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A NEW HISTORICIST READING OF *READING LOLITA IN TEHRAN*

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ABSTRACT



Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003), as the title suggests, is a memoir, which portrays the individual experiences and personal lives of the authoress and her students in Tehran during the Iranian Revolution 1979. In addition, as the subtitle suggests, Nafisi's work constructs this personal memoir using various fictional texts such as *Lolita*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Daisy Miller*. Through the act of reading the above mentioned fictional texts, the individuals in the memoir draw parallel between their lives and the female characters in the novel, and thereby attempt to redefine their lives in the Totalitarian Regime in Iran. The memoir is a mixed construction of fictional world and historical reality, where real life individual experiences are recorded in parallel with canonical fictional characters, in order to deconstruct the dominant Historical narratives by laying great emphasis on personal narratives. This paper argues that Nafisi constructs *Reading Lolita in Tehran* as a historical text as it examines the fictional texts of different periods and appropriates it to the present social, political and cultural scenario in Iran. As an outcome, the memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran* records this historicizing process, and thus becomes 'a' history of Iran from a subject point of view.

Key words: New Historicism, Memoir, Personal Narratives, Discourse, History/history

Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003) is a memoir that records both personal and political events witnessed and experienced by the authoress in Tehran, Iran during the Iranian Revolution 1979. By documenting the personal events that she has experienced and witnessed during this historical cataclysm, she grieves over the repudiation of human values and attempts to explore the value of freedom and celebration of the individual. Meanwhile, her depiction of historical and political events through the voice of a collective consciousness is not a mere pictorial and factual description of history, but a creation of space where the political regime is questioned. As she perceives Iranian Revolution and the ensued historical impact on society from an individual point of view, it becomes purely subjective

and deconstructs the conventional historical narrative which glorified the same events. Her memoir becomes 'a' history, as it records the events with unsaid truths about individual lives and their struggles under the totalitarian regime, which was never articulated and recorded in the conventional mainstream History. On one hand, though the conventional History of Iran claims objectivity as its foremost excellence, it is rather more 'fictional' and subjective in nature, as it has suppressed the voice of the people and articulated the authorial voice of Khomeini. On the other hand, in spite of the subjective nature of her memoir, Azar Nafisi has successfully documented 'a' history of Iran which completely alters the dominant voice of the conventional Historian.

The History of Iran celebrates the 1979 Revolution and its outcome which dethroned the monarch Reza Shah and authorized the rebellious Islamic Republic and its revolutionary ideals. Ayatollah Khomeini was considered to be the father of the revolution as he had led the rebellion. The followers of Khomeini strongly believed that he would lead them on the Islamic path, and he was seen as the guardian of Islamic morality. Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* rewrites a new history of Iranian revolution through her memoir by documenting the suffering and victimization of the common innocent people under this historical and political catastrophe. She records various inhuman activities of the revolutionary guards which are not 'Islamic' and not even moralistic, and absolutely not humanistic. Her narration of personal events, which includes tragic incidents and grieving episodes, distorts the existing picture of Iranian revolution as a boon to Islamic way of life. Azar Nafisi argues that revolutionary leaders, like Ayatollah Khomeini, in the name of God and religion crushed individual lives and dreams in the process of fulfilling their own dreams. The author emphasizes that the so-called father of the revolution *dreams* on everyone's behalf, and states that under the totalitarian regime even the dreams of an individual becomes an illegal phenomenon. The authoress brilliantly expresses this idea in her memoir through the following scene: a little boy raised an alarm waking up his parents in horror telling them that he had an "illegal dream" (46).

Reading Lolita in Tehran is a conglomeration of both the fictional and historical world that focuses on personal narrative, where individual lives and experiences link both these worlds. This memoir portrays the lives of Nafisi and her students in Tehran during the revolution. She has witnessed the activities of fundamentalist Islamic state and their inhuman activities in the name of religion and God. She has undergone a period of horror during the Iran-Iraq war, has spent sleepless nights, and has felt insecure and confined under the Islamic Republic of Iran. She feels nostalgic about the past and expresses her anxiety for the lost freedom. In addition to this individual experiences, she also records the life of many subordinates (her students) who are also

subjected and oppressed. The memoir becomes a historical record of the human rights violation activities occurred during the war time. The memoir, by documenting multiple voices and opposing perspectives/beliefs of the people, resonate the aim of New Historicist reading. In spite of being expelled from the University of Allameh Tabatabaei, Nafisi along with a few female students regularly conducts books reading sessions in her home. The authoress and her students do not perceive these books reading sessions as an escape from the violent, inhuman outside world, rather this exercise helps them to comprehend the impact of the revolution on their marginal position in the society. Through the act of reading the canonical works of great authors like Vladimir Nabokov, James Joyce, Jane Austen, the students here attempt to understand their own lives under the totalitarian regime by comparing their plight to the female characters of the novels. Their act of reading fiction develops into a process of historicizing the texts, as they pedantically interpret the lives of the victimized female characters under the hands of cultural and social patriarchy. Such power discourse observed in these canonical novels (which made the female characters more resilient) helps the students of Nafisi to encounter the dominant socio-cultural discourse imposed by the fundamental Islamic regime. As the memoir records these personal narratives of a traumatic period, which are neglected as part of the mainstream History of Iranian revolution, the memoir also becomes 'a' history of Iran from a subject point of view. Azar Nafisi has titled the book, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*; the title and the subtitle together signify the fact that this text is a mixed construction of individual experiences (Memoir), fictional world (*Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov) and historical realities (Tehran – Iranian Revolution). A memoir is usually a string of individual experiences that talk about one's personal life. But the subtitle here, *A Memoir in Books* advocates the idea that the personal life has been narrated through *Books*—fictional works like *Lolita*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Daisy Miller*. Thus, these different fictional texts form the building strategy of this memoir of Azar Nafisi.

This paper argues that Nafisi constructs *Reading Lolita in Tehran* as a historical text as it examines fictions of different periods and appropriates it to the present social, political and cultural scenario in Iran. The paper also observes the ways in which Nafisi's memoir conglomerates with the other fictional texts to deconstruct the existing history of Iranian Revolution. The memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran* becomes a historical record of individual experiences of common public during the revolution and Iran-Iraq war. New Historicism believes that studying and understanding literature helps to explore the disregarded, yet significant political, social and cultural details of a period from a subject point of view. It looks at literary texts as historical records of the given period of time. The term "New Historicism" was coined by the American critic Stephen Greenblatt and his book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: from More to Shakespeare* is considered to be its foremost and fundamental text. New Historicism views History books skeptically and perceives it as nothing but a distorted idiosyncratic report of events by a dominant authority. New Historicists observe that History is also similar to any other narrative like poetry or fiction and very subjective with no definite objective reality. With a strong argument that History is contoured by the person who writes it, New Historicism attempts to prove that History is also 'a' text which can be interpreted. Louis Montrose, the American New Historicist defines New Historicism as a process in which "the textuality of history and the historicity of texts" are expounded (Chandra 70). A New Historicist reading focuses on diary, fashion, legal records and anecdotes as texts linking it to the historical material to re-evaluate and re-invent the texts (Chandra 70). Considering the idea that memoir can also be taken as a historical text, this paper attempts to explore the "historicity" of Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*.

Judith Newton says, "Instead of the autonomous 'self' or 'individual', New Historicists speaks of subject positions that are socially and linguistically constructed, created by various discourses of a given culture" (88). Here the Islamic state in the name of religion, morality and culture has subjugated women and they are forced to

acquire the "subject position." The State justifies its restrictions imposed on women as moral standards. In the dominant Historical discourse, it is certain that "subject position" of women neither gets recorded nor questioned. But the memoir critically analyses the "subject position," and records every incident of subjugation of the Iranian women. The oppression of women and absolute restriction in the form of veil is also documented in the memoir. The author was expelled from the University of Tehran as she refused to wear veil in the classroom. The so-called religious revolutionary guards molested the Muslim women under the pretext of maintaining moral standards. The restrictions included thus: these guards checked whether women wear makeup, carry makeup kits in their handbags, and wear nail polish; women were not allowed to walk in the streets without a male companion. The girls, who were jailed for every trivial reason, were raped and sexually harassed by the jailors and also get killed. This situation has created a sense of psychological trauma in the minds of the women, for instance, Nafisi grieves, "I asked myself, Are these my people, is this my hometown, am I who I am?" (74). Thus, the authoress records the historical events from a "subject position" (Newton 87) and in order to understand her/their position she/they seek refuge in literary texts.

New Historicism claims greater privilege for literary texts in understanding the historical and socio-political realities of a time rather than estimating a period through the lens of history texts. In his anthology of essays on New Historicism, H.AramVeesser briefly describes the tasks of New Historicists. He says that the foremost task of the New Historicists is to examine different texts in order to show that those texts play a key role in mediating power relations within the state. Secondly, they treat literary texts as inseparable from other texts and forms. Thirdly, they share the view that literature, like other written sources, raises the possibility of subversion against the state (Brannigan 174). Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* also succeeds in interpreting the role of various texts in power relations within the state of Iran and also challenges the state by subverting the religious, moral, social ideals that the state symbolizes. The memoir perceives the literary (fictional) texts as a reflection

of various contemporary issues in Iran, anxieties and struggles of the people, cultural, social, political, religious problems of the state, the idea of freedom and the identity crisis of the civil subordinates. According to Stephen Greenblatt, the postmodern idea that our attitudes towards basic matters like sex, women, colonialism, identity and love are not given but “learned” in New Historicism (Robson 27). This “learning” is transpired in the memoir through self conscious reading of *Lolita* which results in self awareness and self realization. It is evident in the following lines:

Lolita belongs to a category of victims who have no defense and are never given a chance to articulate their own story. As such, she becomes a double victim: not only her life but also her life story is taken from her. We told ourselves we were in that class to prevent ourselves from falling victims to this second crime.

The above quoted lines prove that the authoress and her students are self conscious and they are very certain that their life story should be recorded; unlike Lolita’s, they want their voices to be heard. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* recognizes and records their voices and thereby, transmitting the memoir into a history of Iran through personal narratives.

Azar Nafisi’s concern is to portray the struggles and difficulties of the Iranian women in leading a peaceful life, as their imagination, dreams and desires are curtailed. The authoress creates a space for her own self and also for her students to free themselves from the constriction, and to discuss and express their opinions and ideas. Nafisi creates a space using active and political interpretations of various fictional texts through which they challenge the state and are able to identify their own positions in the society. The thoughts and dreams of the students become the new ideology through which they would like to shape the society. Stephen Greenblatt also argues that literature is typically more than a mere product of its circumstances but can change the conditions in which it was created, in other words, literature is frequently “the politically charged site of ideological struggle” (Goring 246). Azar Nafisi points out such an ideological struggle in

her students’ interpretation of the literary texts which becomes much more significant when their interpretations vary from one and another. In addition to the political voices, emotional and passionate voices are also heard in the memoir. Mahshid shows deep love for her country and don’t want to leave the country, instead wishes to bring a change in the system from within. Nassrin would like to leave the country in search of a new life and completely despise the idea that she could breathe freedom in Iran (51). They strongly emphasize their opinions upholding the texts as the fundamental evidence to validate their beliefs.

Reading Lolita in Tehran breaks the boundary between fiction and reality, intertwines the both in order to transgress from the constricting Islamic Republic of Iran to another world which Nafisi terms as Republic of Imagination and it becomes evident when she states the theme of the class: relation between fiction and reality (6). The living room becomes their space of transgression (8) and the students make constant attempts to understand reality through fiction. Azar Nafisi historicizes fiction through the process of reading it in relation to the lives and difficulties of Iranian women by dismantling the boundary between fiction and reality. She says,

An absurd fictionality ruled our lives. We tried to live in the open spaces, in the chinks created between that room, which had become our protective cocoon, and the censor’s world of witches and goblins outside. Which of these two worlds was more real, and to which did we really belong? We no longer knew the answers. Perhaps one way of finding out the truth was to do what we did: to try to imaginatively articulate these two worlds and, through that process, give shape to our vision and identity (26).

Their world of Imagination is offered to them through Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*. The reading process gives them “a space of their own” (12) and they blur the boundary between fiction and reality which is one of the important tenets of New Historicism.

The dominant historical discourse of Iran celebrates the Revolution, but Azar Nafisi through

her memoir deconstructs it by recording the authoritative rule of the state; the very reading process in the novel is very significant as it constructs a new space for them. New Historicism encourages such 'readings' which includes the examination of social, political, ideological designs constructed in the fiction. Stephen Greenblatt notes that intention, genre and historical situation all have to be taken into account in any 'reading' of the text. He says that New Historicist readings would involve a multiplicity of interests and presumes more than one consciousness. New Historicist readings register the shifts in value and interest that are produced in the struggles of social and political life (Goring 189). Similarly Azar Nafisi historicizes the text by reading *Lolita* in parallel to the current events in Iran. She and her students record the change in the value system which restricts their individual freedom and right to expression. The transformations in the belief system, which are forcefully imposed by the Iranian revolutionaries, are strongly questioned and critiqued through their interpretation of the fictional text *Lolita*.

Nafisi and her students has developed a strong bonding with Nabokov, which has embarked profound impressions in their minds. Nafisi claims that the fictional text is filled with mistrust of what we call everyday reality, an acute sense of that reality's fickleness and frailty. Nafisi and her students interconnect the fictional text *Lolita* to their present historical reality, for instance, *Lolita* is centered on the twelve year old girl Lolita whose dreams and desires are restricted by the forty year old Humbert for his own benefits and pleasures. Similarly, Azar Nafisi raises the issue of marriage age for girls (lowered from eighteen to nine) in Iran under the new Islamic Republic rule (27). She emphasizes the parallel significance between the little girl Lolita and Iranian women by highlighting the fact that both Lolita and Iranian women are devoid of their freedom to marriage and are forced to get into sexual relationship/marriage at a very tender age.

Forrest G. Robinson identifies a definite component to be possessed by New Historicists and he calls it as "a principled flexibility, a sharp eye to the distortion in all perspectives, a cultivated pleasure in the discovery of doubleness and

subversion" (Guerin 248). Subversion is considered to be a significant component in New Historicism as it unearths the underlying meaning in the text to subvert the existing notions. Azar Nafisi also uses this technique and exposes the underlying meanings in the fictional novels to subvert the existing power discourse both in fiction and reality. In one of her interviews, she says that the whole idea of imagination is always subversive and a fiction which comes as a result of this imagination is certainly subversive in nature, like the fictional works of Henry James, Jane Austen, Gustave Flaubert, Saul Bellow, and James Joyce.

In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Nafisi and her students in their discussion on *Lolita* disagree with the critics' skeptical point of view on the character Lolita as, " 'Moppet', 'little monster', 'corrupt'..." (40). On contrary to these prejudiced conceptions of the critics, the students sympathize with Lolita's "helplessness, her pathetic dependence on monstrous HH" (40). As the text *Lolita* is more a passionate confession of Humbert, critics tend to look at the character Lolita as "shallow" and "brat" (40). But in the memoir, the reading of *Lolita* is very different from the other critics, as Nafisi and her students were experiencing a life in a similar confined boundary as Lolita. They highlight the underlying emotions and desires of the little girl who wants a life with freedom of choices. They relate themselves to Lolita and subvert the existing 'religious' notions of Iran against liberty, morality and humanity. Their present situation in Iran is highly restricted and they are led by Khomeini who doesn't value individual lives. Nafisi says, "...the regime that ruled them had tried to make their personal identities and histories irrelevant. They were never free of the regime's definition of them as Muslim women" (28). Similarly, Lolita was also restricted and was not given individual freedom by Humbert, who constantly detriment the little girl's desires. Nafisi's students through their discussion on Lolita understand their own position where they are also denied of identity, freedom and history. Nevertheless, their resilient nature motivates them to create *their own history* through the process of reading and discussion, and Nafisi records *their history* in her memoir.

New Historicists are influenced by the writings of the French philosophical historian Foucault who looks at history in terms of power. He defined power not simply as a tool of oppression, but as a dynamic force that constructs discourses and practices in society. Foucault calls a cluster of claims to knowledge as a discourse; nevertheless, he denies any act of imposing authority over that knowledge and also strongly disagrees with any claim to that knowledge as the absolute truth, as there is no absolute truth. Knowledge or interpretation that enforces power are contested and interrogated for its validity, political correctness and so on (Chandra 69). Azar Nafisi uses fiction as a medium to contest the socio-political discourse through 'interpretation' of the texts, and thereby historicizing the texts. John Brannigan in his definition of New Historicism, details the relationship between power and history, which facilitates the process of 'interpretation.' He states thus: "New Historicism is a mode of critical interpretation, which privileges power relations as the most important context for texts of all kinds. As a critical practice, New Historicism treats literary texts as a space, where power relations are made visible" (174).

Azar Nafisi looks at the idea of power in the state of Iran under the light of *Lolita*. She relates middle-aged Humbert's control over young girl Lolita in terms of individual freedom, with Islamic Republic's inhuman activities against their people violating civilian rights and freedom. Azar Nafisi looks at the fictional character Humbert in parallel with the historical revolutionary leader Ayatollah Khomeini. She observes that Khomeini acted like a dictator and tried to establish his own dreams irrespective of his people's lives and desires; similarly, Humbert wanted to fulfill his dream and desires on Lolita by victimizing her. On the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, Azar Nafisi says, "Like all great mythmakers, he had tried to fashion reality out of his dream, and in the end, like Humbert, he had managed to destroy both reality and his dream. Added to the crimes, to the murders and tortures, we would now face this last indignity-the murder of our dreams" (246). Here the authoress shatters the image of Khomeini as a revolutionary leader, and insists that he wore the cloak of a dictator who ruined people's lives in the name of

religion and morality. The memoir questions and contests dominant authorities by documenting anecdotes and individual experiences and thereby, historicizing the memoir itself.

The New Historicist H.Aram Veeseer says that New Historicism breaks the doctrine of noninterference which forbids humanists and literary writers to intrude on questions of politics and power (Brannigan 174). Similarly in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Nafisi intrudes into the political sphere and creates a space for her students to discuss politics. During the book reading sessions at home, their discussions on the novels were always linked to the political sphere, and they expressed their views condemning the political activities of Islamic Republic in Iran. In one of their discussion,

Mahshid turned to Azin and said with quiet disdain: "No one was talking about making a choice between adultery and hypocrisy. The point is, do we have any morality at all? Do we consider that anything goes, that we have no responsibility towards others but only for satisfying our needs?"

"Well that is the crux of great novels," Manna added, "like *Madame Bovary* or *Anna Karenina* or James's for that matter-the question of doing what is right or what we want to do"

"And what if we say that is right to do what we want to do and not society or some authority figure tells us to do?" said Nassrin... (51)

In the above quoted discussion, diverse levels of 'reading' can be observed. Their voices reflect high political ideals and show their deep concern for their degrading society. Nassrin's final statement, which condemns authority, exhibits her intense bonding with the texts through which she denounces the current political leadership in Iran.

Azar Nafisi briefly discusses the meaning of "poshlost," a term given by Nabokov to describe the close relation between banality and brutality. Nafisi discusses Nabokov's idea thus: "Poshlost is not only the obviously trashy but mainly the falsely important, the falsely beautiful, the falsely clever, the falsely attractive" (23). In addition to the given explanation for "poshlost," *falsely factual, falsely historical,*

falsely fictional can also be included with respect to *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. The History of Iranian revolution as rendered by the conservative Historian is *falsely factual*, because certain facts are hidden and unsaid in Iranian history, for instance, inhuman, violent activities are not recorded. The dominant Historical discourse in Iran looks at the revolution and Iran-Iraq war as a “divine cause,” rather than a cruel attempt to show the power, and thereby it becomes *falsely historical*. The memoir examines the historical nature of fictional texts, and thus proves that the texts are not purely fictional, but *falsely fictional*. Thus Azar Nafisi in her memoir falsifies the fictionality/textuality of fictional texts to bring out the falsification in the historical texts. In other words, the author historicizes the fictional texts by falsifying the factuality in historical texts (dominant discourse) and as an outcome; her memoir also becomes “a” history.

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