best students and discussed with them about books. Nafisi's memory plays a major role. Since it is a memoir, all of the incidents are described by recollecting every situation she has had. Nafisi recollects the traumatic experience of women and their process of development of identities. Thus the themes of memory, trauma and identity are intertwined in Nafisi's Memoir.

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