

# The Orientalisation of Islam and Muslim Societies in Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*

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**Abstract.** In contemporary literature there is a wave of memoirs written by Muslim women. Propelled by former US President George W. Bush's campaign for War on Terror in 2003, there has been an increasing interest in the reading of women's trauma from the Muslim world, which often presents a detrimental image of Islam and the treatment of Muslim women in Muslim societies, where it feeds of the Orientalist fantasies of the "Other". In this paper, the researcher investigates the replication of Western Orientalist perspectives in Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, as manifested in her representations of Islam and the treatment of Muslim women. Accordingly, this study also aims to evaluate the text in the light of autobiographical criticism, particularly in regard to the depiction of Iranian Muslim women's gendered experiences.

**Keywords:** Azar Nafisi, Muslim Women, Autobiographical Criticism, Orientalisation.

## 1. Introduction

If one visits any major bookstores today, one will unmistakably observe the flood of trauma narratives by Muslim women. These books have become bestsellers and have won numerous literary awards. In fact, there seems to be trends where controversial titles such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali's *Infidel* (2006) and Nujood Ali's *I Am Nujood, Aged 10 and Divorced* (2009) are in huge demand, hence catapulting the previously obscure names to instant fame. These narratives describe, among other issues, the experiences of female circumcision and under aged girls marrying a much older man. These kinds of themes are cliché, recycled and fetishised in Muslim women autobiographies and as a result, have somewhat eclipsed the autobiographies of successful and established Muslim women, giving the false notion that all Muslim women are oppressed and helpless.

This paper examines the critically acclaimed memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003) by Azar Nafisi, an Iranian American writer and academician. In order to read the text critically, beyond the conventional neo-Orientalist readings, the researcher seeks to investigate its replication of Western Orientalist perspectives and evaluates its symptoms of Post-Stress Traumatic Disorder (PTSD) and resemblances of false memory.

## 2. Political Underpinnings in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*

### 2.1. A therapeutic narrative versus political reflexes

Nightmares are recurrent symptoms of PTSD but they are not the ultimate determinant. Nafisi mentions two particular nightmares she had: the first is her being reprimanded by the Revolutionary Guards for not wearing a veil and the second, her nightmare where she wakes up screaming for not being able to leave Iran. Nafisi's first nightmare depicts her as being utterly helpless and anxious. The dream was revealed in a sharing session with her students. However, unlike the shattered worldview that is supposed to be exhibited by trauma patients, Nafisi's self-projection and her view of the world are not negative. She does not even suffer from low self-confidence. In fact, Nafisi remained in good humour. Similarly, her second nightmare demonstrates the same hopeful tone. Nafisi desperately wants to leave Iran to embrace with America, the place she calls the "never-never land". Janoff-Bulman posits that, unlike Nafisi, a trauma patient does not find hope in anything. Instead, a trauma patient believes that life is hopeless and meaningless. It is therefore evident that Nafisi was not suffering from PTSD. This is also compounded by her methods of coping up with war. She spent the nights of the bomb attacks on Tehran reading fiction, committing an act of dissociation which according to Johnson is a normal reaction to ensure that we remain resilient to the traumatic impact. *RLIT* has also demonstrated that Nafisi has a support system inclusive of her friends, family and neighbours

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who look after each other's well-being and ensure the safety of others. Turnbull mentions that a support system is very crucial to enable trauma survivors to process the memory that does not make sense to them.

If *RLIT* is not a therapeutic narrative, this leads us to its political reflexes. Many scholars have criticised Nafisi as a "native infomer" and having a connection to "the US leaders of the neoconservative movement". They include Hamid Dabashi, Rokshana Bahramitash, Gillian Whitlock, Anne Donadey and Huma Ahmed-Ghosh. Such claims arise because of Nafisi's mentioning of her contact with Jeff, the American reporter from New York with whom she "roamed the streets in Tehran for a few months" and described whatever she had "witnessed to that other part of the world". Her response to the interview with Patrick Tucker also manifests her political views. She sees the US government as being more "open" and more "democratic" than the Iranian government, further reinforcing the American media biases of the Iranian "axis of evil". Dabashi has also accused her of promoting Western values and neocon democracy as part of an agenda to undermine third world governments. There are many instances in the memoir where Nafisi does this. She is seen to be constantly promoting the idea that fiction has the power to subvert traditions and social expectations in her classes. It is also observed that Nafisi is inclined to view the Western world with rose-tinted glasses, embracing their ideals of love, sensuality, freedom and democracy wholesale and attempting to apply these to her students without considering the cultural differences.

## **2.2. The framing of the Iranian cultural trauma**

Influenced by the study of Alexander et al. on cultural trauma, Mohsen Mobasher constructs a framework termed as the Iranian cultural trauma and concludes that the 'cultural trauma' of the 1978 Islamic revolution in Iran and the "Islamization of the Persian/Iranian culture" is part of a "new narrative framing" by the carrier group consisting of the secularists, political dissidents, the marginalised and pro-Shah supporters who oppose the IRI's Islamisation process. This carrier group uses the media to depreciate the IRI and "portray it as an enemy government". Faithfully ascribing to the Iranian narrative framing, Nafisi views the IRI as anti-democratic and constantly criticises its policies while embracing Western democracy. She asserts that the IRI's governance is insecure and "unpredictable", equating it to the "month of April" saying that it "would go through cycles of tolerance" and "followed by a crackdown". Evaleila Pesaran argues that this "unpredictable" governance of the IRI is a typical characteristic of revolutions which "are said to move along a cyclical trajectory from moderate rule through to radicalism and then back to "normalcy"", which is equivalent to the French Revolution.

Nafisi is persistent in exposing the "evils" of the IRI and in attacking its educational policies. She states in *RLIT* that universities in Iran during the revolutionary period had "become the targets of attack by the cultural purists who were busy imposing stricter set of laws, going so far as to segregate men and women in classes and punishing disobedient professors". Nafisi who is a strong proponent of Western democracy is particularly critical of Khomeini's April 1980 speech which vows to correct the Iranian education system that has been supposedly contaminated by "colonial education of the West". However, at the same time, she has never attempted to rationalise the reason why the IRI decided to revamp the Iranian education system. It is often the 'evils' of the IRI that Nafisi highlights without giving a balanced portrayal of the situation. Her criticisms of the IRI do not stop at its educational reforms and policy-making. She even compares the IRI to Humbert Humbert, the villain of Nabokov's controversial novel *Lolita* (1955), who "solipsized" Lolita's identity and hence accusing the IRI of stealing the Iranians' identity. In a rather extreme statement, Nafisi mentions that "living in the Islamic Republic is like having sex with the man you loathe". This illustrates the extent of her hatred to the IRI. It is obvious that she hardly portrays anything positive about the IRI despite some good changes it introduced in Iranian society. Some of the beneficial progress the IRI has made is its successful program of reducing the gap of illiteracy rate between the rural and the urban population as well as between men and women, its initiatives to be independent of foreign capitalism and the increasing number of citizens pursuing higher education.

## **2.3. Portrayals of Iranian women and society**

Dabashi claims that Nafisi presents Islam as "vile, violent and abusive of women" in order to justify the US government's intervention in Iranian politics. Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh have also highlighted Nafisi's "critique of the *hijab*" and her efforts to embrace "the individual freedom in U.S. terms" while Bahramitash purports that Nafisi's portrayal of Muslim women as "victims of religious dogma" is a resemblance of feminist Orientalist representation of "the other". Although perhaps not intentionally depicting Iranian

society in such a manner, Nafisi is seen to be contributing further to the Orientalist stereotypes of Muslim societies through her denigratory representation of Iranian women and culture.

Nafisi raises the issue of the veil on numerous occasions in *RLIT*. It is observed that she accentuates the individual preference versus the mandatory black robes and scarves that Iranian women should adorn. The following excerpt is one example of Nafisi addressing the uniform mandatory black robes and scarves (“the law of the land”) which, she contends, do not give Iranian women the freedom to choose the colour of their attire:

*I have two photographs in front of me now. In the first there are seven women [...]. They are, according to the law of the land, dressed in black robes and head scarves, covered except for the oval of their faces and their hands. In the second photograph of the same group, [...] they have taken off their coverings. Splashes of color separate one from the next. Each has become distinct through the color and styles of the hair; not even the two who are still wearing their head scarves look the same.*

The way Nafisi describes this mandatory attire which covers them except for the “oval” of their faces and their hands is reminiscent to what Hasan has pointed out in “The Orientalization of Gender” with regard to an expression used by Hanna Papanek who compares the veil worn by Muslim women to a “tent”. Bullock has also argued that the veil and the Islamic dress code are often used to juxtapose patriarchal control of women by the perceived masculine Islamic government—something that Nafisi is seen to be harping on. Nafisi’s desire for her students to unveil and shed their “shapeless” black robes in her living room is to challenge the state law. This substantiates the claims made by Hasan that feminism has been used to portray the “native society as repressive to women”. The veil as Bullock asserts, is often used to promote such agenda.

Like the extract above, Nafisi aims to show that when her students shed their mandatory veils and robes and burst into colour, they gain an outline and shape. This corroborates Bullock’s statement that those who criticise the veil and the loose fitting clothes “rely on secular liberal assumptions about society and human nature” where they propose that they hide the femininity of the woman’s body. This is juxtaposed further in the way Nafisi defines her students’ disrobing of their *chador* and veil as becoming their inimitable, unique selves in contrast to the state law’s uniform black colour:

*I could not get over the shock of seeing them shed their mandatory veils and robes and burst into color. 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. Our world in that living room [...] became our sanctuary, our self-contained universe, mocking the reality of the black-scarved, timid faces in the city that sprawled below.*

Once again, the extract shows a challenge against the state law with “splashes of colors” that enable them to become their individual selves. Here Nafisi makes a comparison of the private sanctuary which allows them to liberate themselves from the perceived authoritarian government. Furthermore, she describes the black-scarved women in the streets below as “timid” for seeming to be losing their identity, heightening the seeming oppression of Iranian women by the IRI.

Apart from the veil, critics of *RLIT* have suggested that Nafisi expressed “contempt for Islam” with sweeping comments such as “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”. Critics are harping on the fact that such vilifications of Islam are symptomatic of Nafisi’s contributions to the “damaging stereotypes of Muslims in the United States and the Western world”. The statement transpired while Nafisi and her students were reading Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). Grassian asserts that Nafisi is not entirely to be blamed because the statement comes from Yassi and not Nafisi. However, it should be noted that Yassi is Nafisi’s fictional creation and that the statement incubated from its original source—the author. What is more, Nafisi also made a comparable remark about a similar issue: “(Child, please remember, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, although this child [Lolita], had she lived in the Islamic Republic, would have been long ripe for marriage to men older than Humbert)”. This is what Hasan has termed as the “orientalization of gender”. Although Nafisi may not be a Western Orientalist, she seems to be feeding the ideas to them.

The following excerpt from *RLIT* suggests Nafisi’s proclivities to locate Iranian feminism as the “periphery” to the industrialised nation’s “core”:

*When I was growing up, in the 1960s, there was little difference between my rights of women in Western democracies. But it was not the fashion then to think that our culture was not compatible with modern*

*democracy, that there were Western and Islamic versions of democracy and human rights. We all wanted opportunities and freedom. That is why we supported revolutionary change—we were demanding more rights, not fewer.* [emphasis original]

Nafisi implies that women's rights during the Shah monarchy were protected, demonstrating that there was "little difference" between Iranian women's rights at that time and those of their Western counterparts. Nafisi measures Iranian women's rights with Western democracies, while regarding the West as the ideal role models of progress and civilisation. She has also hoodwinked the incompatibilities between the Western and Islamic versions of democracy and human rights and attempts to overgeneralise Iranian women's experience by disregarding their specific social, cultural and political backgrounds. This has also been expounded by Mohanty. Nafisi is also seen to be fetishising the Orientalist views of Eastern/Muslim women and societies by discounting the Islamic feminism promoted by the IRI. She contends that Islamic feminism allowed the IRI government to "have the cake and eat it too", calling it a "contradictory notion" where it enables the IRI women to claim themselves as "progressive and Islamic" while denouncing modern women as "Westernized, decadent and disloyal". This shows Nafisi's faithful adherence to the Western feminist framework where any third world government policies or practices that do not comply with the Western concepts of human rights and democracy are subject to criticisms, especially by feminist and human rights groups. Subconsciously, Nafisi shapes the modern or Westernised Iranian men and women as the ideal examples for the supposedly more progressive Western counterparts. This cultural notion, as Bullock and Hasan vindicate, includes foregoing their Iranian women's Islamic identity, culture and traditions.

### 3. Conclusion

The preceding discussion shows that, *RLIT* is found to be less therapeutic and has more political leanings. Nafisi seems to be categorically promoting Western values and ideals through her use of American and European literature in her classrooms to subvert traditions and social expectations. It is also found that her narrative fits Mobasher's notion of Iranian cultural trauma perfectly. Depicted in the narratives of Iranian political dissidents, Nafisi's narratives hardly had any balanced portrayals of the Islamic Republic. She has shown to be consistently rejecting and criticising the Republic's policies. Perhaps intentionally, she has hoodwinked the positive changes brought by the IRI especially in terms of its efforts to eradicate the gap between the rich and the poor, the gap in the literacy rate between Iranian men and women, the increasing number of women in the professional fields and its initiatives to be independent of foreign capitalism. Another prominent issue from the reading of *RLIT* is that Nafisi is seen to be elevating the Orientalist stereotypes of Muslims societies by portraying the IRI as oppressive of Iranian women and society. She has demonstrated that by shedding the mandatory shapeless black chador and veils and by bursting into colour (as depicted in the two pictures of her students), her students gain a shape and outline as she is of the belief that the loose fitting Islamic dress code hides the femininity of the woman's body. It is also observed from the examination of *RLIT* that Nafisi's sweeping generalisations of Muslim society regarding child marriage is an attempt to caricature Islam and its adherents. Nafisi is also seen to be positioning the West as the icon of progress and civilisation for Iranian women and society to emulate.

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