

The Liberating Power of Fiction

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In Azar Nafisi's Reading Lolita in Tehran, Nafisi accomplishes, in a non fiction book, what she explains only fiction can do: make the reader feel empathy towards the characters. As the reader gets to know the characters, sympathizing with them and eventually empathizing with them, it is hard to decide where to put the blame for all the women's problems. Nafisi makes it clear to the reader that many of the women's issues are directly and indirectly caused by the Islamic Republic of Iran. When Nafisi confronts her magician with this mentality, he argues that she can not blame everything on the regime and she must forget about the politics and read literature. It is almost impossible for the reader to agree with the magician as we see the harsh rules of the Sharia and how they affect Nafisi and her girls. As the book continues and the women develop further, it is obvious that while the women read their literature it is important for them to address the politics around them-influential factors in their life- in order to fully gain the epiphanies of truths Nafisi describes. As Nafisi exposes these women to literature, she is also allowing them to grasp the world around them-filled with such hatred for women-and find themselves. Azar Nafisi's Reading Lolita in Tehran exposes an Islamic Republic of Iran where women fall victim to a Sharia that not only sexually suppresses them physically and mentally, but also further dehumanizes them by stripping them of the basic elements of life. Simultaneously these women are exposed to Western literature by Nafisi, leading them to take control of their own identities.

Nafisi's Reading Lolita in Tehran is set during pre-revolution, revolution and post-revolution Iran. Throughout these different times Nafisi is able to show the reader the transition from the Shah to the Sharia, allowing us to fully see the Sharia's harsh sexual suppression that impacts these women physically and mentally. As the revolution

comes to an end and the Sharia establishes its power the veil is soon imposed on women.

The government enforces the veil to hide women and protect men from temptation, but in reality it is used as a tool to take away women's individuality. By forcing women to wear the veil the Sharia categorizes all women according to their bodies, instead of their minds, skills or careers. This loss of individuality causes the women to feel uncomfortable and confused with who they are. Once Nassrin, one of Nafisi's students, takes off her veil and chador, she becomes unsure "like a toddler taking its first steps" and hides her curvy figure. Nassrin is uncomfortable with her body because the government has made a women's body secretive, sexual, and dirty. Nafisi explains, "Now that she was unrobed, I noticed how the chador was an excuse to cover what she had tried to disown-mainly because she really genuinely did not know what to do with it" (296).

Because women's bodies are hidden under the veil, they do not know how to accept their bodies and how to be proud of being a woman. Due to the sexist government in Iran, it is hard for Nafisi's girls to accept their womanhood after it has caused them so much pain and suffering. The republic forces the women to be ashamed of their bodies, resulting in the women separating themselves from their bodies, ultimately dehumanizing themselves. The women's search for their identity becomes a contradictory one as they can no longer differentiate between the Sharia's image of them and their own image of themselves.

The Sharia's dehumanization of these women is caused by the deprivation of the basic elements of the human experience which adds to the blurring of the line between their own image and the governments image of Iranian women. After the revolution, public expression becomes illegal. One can not express emotion in public; these are

human instincts that have been denied to the people of Iran. For Nafisi, this creates her feeling of irrelevance.

Now that I could not call myself a teacher, a writer, now that I could not wear what I would normally wear, walk in the streets to the beat of my own body, shout if I wanted to or pat a male colleague on the back on the spur of the moment, now that all this was illegal, I felt light and fictional, as if I were walking on air, as if I had been written into being and then erased in one quick swipe. (167)

Nafisi explains that because her outer emotions can no longer match her inner feelings she becomes fictional, not real, not human.* Nafisi can not express what she really feels, what she says and does is all according to the Islamic republic; she can not say what she really wants to say. The Iranian government attempts to separate the private and public worlds, which in fact are more connected than one would think. For Mitra, another student of Nafisi's, the separation takes a toll on her relationship with her husband, Hamid. The reader sees the affect of the separation on Mitra as she explains her trip to Damascus with Hamid; where they are able to walk hand in hand in public, feel the wind on their skin, freely expressing their emotions. She then goes on to explain that because of this new context for their relationship they felt like strangers. Due to the dehumanizing rules of the Iranian government Iranians do not know how to act in situations where they can express emotions publicly. The reader is able to see the direct affect of forbidden emotions with Nassrin, another student of Nafisi's. Toward the end of the book Nassrin goes through a metamorphosis, she stops wearing her thick black robe and veil and wears jeans, tight T-shirts and has a boyfriend. Even if she has liberated herself from the confinements of the veil, she explains to Nafisi that she does not know how to be happy,

how to act with men and express love and her emotions. This is a direct effect of the harsh laws of the Sharia. The government tries to separate the private and public worlds by making basic human instincts and qualities illegal, ultimately resulting in the dehumanization of the people of Iran.

As the women continue to be dehumanized by the government, Nafisi exposes them to Western literature which pushes them to take control of their identities. In Nafisi's class the women discuss Nabakov, Austen, James, but they also end up criticizing the lives they are forced to live and the politics of the world oppressing them. "Fiction was not a panacea, but it did offer us a critical way of appraising and grasping the world-not just our world but that other world that had become the object of their desires" (282). As these women meet every Thursday and read fiction, they are able to critically view their world and grasp their parallel fantasies and eventually make them come true. In the beginning of the class it is clear that the women have no sense of their identity, "In answer to 'What is your image of yourself?' she had written, 'I am not ready for that question yet.'" (38), but as they are exposed to fiction they are able to understand what they do not like, what they want and how to get what they want. For Nassrin this means leaving Iran for London, for Mitra going to Canada, for Sanaz getting married, for Azin teaching at Allameh and remarrying a man in California, for Yassi creating her own class and moving to Texas, for Mashid becoming a senior editor and publishing books of her own, for Manna writing poetry, and for Nafisi going to America. By taking control of their careers and lives, they take control of their identities. The women are finally able to recognize what they want, instead of what the republic wants for them, taking away the regime's power to define them.

In Reading Lolita in Tehran Nafisi exposes her girls to Western literature which allows them to finally take control of their identities, which have been blurred due to the Sharia's physical and mental sexual suppression and stripping them of the basic elements of life. "Do not, under any circumstances, belittle a work of fiction by trying to turn it into a carbon copy of real life; what we search for in fiction is not so much reality but the epiphany of truth" (3). Nafisi advocates this mentality in her classroom; as the women study literature in an oppressed environment, they are able to have a series of epiphanies of truths about their world. Eventually leading the women to take control of their identities, for some it means leaving Iran and for others it means making the life they want in Iran, but for all it means fulfilling themselves and confirming their identities.