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**Feminine Identity and Resistance in Azar Nafisi's**  
***Reading Lolita in Tehran***

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## **DEDICATION**

To all souls who dared to dream beyond the stars.

## ABSTRACT

The present study examines feminine identity and resistance in *Reading Lolita in Tehran, a memoir in books* by Azar Nafisi. This personal memoir aims to capture the status of Iranian women, which has generated significant interest and numerous debates in political and literary circles, particularly after two unforgettable events in world history: the Islamic Revolution and the events of 9/11. Following the Islamic Revolution of 1979, women in Iran have consistently faced disadvantages in both the public and private sectors. This study investigates the formation of feminine identity by the author and her students, a recurring theme evident in many literary works, whether authored by Americans or Iranians. The search for female identity has been a common concern for Iranian women and their Iranian-American counterparts in various parts of the world. Iranian women have experienced marginalization and oppression, whether in their homeland or elsewhere. Therefore, the primary focus of this study is on the feminist perspective, conducted within the framework of Lila Ahmed and Lila Abu-Lughod, to capture the identity of Iranian women and to further the literary investigation canon to examine how Iranian resist the totalitarian regime to reclaim their identity and voice and seek refuge in literature. The findings of this study reveals the importance of literature in shaping feminine identity. For Nafisi and her students, literature is the peaceful sword through which they voice their struggles to the world.

**Keywords:** Feminine Identity, Resistance, Agency, veil, The Islamic Republic of Iran.

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## General Introduction

"She resented the fact that her veil, which to her was a symbol of her sacred relationship to God, had now become an instrument of power turning the women who wore them into political signs and symbols"

(NAFISI, 103)

In October 2023, global news outlets, television channels, and media platforms prominently featured the announcement of Narges Mohammadi as the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. The resonance of this recognition sparks widespread curiosity, leading to inquiries about her identity, origins, and, significantly, the rationale behind the awarding of the prestigious peace prize to Mohammadi. Narges Mohammadi, an Iranian human rights activist, received the prestigious 2023 Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of her tireless commitment to challenging the oppression of women in Iran, a cause for which she continues her advocacy even while facing imprisonment. The trio of terms—'Iran,' 'woman,' and 'distinctionless'—plucked from a single dictionary, appear harmonious in a sentence. However, this unity remains elusive, refusing to coexist seamlessly across time—neither in the historical past, the contemporary present, nor the enigmatic future. The dichotomy between these seemingly innocuous words poignantly reflects the intricate challenges faced by Iranian women as they navigate societal expectations and strive for unbounded representation. These three terms remain incompatible throughout history; therefore, the ongoing challenges faced by Iranian women can be traced back to the period of the 1970s and 1980s. It was a tumultuous time for Iran's landscape as it went through a series of ups and downs. This period encompassed a narrative that oscillated between

progressive movements and conservative ideologies, shaping Iranian society and, in particular, women's roles and identities.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Iranian women's experiences were shaped by significant societal changes. These changes continue to influence women's roles and perceptions in Iran. Iranian women are currently facing a complex mix of progress and regression as they navigate through evolving social norms and government policies.

At this crossroads of the past and present, Azar Nafisi stand as a literary canon as one of the foremost advocates for women's rights, she emerges as the voice of the voiceless in the compelling narrative of Iranian womanhood. She has advocated Iranian identity and independence from 1987 to the present day, tirelessly defending for her homeland and the rights of her fellow Iranians. She is also regarded as one of the fiercest and bravest writers, who uses the power of literature and the sharpness of the pen to raise and empower the silent Azar Nafisi is defined by her first highly acclaimed novel *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* published in 2003. As *The New York Times* bestseller for more than a hundred weeks and published in thirty-six languages, this masterpiece work mixing autobiography, fiction, and literary criticism sheds light on the author's life and career in post-revolutionary Iran. Through the lens of banned Western literature, Nafisi explores the impact of political and cultural restrictions on the lives of her female students, revealing the transformative power of literature in the face of oppression. This memoir provides insight into the resilience of women and the power of literature to provide comfort and empowerment to them. Thus, the purpose of the study is to examine feminine identity, resistance, and literature's power to provide comfort and empowerment to women.

This dissertation aims to address the following question:

1. How do the female characters in 'Reading Lolita in Tehran' construct and express their feminine identities and in what ways do these identities intersect with or undermine societal norms in Iranian context? this question will be answered by introducing sub-questions:

1.1 What relevance does the concept of the veil in the memoir have to a broader context than just Iran's revolutionary history?

1.2 To what extent does transcending boundaries through literature become a form of unveiling for the women in the memoir, and how does it construct their individual and collective identities?

This dissertation aims to explore how the female characters resist and express their feminine identities within the complex socio-political landscape of Iran. Additionally, an understanding of Women's experiences in diverse contexts and empowerment is crucial. In essence, this paper presents a comprehensive analysis of the multifaceted interrelationships between resistance, identity, feminist theories, and women's agency. Furthermore, the study examines the collision between the West and Muslim worlds, as well as how fiction and reality interact, and their impact on the characters' perceptions of themselves. By the same token, understanding how breaking societal boundaries can also contribute to the construction of personal and shared identities. Last but not least, there is still a lively discussion around the veil (Burqa) in the context of contemporary Iran. The experiences of Iranian women today are shaped by ongoing debates and movements advocating for women's rights and challenging traditional norms. The memoir serves as a lens to understand if the veil signified as a symbol of resistance and empowerment for Iranian women or as a political-oppression symbol.

The publication of *Lolita in Tehran* results in a gap in criticism between the two worlds. One of the most unsparing of Nafisi is Hamid Dabashi, with his critical essay entitled "Native Informers and the Making of the American Empire." In his critique of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*,



scholar Hamid Dabashi states “Azar Nafisi is the personification of that native informer and colonial agent, polishing her services for an American version of the very same project.”<sup>1</sup> In his essay, Dabashi argues that *'Reading Lolita in Tehran'* represents colonial projects by using English literature to reinforce the American empire. According to Dabashi, Azar Nafisi portrays herself as embodying the role of an informer and colonial agent in British India, aligning her with a similar project in American history.

Donadey, Anne, and Huma Ahmed-Ghosh's, in an article titled “Why Americans Love Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*.” States that a variety of political and ideological factors have led to the controversy surrounding the novel, particularly in the United States. It sheds light on the power of politics and the whites, and asks an important question regarding why we should be concerned about the love of this novel among the American people.<sup>2</sup>

An article entitled "Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*: a new orientalist narrative" in which Sima Miri pointed out that "the writer, consciously or unconsciously, has created a narrative that reinforces the Westernization of goodness" and the “Islamization of Evil” The article discusses how Nafisi failed to capture her country's image by In its comparison of the East and the West, the book emphasizes the inferiority of the East and the civilized superiority of the West.<sup>3</sup>

Dora Ahmed's article "Not yet beyond the Veil: Muslim Women in American popular Literature" discusses the misinterpretation and misrepresentation of Muslim women in American popular literature. It examines the prevalent image of Muslim women as veiled, subjugated, and in need of rescue from the West.<sup>4</sup> The article argues that these narratives, such

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<sup>1</sup> Hamid Dabashi, “Native Informers and The Making of The American Empire” *Al-Ahram Weekly*, No 797 (2006) p.1-9

<sup>2</sup> Anne Donadey and Huma Ahmed-Ghosh, “Why Americans Love Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*,” *Chicago Journal*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (Spring 2008), p. 623-646

<sup>3</sup> Sima Miri “Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*: a new orientalist narrative,” *Research Journal of English Language and Literature*, Vol.9, No 4, p. 235-241

<sup>4</sup> Dora Ahmed, "Not yet beyond the Veil :Muslim Women in American popular Literature," *Duke University Press*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Summer 2009), p. 105-131

as *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, deny the specificity of regional, doctrinal, and economic factors and instead present an iconic and politically empty image.

In "Lolita Revisited: Reading Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran: a Memoir in Books*," Christine Grogan discusses the daily insidious trauma females in Iran experience. Grogan further outlines how the critics misunderstood Nafisi's memoir and focused only on what they perceived to be the book's endorsement of U.S. military intervention. According to Grogan, Nafisi's memoir is "feminist messages and her efforts to unveil the insidious trauma many women in Iran experience."<sup>5</sup>

The above literary findings discuss themes of trauma, orientalist narratives, and the conflicts between Western and Eastern cultures. However, this dissertation takes a different perspective on the memoir by focusing on the feminine identity, agency, and resistance exhibited by the characters and the author within the novel.

The choice of novel to mirror this study is influenced by a variety of factors. One of these is the ongoing media debate regarding Iran and Muslim women's identity. Furthermore, there is increasing Western interest in this issue, namely the concern for the safety of Muslim women. This Research will assist in clarifying misunderstandings of women's identity and images of Muslim women that have been misconstrued through western photographs. It will also illuminate a significant issue in today's Thus, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is a great example to illustrate this issue.

The study will be divided into two main chapters. The first chapter will reveal the historical timeline of what is known today as the Islamic Republic of Iran. This chapter will introduce the establishment of what was once an empire and its transformation into an Islamic nation. It will take the readers through the

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<sup>5</sup> Christine Grogan, "Lolita Revisited: Reading Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran: a Memoir in Books*," *Women's Studies: An inter-disciplinary journal*, Vol. 43 No. 1(2014) , p.52–72

Historical timeline of Iran, from the early days of the Persian Empire to the modern-day Islamic Republic of Iran. Then, it moves to explore the history of feminism's theoretical framework and its spread into the third world. It will highlight the key figures, events, and ideas that have shaped the feminist movement, it will discuss the challenges that women in the third world face, including issues related to poverty, education, health, and political participation. It will examine how feminist theory has sought to address these challenges and the ways in which it has been adapted to suit the specific needs and contexts of women in the third world.

Chapter two will paint the research question, that is to say, there have been several significant studies conducted on Arab women and their identities. I choose Lila Abu Lughod's seminal work *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Ahmed's *Women and Gender in Islam* as the framework for my research. The analysis aims to explore feminine identity in Nafisi's memoir through Ahmed's scholarly insights on gender dynamics in Islamic contexts. In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, the narrative illustrates how women navigate and sometimes resist societal boundaries to assert their independence and make their own choices, highlighting the concept of women's agency as discussed by Leila Ahmed. The Book club created by Nafisi and her students serves as a space to explore ideas and express themselves freely, away from the restrictive eyes of the regime. This act of meeting and discussing forbidden literature demonstrates their determination to find their own space and voice within a repressive environment. The story also demonstrates the intersectionality of gender, religion, and culture—another critical concept from Ahmed. Each woman's story is influenced by her unique background, which affects how she deals with the regime's rules. For example, varying levels of conservatism among families and differences in personal freedom significantly impact their responses to societal restrictions.

Additionally, the memoir engages with the debate between cultural relativism and universalism in understanding gender issues, a theme central to Ahmed's analysis. By

comparing Western ideas of freedom and oppression with the Iranian context, the text prompts reflections on the meaning of freedom for the women involved. This comparison helps to consider both cultural specifics and broader ideas about gender equality.

Using these concepts from Leila Ahmed's work helps to understand the complex ways in which the women in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* experience and respond to the challenges of their society. This approach highlights the multifaceted nature of feminine identity within a specific cultural and historical context

# CHAPTER ONE: IRAN: SETTING THE SCENE

"History is a guide to navigation in perilous times.

History is who we are and why we are the way we are."

David McCullough

## 1. Introduction

History is a lens through which we delve into the world, nations, and empires, exploring centuries of enlightenment, clashes, constructions, and deconstructions. It allows us to understand how the past has shaped the present and how the present will shape the future. History spans the timeline of civilizations from the beginning of humankind to the present, encompassing the world's most powerful nations and empires. Therefore, an introduction to the historical and theoretical background of the novel is provided in this chapter in two main parts, the first part of which deals with the socio-historical context in which the novel was written. As the second part of this chapter discusses the theoretical background of the study, the third concludes with a biography of the author and an overview of the novel.

History has often depicted the Islamic Republic of Iran as one of the world's greatest nations, tracing the evolution of a country once known as Iran to its present manifestation as the Islamic Republic of Iran. From the country's foundation to the formation of the new nation of Iran in 1935 under the authority of Reza Shah Pahlavi, a turning point in the empire's history.

The twentieth century's Iran witnessed its turning point with the establishment of the Pahlavi dynasty. The Pahlavi dynasty was established in 1921 by Reza Khan, who crowned himself as the Shah. "There is room in Iran for only one shah – and I will be that shah,"<sup>6</sup> As Ervand

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<sup>6</sup> Reza Shah. quoted in Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018)p. 119

Abrahamian remarks in his book *A History of Modern Iran*, "Reza Khan had become Reza Shah. He remained so until the Anglo-Soviet invasion of 1941. These fifteen years, together with the preceding five, can be described as the Reza Shah era".<sup>7</sup> The Reza Shah era is divided into two periods; the first era was under Reza Shah (1925-1941), followed by his son Muhammad Reza. The Shah states one aim during his ruling era throughout his action to build and structure the nation from stone. Ervand Abrahamian reports "The hallmark of the era was to be state-building. Reza Shah came to power in a country where the government had little presence outside the capital. He left the country with an extensive state structure – the first in Iran's two thousand years."<sup>8</sup>

The first Shah's betrayal of his allies echoes these plans to rebuild the greatest nation of its time into the air. R. Pahlavi actions during the war were seen as a betrayal by many, which had significant political consequences. This betrayal ultimately led to his exile, first to the Indian Ocean Island of Mauritius and later to Johannesburg, South Africa. In the doors of the second war, the soviet with the British power took control of Iran, forced the Shah to singed up and left to exile. A few days after Reza Khan's exile, his son was the next Shah; hence, the new nation was firmly between the waves.

### **1. The Realm of Iran: Unveiling the Past**

Days passed after Reza Shah depose by his allies; the country was under foreign chaos, and the British-Soviet allies were circulating Iran from the sea to the borders. Each with his desires; on the one hand, the Russians aimed to control the country, and on the other hand, the British sought to end the Pahlavi Empire. Linda Barth contends in her book *Mohammed Reza Pahlavi*, "The British considered several options, including reinstalling the royal family, the Qajars, which Reza Shah had overthrown. Ultimately, the British selected Mohammed Reza because

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<sup>7</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, *a History of Modern Iran*, (New york, Cambridge University press, 2018) p. 122

<sup>8</sup> Abrahamian, *a History of Iran*, p 122

they believed he would be easy to manipulate and control.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the British government achieved its goals hand in hand with the Russians and dominated the land with its rich resources until the end of World War two; in his book *Mohammed Reza Pahlavi Shah of Iran*, James D. Cockcroft describes Mohammed Reza era “Mohammed Reza signs the oath of obedience at the Majlis (parliament) in October 1941 and is recognized as the new Shah of Iran. Virtually powerless during World War II, the Shah eventually allied himself with the United States, which by the end of the war had established a large presence in Iran.”<sup>10</sup>

Mohammed Reza became the new Shah of an unrecognisable country, the foreign allies from one side, and the nation insiders from the other. The foreigners controlled the country according to their own needs and deeds, growing more powerful and wealthy due to their control of the Iranian oil, leaving the Iranian powerless and in poverty. All of these occurred in the presence of the new Shah Mohammed Reza, with him not acting, resulting in a harsh wave from his people. The presence of Allied forces in Iran was justified as necessary to protect the nation's sovereignty. However, it should be noted that the Allies' continued exploitation of Iran's oil resources rendered this purported protection meaningless, which Iranians viewed as a form of colonialism. As Stephen Kinzer points out in *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror*, that although the Allies claimed to be in Iran to protect its sovereignty, they also exploited its resources, particularly its oil. This economic exploitation led to resentment among Iranians, who viewed it as a continuation of colonialism.<sup>11</sup>

Both the interference of the British and Soviet governments continued until the end of world war two. Therefore, the hatred waves continued. Unsurprisingly, the hatred waves come under the term "nationalization" in the early 1950s. The Iranian followers demanded national representation away from the allies alongside the nationalization of the country's oil. The Shah's

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<sup>9</sup> Linda Barth, *Mohammed Reza Pahlavi*, (Philadelphia, Chelsea house of publishers, 2003) p. 26

<sup>10</sup> James D. Cockcroft, *Mohammed Reza Pahlavi: Shah of Iran*, (New York, Chelsea House Publishers, 1989) p. 47

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror* (Hoboken, New Jersey, John Wiley & Sons, 2008) p. 64

Prime Minister, Mohammad Mosaddegh, led the nationalization wave under the support of the Iranian followers. Mostafa Elm portrayed the events in his book *Oil, power, and Principles: Iran Oil Nationalization* "Mossadeq, taking advantage of the opportunity, announced that he would accept the post with honour only when the Majlis approved the Oil Committee's resolution on nationalization."<sup>12</sup>

Shortly after, the British government and Prime Minister Mossadeq started the oil war. The British side was unwilling to go beyond what the Iranian side believed and asked for. The British company known as, the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, entirely dominated the oil industry in Iran. Thus, the British relied on the oil to maintain its nation and power.

The Iranian people welcomed the movement, which was rejected and seen from the British perspective as a rebellion. A Rebellion will affect Britain and extend to the other Western allies in the third if it proves it ways. Notwithstanding, as both sides set on negotiating table, agreement on a solution was unnegotiated to both sides. As prime minister, Mossadeq took steps to carry out his plans. He placed his supporters in key government positions and started negotiations with a British oil company for the transfer of control. When the British company resisted, he ordered the Iranian oil company to take over the British company's assets in Iran. In response, the British government evacuated its personnel, blocked oil exports from Iran, and lodged a complaint with the United Nations. Mossadeq accused Britain of subversion, broke diplomatic ties, and closed down the British consulates and embassy. Britain froze Iranian assets and increased its naval presence in the Persian Gulf. This led to a serious crisis between Mossadeq's government and Britain by the end of 1951.<sup>13</sup>

The oil crisis ended in 1959; with the cooperation of the British MI, the American CIA secretly organized a military coup to arrest Prime Minister Mossadeq. Abrahamian asserts in

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<sup>12</sup> Mosatfa Elm, *Oil, Power, and Principle: Iran's oil Nationalization and its Aftermath*(New York, Syracuse University Press,1992) p.92

<sup>13</sup> Abrahamian, *A history of Iran*,179



his book *A History of Modern Iran* that “The 1953 coup has often been depicted as a CIA venture to save Iran from international communism. In fact, it was a joint British–American venture to preserve the international oil cartel”.<sup>14</sup>

## **2. Occidental renaissance:**

The 1950 coup was a significant turning point that marked the beginning of Mohammed Reza's leadership era, an era of economic growth, oil price growth, and modernization. In the early days after the second coup, the last shah landed in the country with one aim: "To push my country into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century"<sup>15</sup> The modernization wave spread throughout nations like a thousand splined suns. Modernization theory sees the world as divided between traditional and modern societies but does not define precisely what these terms mean. It tends to label Western countries as modern and Third World nations as traditional without explaining clearly. The theory suggests Third World countries struggle with development due to old-fashioned institutions, fast population growth, limited public involvement in governance, and deeply rooted beliefs. In essence, it blames internal issues within these societies for their underdevelopment.<sup>16</sup>

After World War II, the idea of "modernization" became popular. It offered a plan for how societies could grow socially, economically, and culturally. Most economists agreed on a couple of main ideas behind this theory. They believed all societies had to go through the same steps that richer countries did.<sup>17</sup> Following the Mossadeq affair in 1960, Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi of Iran conspicuously espoused Western ideologies, particularly those of the United States. Undeterred by opposition from religious clerics, the Shah fervently pursued his vision of modernizing Iran along Western lines. As Linda Barth aptly notes in her book

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<sup>14</sup> Abrahamian, *A history of Iran*, 180

<sup>15</sup> Cockcroft, *Mohammed Pahlavi*, p 63

<sup>16</sup> Ramin Jahanbegloo, ed., *Iran between Tradition and Modernity*

<sup>17</sup> Jahanbegloo, ed., *Iran Tradition and Modernity*

*Mohammed Reza Pahlavi*, "In the summer of 1962, Mohammed Reza announced his White Revolution,"<sup>18</sup> embodying his aspiration to align Iran with Western principles.

The Shah's white revolution program lasted for 17 years and centred around six laws: the reform of lands, the nationalization of state forests, the sale of state factories, and the creation of a literacy corps, a program of profit-sharing for industrial workers, and the granting of voting rights to women".<sup>19</sup> The Shah insisted on the reform of lands program of all these laws, and the main focus of the White Revolution in Iran was land reform. It aimed to allow share croppers to buy the land they farmed at lower prices with the help of loans. The Shah had two main goals: to create a group of Peasant Supporters loyal to the monarchy and to encourage people to move from rural areas to cities to work in new industries. Additionally, the reform aimed to modernize agriculture, increase Production, and decrease the influence of the landlord class, some of whom did not support the Shah's rule.<sup>20</sup>

On the same line of westernisation, the reforms extended to the female side as the second fundamental of the revolution. Indeed, the idea of westernising Iranian women was not new to Iranian society; it traced back to the Shah's father, who banned the veil and the traditional Iranian chador. Ergo, the son follows the father's steps, allowing Iranian women the time of their dreams during the white revolution era. They experienced more rights, more freedom, less restrictions. In the words of Ervand Abrahamian "The White Revolution also expanded to include women's issues. Women gained the right to vote; to run for elected office; and to serve in the judiciary – first as lawyers, later as judges.....Although the veil was never banned outright, its use in public institutions was discouraged."<sup>21</sup> In the course of the events, Iranian's spheres witnessed a dramatic changes in the core of these reconstructions as it gained support from one Iranian generation, and as any revolution, there is the other generation known clergy

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<sup>18</sup> Linda Barth, *Mohammed Pahlavi*, p.49

<sup>19</sup> Michael Axworthy, *Iran: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2017) p.73

<sup>20</sup> Axworthy, *Iran*, p.73

<sup>21</sup> Abrahamian, *A History of Iran*, p.199

as the highly opposed the white revolution. The shah's accepting a contract with Israel was the fire that led to spark of the opposed generation.

Dependency theory emerged as an alternative to modernization theory, focusing on the dual notion of the world system. It posits that industrialized and non-industrialized countries are the "core" and "periphery," with the core exploiting the periphery. This theory suggests that internal characteristics, like traditional institutions or educational systems, are not obstacles to development, but rather exploitative relations between the core and periphery. It seeks to explain underdevelopment by identifying external obstacles.<sup>22</sup>

Khomeini Ayatollah led other generations. They included clergy, landowners, intellectuals, and merchants who opposed all new reforms, whether in politics, economics, or socially, accusing the Shah of letting the United States manage the country. As Khoemini's first public political appearance, the white revolution was the last revolution of the Shah. According to Matthew Gordon, in his book Khomeini, the ayatollah delivered the following speech directly to the Shah:

“Shah ... I don't want you to become like your father. Listen to my advice, listen to the ulama [learned men] of Islam. They desire the welfare of the nation, the welfare of the country. Don't listen to Israel; Israel can't do anything for you. You miserable wretch, 45 years of your life have passed; isn't it time for you to think and reflect a little, to learn a lesson from the experience of your father?”<sup>23</sup>

Khomeini's speech made the Shah angry; thus, he was exiled first to Turkey and then Iraq for nearly fifteen years, fifteen years of reverberating messages and speeches from exile to his followers in Iran. To encourage them to be patient and wait for their moment. Khomeini's messages were recorded during his exile time in France in cassettes for his Iranian followers inside and outside Iran. Through those messages, he was orchestrating an army of

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<sup>22</sup> Jahanbegloo, *Iran tradition and modernity*, p.36

<sup>23</sup> Matthew Gordon, *Ayatollah Khomeini: World leaders past & present*, (Chelsea House Publishers, 1987) p. 61.

revolutionaries that would stand for the right timing Simultaneously, the opportune moment identified as the Islamic Revolution came into existence on black Friday, January 1978, when the capital's newspaper wrote an article that deceptive Khomeini origins and argued that he had negative hidden goals. In response to the publication, the letter's followers' protests erupted throughout the country; this event ignited the fire that burned the last Shah out and welcomed Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

### **3. The Crescent Uprising: The Islamic Revolution Unfolds**

With a warm welcome from millions of Iranians, Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic revolution, arrived in the nation to thousands and thousands of cheers. A new chapter in the history of Iran began with the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Khomeini was appointed as the Supreme Leader of The revolution and of the entire country. As a consequence, he was able to assume full control over the country, resulting in the restoration of "back to tradition" reconstruction measures.

One fundamental aspect that Khomeini concentrated on as the foundation of his reconstruction was establishing an Islamic government based on the principles of Shia Islam. Khomeini and his followers believed that the country must be ruled only by Islamic principles and collaborated to create a society based on these principles. This encompassed the implementation of Islamic law, known as Sharia, which governed all aspects of life in Iran, from personal to government. The government structure included elected officials, such as the parliament, but ultimate power rested with the supreme leader and the clerical. Moreover, the revolutionary guards, officially known as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard crops, were established by Khoemini to safeguard the new Islamic republic from internal and external threats. Shaul Bakhash an Iranian-American historian states that The Revolutionary Guard, or The Pasdaran-e Enqelab, had conflicting motives of imposing discipline on revolutionary committees, armed retainers, and creating an organized armed force for radical clerics. Like

revolutionary committees, guards made arrests, ran prisons, interfered with officials, and became a center of independent power.<sup>24</sup>

In parallel with this, Iranian foreign policy under Khomeini underwent a significant transformation. The new regime broke away from its previous alignment with Western powers to establish itself as a solid Islamic power. The Islamic Republic of Iran was no longer content to be a mere pawn in the hands of outside forces. Instead, it sought to assert its own identity and challenge the dominance of Western powers in the region. It was an era of defiance and self-assertion during which the country stood firmly behind its religious and nationalist principles. This marked a new chapter in the country's history and world affairs, characterized by a strong independent spirit and a steadfast determination to protect its sovereignty. As highlighted by Abbas Amanat, a prominent Iranian historian and scholar, "almost becoming a voodoo-like invocation, the satanic first attribute in November 1979 by Khomeini in a routine diatribe against the United States, may have rooted more in Cold War propaganda than in an Islamic notion" In other words, Khomeini calling America Satanic in 1979 might have been more about Politics than religious. This demonization of America was part of portraying the Islamic revolution as a battle of good versus evil.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the hostage crisis, which unfolded as demands for the USA to extradite the shah for trial and the return of his assets, the hostage crisis by Iranian students and the public a shift towards greater militancy, with students adopting leftist rhetoric and techniques. They influenced Khomeini and others to take more ideological stances. The slogan "neither East nor West but the Islamic Republic" became more anti-imperialist, and "Death to America" was matched by Khomeini's denunciation of America as the "Great Stan." <sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Shaul Bakhash, *Reign of The Ayatollahs: Iran and The Islamic Revolution*, (New York, Basic Books, Inc, Publishers,1984)p. 63

<sup>25</sup> Abbas Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History*,(New Haven & London, Yale University Press,2017)p. 999

<sup>26</sup> Abbas Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History*, p.999.

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's sweep of changes extended beyond the political realm, significantly impacting various facets of everyday life, including social norms, cultural practices, and educational dynamics. Khomeini's vision for an Islamic state engendered far-reaching transformations that permeated multiple spheres of Iranian society, leaving a profound imprint on the nation's social fabric and cultural landscape. One of the most notable areas where Khomeini's ideology significantly impacted was the educational system and cultural landscape of Iran:

Many teachers and professors who teach at our schools and universities are Westoxicated.

Their task is to brainwash our youth with the incorrect education, rooted in colonial education. ... our universities should change fundamentally. They should be rebuilt from the ashes... and new teachers with a correct training and education should be in charge of teaching our youth... <sup>27</sup>

The closure of all universities and colleges marked the start of the cultural revolution in line with the Abbas Amanat narrative: "At the core of what came to be known as the Cultural Revolution (Enqelab-e Farhangi) stood a deep resentment of the secular educational system that had emerged since the turn of the twentieth century."<sup>28</sup> The universities underwent substantial changes to align with Islamic principles and teachings in conjunction with the educational program. Religious education became a fundamental part of the curriculum program. The Cultural Revolution aimed to instill Islamic values and ethical principles within the educational framework, contributing to a broader narrative and the revival of Persian culture and traditions, as elements of pre-Islamic Persian heritage were integrated into the fabric of the Islamic Republic.

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<sup>27</sup> Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, quoted in Maryam Borjian, "The Revolutionary Period (1979–1988)," in *English in Post-Revolutionary Iran: From Indigenization to Internationalization*. p.65-88

<sup>28</sup> Abbas Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History*, p.981

As a part of re-Islamizing the educational system, a process was initiated to re-evaluate and expel thousands of students and faculty members. This process involved subjecting them to ideological tests, where their beliefs and practices were scrutinized to determine their alignment with the new Islamic regime. Many faculty members were labelled as anti-revolutionary or idol worshippers. They were forced to leave the country or pursue another career. Professors in the humanities and social sciences were explicitly targeted in what was essentially an 'academic cleansing campaign'. This campaign involved the systematic removal of individuals deemed to be promoting Western cultural influences or living in a way deemed un-Islamic, with the aim of purging the educational system of such influences.<sup>29</sup>

In social norms and cultural customs, cultural practices experienced a resurgence, with traditional Islamic customs gaining prominence in various aspects of Iranian daily life, from celebrating Islamic holidays and promoting Islamic art and literature to family structure. Moreover, the Cultural Revolution was a watershed moment in the nation's history that catalysed significant reforms, fundamentally altering women's lives and Artistic Freedom. A fundamental redefinition of women's roles and status unfolded. Mainly, dress code and women's access to public spaces and behaviour. The mandatory hijab (veiling) was obliged and regarded as a symbol of modesty and obedience. The new regime reversed the Family Protection Law, lowered the marriage age for girls to thirteen, and allowed husbands to divorce without court permission. It removed women from the judiciary and secular teachers, removed Bahais from government positions, closed temples, and executed their leaders. They enforced an Islamic code of public appearance, with men discouraged from wearing ties and women required to wear scarves and long coats.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, Khomeini's era also witnessed the evolution of cultural expression and artistic freedom; artistic and cultural productions were Subject to the interplay with religion and tradition. Art forms ranging from literature, theatre, and cinema to

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<sup>29</sup> Abbas Amanat, *Iran: A Modern History*, p986

<sup>30</sup> Abrahamian, Iran, p.241

music and poetry reflected an engagement, if not banned, with Islamic themes and ethical narratives.

#### **4. Feminism Unveiled : Across Time And Space**

The word Feminism has echoing meanings from its first use to the current era because of its misunderstanding, misuse, misinterpretation, and, most importantly, misdefinition. Various definitions are available for Feminism, including academic and trendy definitions. Dictionaries, namely Merriam-Webster's Encyclopedia, describe this term as follows: a belief in and advocacy of the sexes' political, economic, and social equality expressed especially through organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests.<sup>31</sup> Conspicuously, Lorna Finlayson, among other academics, defines Feminism in her book *An Introduction to Feminism* “as a form of theory, the theory which identifies and opposes what is calls sexism, misogyny or patriarchy”. She additionally contends that “feminism is not just a matter of words; it is also a way of living and struggling against the status quo”.<sup>32</sup>

In today’s social media landscape, the term feminism holds different meanings. Some define feminism and those who believe in it as “man-hating” and as a Westernized philosophy that destroyed the norms of society and traditional beliefs. Platforms have provided spaces for both the spread and support of feminist ideas and awareness of women’s status globally; it has also opened the doors for marginalized voices to express their experiences and stories. At the same time, there has been a space for backlash against feminism; women who engage in feminist activism or express their opinions on social media may face Targeted harassment, threats, and attempts to silence their voices. Social media algorithms and policies have been criticized for hiding most of their sensitive content that addresses women’s issues. Through the annals of history, feminism emerged widely in the mid-19th century. The term is articulated from the

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<sup>31</sup> Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s. v. “feminism,” accessed April 17, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/feminism>.

<sup>32</sup> Lorna Finlayson, *An Introduction to Feminism*, (United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 2016), p.4



Latin word “Femina,” which means women, and the suffix “ism” refers to ideology. Insofar as the term refers to an ideology and its primary concern centered on females, feminism is a widely discussed and sensitive topic on a global scale because of particular circumstances. Following the historical lineage, what is fought for in the present belongs to the past. That is to say, what women face today is not new; being second after men in every aspect of life, the inequality between females and males, whether in families or in society, the oppression, the marginalization, and the never struggles parallel those from the middle ages, renaissance period, age of enlightenment. The modern era marked the beginning of females’ active participation. Several researchers, such as Rebecca Walker and Judith Lorber, have outlined the history of feminism into three waves, each with its principles and goals. The three waves of feminism represent different stages in the ongoing struggle for gender equality and illustrate the diverse and evolving nature of feminist thought and activism over time.

## **5.1 THE FIRST WAVE**

The first wave of the women's movement started in the late 19th as a wave of women's rebellion against the system. At that time, women in America and Europe were, if not unclassified at all, subjected to existence; they only existed with and were defined by the family or the husband, no more than this alongside with less of rights. Marriage means the loss of their property and future earnings. No right to education, rights to their children, or rights in life. They were only regarded as luxury portraits that represented children and housekeeping. Ergo, the first wave of feminism focused primarily on suffrage, the right to vote, and broader issues of gender equality and women's rights. Certain members of the female gender challenged the prevailing social norms and they become later and today key figures in feminism history. To name a few, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Lucretia Mott worked tirelessly to advocate women's rights and challenge the prevailing attitudes and laws that limited women's opportunities and freedoms. The first wave of feminism was a significant period in history that forever changed

women's lives, the first wavers achieved significant progress in advancing women's rights and freedoms. Some of their notable achievements include women's right to vote, which was finally granted in 1920 with the passage of the 19th Amendment in the United States. This was a major milestone for women's political Participation and representation. It also increased opportunities for women to pursue higher education and enter professions that were previously closed to them.

## **5.2 THE SECOND WAVE**

The second wave of feminism, referred to as the Women's Liberation Movement, which originated from the 90s to the 1980s, was a continuation of the first wave. The first wave permitted something important- the right to vote for women- but it failed on the other basis. Women could vote, attend universities, and work at that time, but with limited choices. Their status, whether socially or in other aspects, remained the same. Men get paid more for the same work, men can choose, and women get the available. Men can divorce easily; women cannot; violence was illegal only in-laws as the male gender

Did not believe in its illegality. Therefore, the second wavers demanded psychological, political, and social. As Marilou Niedda argues in her article "Feminist and Queer Studies: Judith Butler's Conceptualizations of Gender," women hoped more than the legal rights they had gained. Women wanted to be free from male domination".<sup>33</sup> Thus, The second wave's slogans, "The Personal is Political," created by Carol Hanisch, and "Identity Politics," illustrated the philosophy of the second wave: That oppression based on race, social status, and gender are all intertwined. Hence, during that period, numerous feminist activist organizations surfaced, such as African American feminist groups. Instead of a political upheaval, women

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<sup>33</sup> Marilou Niedda, "Feminist and Queer Studies: Judith Butler's Conceptualisation of Gender," La clé des langues - Cultures et langues étrangères, March 24, 2021, <https://cle.ens-lyon.fr/anglais/civilisation/domaine-americain/feminist-and-queer-studies-judith-butlers-conceptualisation-of-gender>.

sought a cultural transformation.<sup>34</sup> One key achievement of second-wave feminism was the introduction of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 in the United States, which prohibited discrimination based on sex in fields such as employment and education. The passage of Title IX was a significant victory for women who had long been denied equal opportunities in the workplace and higher education. Another essential aspect of second-wave feminism was The emphasis on intersectionality or the recognition that women's experiences are shaped by factors such as race, class, and sexual orientation. Feminists of this era worked to highlight the ways in which different forms of oppression intersect and compound each other, leading to unique challenges for women who face multiple forms of discrimination.

### **5.3 THE THIRD WAVE**

The third wave, Emerging in the aftermath of the second wave of feminism, embodied a more diverse and inclusive feminist agenda. Diverse demands characterized the 1990 wave; instead of erasing sex differences, women wanted to highlight their unique identities. Some focused on advocating for sexual and racial minority groups, such as Chicanas and LGBTQ individuals. Second-wave feminists were criticized for only addressing sexism, neglecting other forms of oppression based on race, class, and sexuality. Kimberlè W. Crenshaw introduced the concept of intersectionality in 1989 to address these intersecting layers of discrimination. This framework illustrates how multiple forms of discrimination intersect, making prioritizing one over the other impossible. For example, Black women face both racist and sexist discrimination simultaneously. The 1990s also saw a shift towards embracing diverse gender identities rather than overcoming gender differences.<sup>35</sup>

One of the most significant changes in the third wave was the shift towards embracing diverse gender identities rather than overcoming gender differences. This was reflected in the growing

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<sup>34</sup> Niedda, "feminist and queer studies".

<sup>35</sup> Niedda, "feminist and queer studies".

visibility of transgender and non-binary individuals, who challenged the binary notion of gender and fought for their rights.

#### **5.4 Veiled Voices: Feminist Narratives from Muslim Perspectives:**

In the sphere of feminist discourse, there are to be found countless voices that are often overlooked or marginalized, specifically those from the third world. Third-world women have been the question that has never been answered, the subject of past and present debates, and the subject of portraits. In the West, particularly among Western feminists, Arab women are viewed as silenced, docile, and veiled. They are regarded as prisoners who urgently need saving and liberation. The extent of this perception varies from one country to another, from Pakistan to Syria and Iran. After 9/11, all literary, political, and human attention was directed toward Arab women in the Middle East, North Africa, and Africa. Westerners believe that the Arab nation needs to be de-Orientalized and de-Islamized. According to Chandra Mohanty “Scholars often locate third world women in terms of the underdevelopment, oppressive traditions, high illiteracy, rural and urban poverty, religious fanaticism, and overpopulation of particular Asian, African, Middle Eastern, and Latin American countries.”<sup>36</sup>

In her essay *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*, Chandra Mohanty critiques the Western feminist perspective of viewing 'Third World women,' a term used to refer to women from economically and politically disadvantaged regions as a monolithic group. She argues that just like Western women, Third World women cannot be defined as a coherent interest group. Thus, Mohanty's work underscores the imperative to account for the

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<sup>36</sup> Chandra Mohanty, *Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses*, Palgrave Macmillan Journals, *Feminist Review*, No.30(Autumn, 1998), p. 61-88

internal complexities and diversities within Third World women, including differences in class, religion, sexuality, and history.

The image of Third World women can be traced back to the era of empires and modernization. During the colonial era, Western powers used the image of the "exotic" Third World woman to justify their imperialist projects. Third World women were portrayed as passive, submissive, and in need of rescue by Western powers. The rise of modernization theory in the mid-20th century further reinforced the image of Third World women as oppressed victims in need of liberation through Modernization and Westernization. Modernization theorists argued that Third World women were oppressed by religious, traditional cultures and practices and that their liberation could only come through modernization and Westernization. This image of Third World women as oppressed victims has persisted to this day despite criticism from feminist scholars and activists.

However, these representations of Third World women fail to account for their internal complexities and diversities. They present a monolithic view of Third World women, ignoring the fact that they come from diverse backgrounds and have varied experiences and perspectives. By reducing Third World women to a single image, these representations create a distorted view of reality that can lead to misrepresentations and misunderstandings. This distortion not only erases the rich diversity of Third World women's experiences but also perpetuates harmful stereotypes, reinforcing power imbalances and inhibiting social progress.

In the steps of defending the third world image, precisely the Arab image, Lila Abu Lghoud demonstrate in her book *Do Arab Women Need Saving?* That why was it considered more important to understand the culture of the region, including its religious beliefs and treatment of women, rather than delving into the history of oppressive governments in the region and the involvement of the United States in that history? This cultural focus, in my opinion, hindered a thorough exploration of the underlying causes and nature of human

suffering in that part of the world. Instead of providing political and historical explanations, experts were expected to offer religious or cultural explanations. This approach seemed to artificially separate the world into distinct spheres, creating a divide between the West and the East, between "us" and Muslims, and between cultures where first ladies make speeches and those where women are confined to silence in burqas.<sup>37</sup>

Third world, women's images that have been circulating after the attack of 9/11 and the Islamic revolution have been captured in the sense that Islam is what blurred the picture of Arab women to become a Westernized, developed, aesthetic photograph—neglecting to the degree that As in the case of Western society, discrimination, and the patriarchy system in the third scope are not the result of Islam religion nor the objectivity veil nor what the generation before left whether believes or norms. Patriarchy in origins comes from the social system and what the old Western church believed in. The most crucial point is that whether East, west, are defined as totally different spheres, each with its own ideologies, beliefs, and philosophies, and that is what makes them different begin different in maintaining the world balance.

In this steam, third-women writers choose words as swords to define the third women and rewrite their history. Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is a powerful example of how women writers use the power of words to define themselves. Nafisi's memoir depicts her experiences as a literature professor in Iran and her secret book club, where she and her female students discussed forbidden Western classics. By doing so, Nafisi and her students challenged societal norms and redefined their roles as third-world women. Nafisi's work exemplifies the transformative power of literature and the written word in shaping one's identity and resisting oppression.

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<sup>37</sup> Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (England, Harvard University Press, 2013) p. 31

## 6. Azar Nafisi: At the Crossroads

Azar Nafisi an Iranian American is, well known, as a writer and professor of English Literature who has made significant contributions in the literary field. Born to a well-to-do family in Tehran, Iran in 1948, a prominent Iranian mayor and one of the country's first female parliamentarians, at the age of 13 she left Iran to initially pursue her education in Switzerland before returning to Iran when her father was imprisoned. Later, she pursued a PhD in English and American Literature at the University of Oklahoma, where she became involved in the Iranian student movement. However, her primary interest lay in studying revolutionary texts like Engels' "Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State" and Marx's "The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte." Despite her participation in the student movement, Nafisi grappled with conflicting feelings as she appreciated Western literature while also protesting against Western imperialism. Following her PhD and a fellowship at Oxford University, Nafisi went back to Iran in 1979 and taught American literature at the University of Tehran.<sup>38</sup>

Nafisi while in Tehran, defied government bans by teaching Western classics like *The Great Gatsby*, *Daisy Miller*, and *Pride and Prejudice*, which conflicted with Islamic values. Some radical students opposed her teachings, viewing the characters' actions as immoral and emblematic of Western selfishness. In 1981, she was ousted from the University of Tehran for refusing to wear the veil, subsequently finding teaching positions at the Free Islamic University and Allameh Tabatabai University until she resigned in 1995. They read and discussed Western novels like *Lolita*, *Invitation to a Beheading*, and *Madame Bovary*. Nafisi challenged her students to connect these stories to modern Iran. This covert reading group served as the basis for her celebrated work, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Mfon, Victoria; Selander, Elizabeth. (2006). Azar Nafisi. Retrieved from the University Digital Conservancy, <https://hdl.handle.net/11299/166285>.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, p.2.

Azar Nafisi is well-known as a writer many of whose novels show her genuine concern about both women and their lives in oppressive systems and male-dominated societies and about human liberty. To a great extent, In Iran as elsewhere women are considered as an object in every aspect of life, whether socially, politically, academically, or humanly. Women are classified as visible and invisible according to the situation. In one of her articles “The Veiled Threat” Nafisi delineates Iranian women “on the eve of the twentieth anniversary of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. On the one hand, the ruling Islamic regime has succeeded in completely repressing Iranian women”. In another article entitled Opinion: Book bans signal the dangerous direction society is moving she describes the act of banning books.

In recent years, we have seen how truth is replaced by lies, and how dangerous a cultivated ignorance can be, especially when it is embraced by our political leaders and our loudest media commentators, those with the largest bullhorns. Book-banning is a form of silencing, and it is the next Step along a continuum — one that I worry even in the United States presages a further slide toward totalitarianism.<sup>40</sup>

Indeed, the act of banning and destroying books holds hidden meaning for each society for the importance that it holds being more than books. Azar Nafisi’s last published book *Read Dangerously: The Subversive Power of Literature in Troubled Times* offers a compelling framework to the literary world and the power of literature in the wars whether ideological or cultural one’s. Her last publication questioned “What is the role of literature in an era when one political party wages continual war on writers and the press?”

Nafisi’s first published book lightened the path for her in the literary circle, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* posits Nafisi in the forefront of the Iranian writers. After publishing her first seminal work, Nafisi has been honoured with multiple prestigious literary accolades. These include the

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<sup>40</sup> Azar Nafisi, "Book Bans Are a Dangerous Warning Sign of Growing Totalitarianism," Washington Post, February 14, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/02/14/azar-nafisi-book-bans-dangerous-warning-totalitarianism/>.



2004 Nonfiction Book of the Year Award from Booksense, the Frederic W. Ness Book Award, and the 2004 Latifeh Yarsheter Book Award. Additionally, she has received an achievement award from the American Immigration Law Foundation and was a finalist for the 2004 PEN/Martha Albrand Award for Memoir. In 2006, she was bestowed with a Persian Golden Lioness Award for literature by the World Academy of Arts, Literature, and Media. Furthermore, in 2011, Nafisi was granted the Cristobal Gabarron Foundation International Thought and Humanities Award in recognition of her unwavering commitment to defending human values in Iran and her endeavours to raise awareness about the challenges faced by women in Islamic society through her literary contributions.<sup>41</sup>

## **7. Re-reading Lolita in Tehran: an overview**

In the opening pages of *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, Azar Nafisi reflects on her life in post-revolutionary Iran. The pages of *Lolita* tell the story of her resignation from her last academic post at Allameh Tabatabai University, where she taught literature in the faculty of Persian and foreign languages and literature. Nafisi recounts her experience forming a small reading group with seven female students. The group met weekly to discuss literary works, and she provided them with questions to ponder after completing each reading assignment. The literary circle consists of seven female students of Nafisi's best and most committed students: Manna, Nassrin, Mahshid, Yassi, Azin, Mitra, Sanaz, and one persistent male student, Nima, on special occasions allowed to come to talk about the assigned materials. For nearly two years. The class was based on the relation between fiction and reality. During the two years, they read different genres, such as *A Thousand and One Nights*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Madame Bovary*, *Daisy Miller*, *Gatsby*, and *Lolita*. For the female students, reading is a Sanctuary of their own

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<sup>41</sup> <sup>41</sup> Mfon, Victoria; Selander, Elizabeth. (2006). Azar Nafisi. Retrieved from the University Digital Conservancy, <https://hdl.handle.net/11299/166285>

a safe, personal space whereas women can retreat, reflect, and rejuvenate, despite every obstacle they encounter.

Through two photographs, we learn about Nafisi girls, as she refers to them; the first photograph blurs the girls, and the second mirrors them. The first photo shows a group of female students of Nafisi at a university before the revolution. In this image, the women are dressed in modern, colorful clothing, which reflects a period of relative freedom and Western influence. Symbolizing the intellectual and social freedoms they enjoyed at that time, they are shown engaged in lively, open discussions. The second photo shows the same group of women after the revolution. These women are veiled in black chadors in accordance with the strict dress code of the new Islamic regime. This image stands in stark contrast with the first, highlighting the significant loss of personal freedom and the oppressive social changes that women have endured as a result of the revolution. The women's expressions are more subdued, reflecting the new reality of censorship and repression in their daily lives.

These photographs illustrate the transformation of Iranian society and the impact of the Islamic Revolution on women's lives. The contrast between the two images serves as a powerful visual metaphor for the broader themes of Nafisi's memoir: the struggle for personal freedom, the oppressive nature of theocratic rule, and the resilience of individuals in the face of authoritarianism. The author and her students discuss Henry James's novels, including *Daisy Miller* and *Washington Square*. Through James Nafisi draws parallels between the experiences of James's characters and the lives of her students in Tehran. The discussions reveal the students' struggles with societal expectations, personal desires, and the harsh realities of living in a repressive society. James's section in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* highlights the profound impact of Henry James's works on Nafisi and her students, particularly within the context of the Iran-Iraq War. James's characters serve as a mirror to their struggles, offering insights into their own lives under an oppressive regime and during a brutal conflict. Through their engagement with literature,

the students find strength, solidarity, and a means of asserting their individuality against the forces that seek to control them. Most importantly, the section captures the memoir's central theme of the enduring power of literature to provide refuge and inspiration in times of great adversity.

In the final chapter, all seven female students develop a strong bond with each other, and Azar Nafisi, despite their diverse backgrounds, identities, and aspirations. Each of them grapples with her own unique journey and challenges. In 1997, Nafisi departed Iran, bidding farewell to the green light of hope that had guided her. Yet, despite her physical departure, the essence of Iran remained deeply embedded within her: Manna, the poet, hardworking Mahshid, and young Yassi. Even after class ended, they kept meeting. Azin got married again, Mitra moved to Canada, Sanaz went to Europe, and Nassrin to England, though not made it till the end. Despite the distance, their friendship remained strong, keeping alive the memories of their time together.

## **8. Conclusion**

In this chapter, the historical and theoretical aspects of the research were explained. The first section provided a socio-historical analysis of the novel; it provided a historical overview of Iran from the Pahlavi dynasty to the present. In the second chapter, feminist theory is introduced along with its relation to literature, which serves as the basis for the following analysis. The last section, provided a glimpse of Azar Nafisi as a female writer.

## CHAPTER TWO:

“We had lost all our rights, beginning with the right to talk. [...]

Everywhere, on billboards, in the newspapers, on the screen,

We encountered the revolting and insipid picture of ourselves that

Our oppressors wanted us to accept. And, because of all this, we were free.”

Sartre, “Republic of Silence” 498)

Contemporary Iranian literature has been particularly preoccupied with the theme of identity and the search for it. Iranian novelists have written extensively about the challenges of navigating a complex cultural landscape where they often feel like outsiders. Iranian women writers have made significant contributions to Arab American literature, offering unique perspectives on issues of identity, gender, and cultural heritage. Their works have been instrumental in challenging stereotypes and misconceptions about them, who are often portrayed as passive and oppressed. Through their writing, Iranian women writers have sought to assert their agency and voice, reclaiming their place in both Arab and American society.

In this way, women writers have also used their works as a means to promote greater understanding and empathy across cultures. By sharing their experiences and shedding light on their rich cultural heritage, they have made an invaluable contribution to both Arab American literature and the wider literary landscape. Their works serve as a testament to the power of writing to challenge stereotypes, foster empathy, and promote social change. Azar Nafisi, a prominent Iranian-American writer, is an excellent example of an Arab woman writer who has sought to assert her agency and voice through her literary works. Through her writing, Nafisi highlights the complexities of Iranian women's lives, navigating multiple identities and cultural expectations. She also challenges stereotypes and misconceptions about Iranian women, who are often portrayed as passive and oppressed. Henceforth, This chapter using Abu-Lughod's work *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* And Ahmed's *Women and Gender in Islam* to shed light

on feminine identity in the context of Iranian society, as well as the role of literature as a form of resistance.

### **1. The Subtext of The Title**

The title *Reading Lolita in Tehran* holds significant meaning in the context of the memoir by Azar Nafisi. The title first purely mirrors the memoir. It symbolizes the act of rebellion and resistance against the oppressive regime in Iran. The act of reading a banned and controversial novel like *Lolita* in the conservative and restrictive environment of Tehran represents the defiance of societal norms and the pursuit of intellectual freedom. It also reflects the power of literature to transcend cultural and political barriers and to provide agency and empowerment in the face of power and ideologies. Overall, the title serves as a powerful metaphor for the themes of freedom, resistance, and the transformative power of literature explored in the memoir.

Additionally, the title symbolizes the juxtaposition of Western and Iranian cultures within the memoir. The characters grapple with the tension between their traditional Iranian upbringing and the subversive nature of the Western literary works they explore. This mirrors the internal conflicts and struggles faced by the characters as they navigate their personal and intellectual freedom in a restrictive society. Moreover, the title's reference to *Lolita* specifically highlights the themes of power, agency, and the subversion of societal expectations present in the memoir. The characters' discussions surrounding *Lolita* and other controversial novels serve as a metaphor for their feminine identities against the limitations placed upon them as women in Iran. Overall, the title *Reading Lolita in Tehran* effectively mirrors the memoir and its characters by capturing the themes of resistance, cultural clash, and the transformative power of literature that are central to their experiences.

## 2. Feminine Identity: Veiled Voices

From Nawal El Saadawi to Leila Ahmed, Amina Wadud, Lila Abu-Lughod, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Assia Djebar, and Asma Lamrabet, despite originating from diverse locations, all share a common aim: to define and explore the intricacies of female Muslim identity. The above writers led the contemporary wave for the female's Muslim writers to redefine the identity of Muslim women all around the world and to totally abject the stereotypes surrounding the Muslim communities. Therefore building a legacy for the following generation to be part of and proud of, a platform to echo against the internal and external oppressions. Azar Nafisi like, each one of them, choose literature to voice her thoughts and words. Throughout the pages of her memoir Nafisi senses herself as never before. In the second chapter entitled *Gatsby* we get to know her as Azar Nafisi an Iranian who all the time and spaces dreamt of her country as all the Arab around the world.

She stands in the customs area, teary-eyed, desperately looking for a sympathetic face, for someone she can cling to and say, Oh how happy, how glad, how absolutely happy I am to be back home. At long last, here to stay. But no one so much as smiles. The walls of the airport have dissolved into an alien spectacle, with giant Posters of an ayatollah staring down reproachfully.<sup>42</sup>

Nafisi, employing the third person narrative, eloquently depicts her happiness and the experience of finally returning home amidst the Islamic revolution. This narrative technique underscores Nafisi's endeavour to make sense of her past from a different vantage point, to distance herself and reconcile with her experiences and identity, and the enduring pressures, both internal and external, she confronts while crafting her memoir. Despite years spent abroad, first as a young student and later as an adult, her longing for her homeland persists.

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<sup>42</sup> Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita In Tehran: a Memoir in Books*, (New York, Random House, 2003), p.81

During my first years abroad—when I was in school in England and Switzerland, and later, when I lived in America, I attempted to shape other Places according to my concept of Iran. I tried to Persianize the landscape and Even transferred for a term to a small college in New Mexico, mainly because it Reminded me of home..., is just like Iran. Just like Iran, just like home.<sup>43</sup>

Nafisi Tells the memories of her comeback with her husband in the first pages of Gatsby chapter, showing her love for her country the childhood memories with her brother in the Tehran airport. That, Living in three different landscape England, Switzerland, America never blurs her country image from her memories wherever she goes her country's images goes with her. The act of Persianize each landscape she puts herself in to nostalgic feel at home.

The chapter, aptly titled Gatsby, delves deep into the author's experiences, offering profound insights that extend beyond mere descriptions of her life at that time. Nafisi unequivocally sees herself through Gatsby in the sense of longing for an idealized version of life and pursuing the American dream.

Just over a month after we landed at the Tehran airport, I found myself standing In the English Department at the University of Tehran. As I arrived, I almost ran into a young man in a gray suit, curly-haired and friendly-looking. I later discovered he was another recent recruit, just back from the United States and, like me, filled with new and exciting ideas.<sup>44</sup>

She identifies with Gatsby's relentless pursuit of his vision of success and his desire to transcend his circumstances. In *The Great Gatsby*, Gatsby's relentless pursuit of the American dream mirrors Nafisi's pursuit of freedom and intellectual fulfillment in a repressive society. Nafisi, like Gatsby, is unequivocally driven by a longing for a better, more meaningful existence and to achieve her dream of being a literature teacher in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Just as Gatsby reinvents himself and creates a persona to fulfill his dream, Nafisi unequivocally seeks

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<sup>43</sup>Reading *Lolita in Tehran*, p.82.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p.87.

to carve out her identity and find fulfillment in a restrictive environment. Moreover, Nafisi's identification with Gatsby is indisputably evident in her yearning for a life beyond the constraints of a totalitarian regime. Gatsby's extravagant parties and opulent lifestyle serve as a metaphor for Nafisi's unwavering longing for a world of intellectual freedom and personal autonomy. Both characters are assertively driven by a desire to break free from societal limitations and achieve a sense of fulfillment and self-realization. Nafisi's identification with Gatsby is undeniably further illustrated by her understanding of the complexities of human desires and the pursuit of happiness. Through Gatsby's tragic story, Nafisi assertively reflects on the nature of ambition, the allure of unattainable dreams, and the consequences of relentless pursuit. She sees herself through Gatsby's struggles and aspirations, finding resonance in his ultimate quest for a life transcending societal expectations and limitations. The character of Gatsby serves as a poignant reflection of Nafisi's aspirations and struggles, highlighting the universal themes of longing, ambition, and the quest for a meaningful existence. She was nevertheless just a female version of Gatsby, starting with a dream and ending with a fear wall. Nafisi's teaching journey, whether within her small circle or as a university teacher, has played a significant role in constructing and redefining her feminine identity as an Iranian woman. Her experiences in the classroom have undoubtedly shaped her perspective on womanhood and identity in the Iranian context.

The wide street in front of the university contracted and expanded to accommodate our movements and for a long time I moved senselessly, swaying to the beat of the crowd. Then I found myself beating my fists against a tree and crying, crying, As if the person closest to me had died and I was now all alone in the whole wide world. <sup>45</sup>

In the wake of the events and new orders, Nafisi found herself grappling with profound mental and physical effects. Initially, she struggled to come to terms with and adapt to the rapidly changing circumstances.

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<sup>45</sup> *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, p.91



I did not know then that I would also have my own battle to fight Looking back, I am glad I was unaware of my special vulnerability: with my Small collection of books, I was like an emissary from a land that did not exist ,with a stock of dreams, coming to reclaim this land as my home. Amid the talk of treason and changes in government, events that now in my mind have become Confused and timeless.<sup>46</sup>

Further, Nafisi express feelings of isolation, displacement, and psychological distress and often feels a sense of homelessness and alienation due to the oppressive environment “the highest form of morality is not to feel at home in one’s own home”. Nafisi intense emotional turmoil and existential loneliness led her to escape reality into the world of fiction. “I like others, went about my business. It was only at night and in my diary that my growing desperation, my nightmares, poured out uninhibited” Thus, building her own world where she can act freely. By the same token, she found herself in-betweenness between herself and the other: with different educational background and deep appreciation for Western literature and culture clashed with the dominant ideologies in post-revolutionary Iran, This was a time of total changes, where the country, the system, and the society were all in flux.

I need you, the reader, to imagine us, for we won’t really exist if you don’t. Against the tyranny of time and politics, imagine us the way we sometimes didn’t dare to imagine ourselves: in our most private and secret moment in the most extraordinarily ordinary instances of life, listening to music, falling in love, walking down the shady streets or reading *Lolita* in Tehran. And then imagine us again with all this confiscated, driven underground, taken away from us<sup>47</sup>

As a woman in Iran, Nafisi was not exempt from the gender-specific restrictions that furthered her sense of in-betweenness. The regime's policies on women's dress code and behaviour directly contradicted Nafisi's beliefs about gender equality and individual freedom. Nafisi's struggle to maintain her values, beliefs, and identity in the face of these restrictions was a constant battle.

With her commitment to her dream and creation of a class where she can work with the best and most committed female students, Nafisi is creating a "room of her own" where she is free to act not in compliance with specific laws, but in accordance with her identity as an Iranian woman.

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p. 89

<sup>47</sup> *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, p. 6

Six A.M.: the first day of class. I was already up. Too excited to eat breakfast, I put the coffee on and then took a long, leisurely shower. The water caressed my neck, my back, my legs, and I stood there both rooted and light. For the first time in many years, I felt a sense of anticipation that was not marred by tension: I would not need to go through the torturous rituals that had marked my days when I taught at the university—rituals governing what I was forced to wear, how I was expected to act, the gestures I had to remember to control. For this class, I would prepare differently.<sup>48</sup>

In the context, Hamideh Sedaghi, an Iranian author, argues in her work *Women and Politics in Iran: Veiling, Unveiling, and Reveiling* that "Whether secular or religious or both combined, from the Pahlavis to the present regime, the state has played an instrumental role in modifying and restructuring gender relations and women's sexuality."<sup>49</sup> Why did the new leaders, like Reza Shah, impose severe punishment for violating the veiling traditions, and why was veiling so important that it became one of the cornerstones of the Islamic state? The fundamental query I posed earlier is furthered by the use of coercion to enforce veiling observances: what does it mean for women to be sexually active if the state places such a high value on their exhibition or concealment of it? From the early 1900s till the present, the political system's warring factions and the clerical establishment, their religious opponent, have been battling it out for control over women's sexuality. The status of women in society was the subject of contentious discussions, and women's labour was incorporated into development initiatives, all while women's social media personas shaped both national and global identities.<sup>50</sup>

Leila Ahmed's concept of women's agency in *Women and Gender in Islam* examines how women in Islamic societies navigate, negotiate, and sometimes challenge the social, cultural, and religious boundaries imposed on them to assert their feminine identity and independence. Ahmed emphasizes that despite patriarchal structures, women have historically

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, p. 9

<sup>49</sup> Hamideh Sedghi, *Women and Politics in Iran: Veiling, Unveiling, and Reveiling*, (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 201

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p.202

and contemporarily found ways to exercise their agency within these constraints. Ahmed, through early Islamic societies, women such as Khadija, the first wife of Prophet Muhammad, and Aisha, a prominent scholar and political leader. These women serve as models of agency, demonstrating that women have played active roles in shaping Islamic history and culture.<sup>51</sup>

Furthermore, by referring *Colonial and Post-Colonial Periods Women*, Ahmed examines how colonialism and post-colonialism have impacted women's agency in Muslim-majority societies. She discusses how colonial powers imposed their own gender norms and patriarchal structures, which sometimes conflicted with indigenous practices. Despite these challenges, women have continued to assert their agency through various forms of resistance and activism. At the end of her work, Ahmed analyses contemporary Islamic feminist movements, which seek to reinterpret religious texts and challenge patriarchal interpretations of Islam. These movements represent a form of women's agency, as women advocate for their rights and work toward gender equality within Islamic frameworks.

At the heart of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is the act of forming the Iranian feminine identity through agency; in this passage, the concept of agency is reflected in the transformative power that the act of reading and discussing novels has on the women in the room. Despite the societal constraints and limitations placed upon them, the women in the room exercise agency by creating a space for themselves to engage with literature and intellectual discussions freely. This act of forming a literary circle and delving into the novels represents their agency to carve out a realm of intellectual and personal freedom within the constraints of their society. Through their shared exploration of literature, they empower themselves to learn, grow, and expand their perspectives, demonstrating their agency in seeking knowledge and finding meaning beyond their everyday lives.

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<sup>51</sup> Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (Yale University Press, 2021).

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 eye of fiction.<sup>52</sup>

A private secret class become the centre of life for both the writer Azar Nafisi and her selected girls. The Outside deconstructed their feminine identity into different versions' of Lolita, it was only through the class they get to construct and freely express their femininity. They found in that "room of her own" not only an escape to escape the harsh reality but "a room for their own" to express their feminine identity, the marginalized feelings, thoughts that have been silenced. In the same vein, Nafisi alongside with the female students experienced of otherness and the search for a home in home. "In some ways our readings and discussions of the novels in that class became our moment of pause, our link to that other world of tenderness, brightness and beauty. Only eventually, we were compelled to return."<sup>53</sup> The literary circle represents a feminine space for female agency and empowerment for both sides, the latter seeks refuge within her students in which she connected with herself through the female students; and the female students saw hope in Nafisi.

It allowed us to defy the repressive reality outside the room—not only that, but to avenge ourselves on those who controlled our lives. For those few precious hours we felt free to discuss our pains and our joys, our personal hang-ups and weaknesses; for that suspended time we abdicated our responsibilities to our parents, relatives and friends, and to the Islamic Republic. We articulated all that happened to us in our own words and saw ourselves, for once, in our own image. <sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, p.8

<sup>53</sup> *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, p.57.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, p. 57.

Conclusively, Literature has traditionally served as a mirror to society to better understand nations. Turning the pages of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* to the last section by Austen, we can see the seven female characters reclaiming their feminine identities. Nassrin declared "over here we have an identity, we can make something of our lives. Over there, life is unknown."<sup>55</sup> Purportedly, Mahshid and Bijan, Nafisi's husband, shared similar thoughts and views on the country. However, the latter refused the idea of leaving the country as soon as possible, which was suggested by Manna. "If everybody leaves, who will help make something of this country? How can we be so irresponsible?"<sup>56</sup> Mahshid felt a sense of belonging only in her country, while Bijan, in total contrast with Nafisi, requested to leave. "We can't all leave this country—this is our home."<sup>57</sup> One can find himself only in his country, and one has to resist the obstacles on his way to find an identity and belonging.

Several characters of *Lolita in Tehran* embody Leila Ahmed's concept of women's agency. As the narrator and main character, Azar Nafisi demonstrates agency by creating a secret literature class for her female students. Despite the oppressive environment, she provides a space for intellectual freedom and critical thinking, encouraging her students to engage with and reflect on Western literature.

Nafisi's decision to leave her position at the university and teach privately in her home is a form of resistance against the regime's restrictive policies. Her actions exemplify personal and professional agency under repressive conditions. Ostensibly, Mahshid demonstrates agency through her ability to reconcile her religious beliefs with her intellectual pursuits. Her participation in the secret literature class reflects her commitment to intellectual growth and engagement, while her choice to veil indicates her autonomy in determining her identity.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p. 286

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p. 286

<sup>57</sup> *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, P.

Similarly, Yassi's love for poetry and her desire to express herself creatively highlight her agency. Despite societal restrictions, she finds ways to pursue her passion for literature and poetry, asserting her individuality and intellectual freedom. Sanaz, one of Nafisi's students, also exemplifies agency by navigating the strict social norms and regulations imposed on women. Her efforts to maintain a semblance of normalcy and personal freedom, such as dressing differently when out of sight of the authorities, show how she asserts her autonomy within the constraints of her society

### **3. Veil and Sentences: Weaving the Personal and Political**

The veil is a word composed of four letters without any stress. It has a long and diverse history and a culture of its own. It belongs to the ancient Chinese empires, the European elites, and Muslim women. Centuries back in history, the veil was considered a symbol of purity and elitism. Christian women in the Near East veiled before Islam and continued to do so in Europe until the 12th century. Mediaeval scholars view the Gregorian reforms as a low point for European women's rights. Historically, Jewish, Roman, Greek, Zoroastrian, Assyrian, and Indian women wore veils, which were considered a privilege for upper-class women and desired by lower-class women.<sup>58</sup>

Today, when celebrities wear the veil, it becomes a trend and a symbol of fashion and class. Covering is considered a form of elegance for elite families, such as the British ruling elite and the Spanish princesses. Comments and people's perceptions of them, especially in social media and newspapers, show the reality of the contemporary era. On the other side, when it comes to Arab women, the number of scholarships on Arab women and the "veil" word increased mainly after the 9/11 events. The act of banning the veil spread year after year all over the continents, including Europe, with the "la guerre des voiles" in French and America "war on terror".

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<sup>58</sup> Heath, *The Veil : Women Writers on Its History, Lore, and Politics*, p. 27.

The prevailing political, literary, and news narratives were predominantly centered around the experiences and roles of Arab women. The Bush administration provided justification for the military intervention and occupation of Afghanistan by framing it as a mission to bring liberation and freedom to the Afghan people. This narrative was aimed at garnering domestic and international support for the military actions in Afghanistan by emphasizing the goal of empowering the Afghan population, particularly women, and fostering democratic values in the region. The portrayal of the intervention as a means to liberate and uplift the Afghan people, including women, was a key aspect of the administration's diplomatic and public relations strategy during that time. Lila Abu-Lughod is a prominent anthropologist and scholar known for her work in the fields of Middle Eastern studies, gender studies. She has made significant contributions to the understanding of women within the context of Islam and the Middle East. Abu-Lughod's work *Do Muslim Women Need Saving* offers a critical and nuanced examination of the prevalent Western narratives and interventions that position Muslim women as victims in need of rescue or liberation. The book challenges the assumptions and ethnocentric perspectives that underpin such narratives, offering a compelling critique of the ways in which these representations perpetuate stereotypes and misunderstandings about Muslim women's Lives and agency. The central argument of the book centers on the complexities of gender dynamics within diverse Muslim societies and the problematic implications of external intervention that seek to "save" or "liberate" Muslim women. Drawing on extensive ethnographic research and critical analyses, she deconstructs the narratives of victimhood and empowerment, highlighting the need to understand the multifaceted realities and subjectivities of Muslim women on their own terms, free from the lens of western projections and misconceptions.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup>. Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Harvard University Press, 2013).

Through her work, Abu-Lughod advances a discussion on the intersections of gender, power, and agency within Muslim societies. In *Do Muslim Women Need Saving* demonstrates that:

Instead of questions that might lead to the examination of internal political struggles among groups in Afghanistan, or of global interconnections between Afghanistan and other nation-states, we were offered ones that worked to artificially divide the world into separate spheres—re-creating an imaginative geography of West versus East, us versus Muslims, cultures in which first ladies give speeches versus others in which women shuffle around silently in burqas.<sup>60</sup>

Indeed, the debates around women in burqas was the issue of both the West and the East, Similar occurrences exist throughout history, notably in the Middle East. In turn-of-the-century Egypt, there was a selective concern about Egyptian women's condition, with a focus on the veil as a symbol of oppression and no support for women's education.<sup>61</sup> Abu-Lughod illustrated that “so we need to be wary when Lord Cromer in British- ruled Egypt, French ladies In Algeria, and First Lady Laura Bush, all with military troops behind them, claim to be saving or liberating Muslim women”.<sup>62</sup> The blue burqa is often seen as a symbol of Taliban persecution against Afghan women. Liberals have expressed astonishment that women in Afghanistan did not remove their burqas after the Taliban were driven from power in 2001. Those who have worked in Muslim regions may question why this is shocking. Did we anticipate that once "free" from the fanatical Taliban, these ladies would return to midriff shirts and blue jeans, or dust off their Chanel suits? To promote practical clothes for "women of cover," it may be necessary to address certain fundamental concerns with veiling. (35)

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p. 31.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p. 34.

<sup>62</sup> *Do Muslim Women Need Saving*, p.35



At the heart of Nafisi's *reading Lolita in Tehran* the veil emerges as a complex symbol—a battleground for control and a canvas for personal expression. As it was things in the shah's time women was under the codes of dressing by the shah and before him, his father, as one of the most important steps toward modernizing the nation is to modernize the female side, therefore unveiled. Any women was found to be veiled publicly to be punished and set in jail. "I told him about my grandmother, who was the most devout Muslim I had ever known, even more than you, Mr. Bahri, and still she shunned politics. She resented the fact that her veil, which to her was a symbol of her sacred telationship to God, had now become an instrument of power, turning the women who wore them into political signs and symbols. Where do your loyalties lie, Mr. Bahri, with Islam or the state?"<sup>63</sup>

Nafisi's grandmother lived during the Shah's era and witnessed the White Revolution. Despite the Shah's strong desire to modernize society, he faced opposition. He aimed to pave the way for a new era in Iran through women, who were seen as a key to demonstrating the opposite Side, the clerics, and his unwavering goal. Reza Shah implemented his decree by launching the anti-veil operation in 1936. Faegheh Shirazi In the *The Veil Unveiled* depicts the strategies used by the first shah: Police were directed to use force to remove women's coverings off the streets. Reza Shah ordered the removal of the chador, which was seen as a symbol of backwardness, from the streets. Women from traditional Iranian families hesitated to leave their houses due to fear of police attacks under Reza Shah.<sup>64</sup> In other words, the veil symbolizes power whether in Iran, the Islamic Republic of Iran, or the West. Although Women who chose to wear religious dress were seen as anti-modernization and were harassed for their personal choices, Nafisi's grandmother refused to remove her veil and resisted the orders by staying in her house for three months without leaving it for minutes.

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<sup>63</sup> *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, P. 103.

<sup>64</sup> Faegheh Shirazi, *The Veil Unveiled: The Hijab in Modern Culture*, (Berkeley: University Of California Press, 2008), p.90.

Teaching in the Islamic Republic, like any other vocation, was subservient to politics and subject to arbitrary rules. Always, the joy of teaching was marred by diversions and considerations forced on us by the regime—how well could one teach when the main concern of university officials was not the quality of one's work but the color of one's lips, the subversive potential of a single strand of hair? Could one really concentrate on one's job when what preoccupied the faculty was how to excise the word *wine* from a Hemingway story, when they decided not to teach Brontë because she appeared to condone adultery?<sup>65</sup>

Through the pages of her memoir Azar Nafisi advocated against the intertwining of personal matters with political affairs. She passionately fought for personal freedom and autonomy, believing that individuals should express themselves freely without political interference. In other words, Muslim women have always been embracing by their society and the West mostly in ideological clashes

What could he think? A stern ayatollah, an improbable philosopher-king, had decided to impose his dream on a country and a people and to recreate us in his own myopic vision. So he had formulated an ideal of me as a Muslim woman, as a Muslim woman teacher, and wanted me to look, act, and in short live according to that ideal. Laleh and I, in refusing to accept that ideal, were taking not a political stance but an existential one.<sup>66</sup>

Following the 1979 Islamic revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini launched a formal transition and political upheaval. That is to say, what the Shah once did in opposition to Khomeini, Khomeini undid. Mohja Kahf contends in her essay “The Blessings of the Veil and the Trauma of Forced Unveilings in the Middle East” that “But who Made it a political issue in the first place? Neither regime can be exonerated: if post revolution Iran is to be condemned for forcing veiling, so is pro-Western, Pahlavi Iran for forcing unveiling”.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, p.10.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, p 28.

<sup>67</sup> Jennifer Heath, *The Veil: Women Writers on Its History, Lore, and Politics* (University of California Press, 2008), p 27.

The parody of the veil differentiates from one line to another, from a symbol of power in ideologies war to a symbol of oppression in the West discourse to just a symbol of identity. In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Mahshid is portrayed as a progressive and hardworking Iranian woman who holds the Islamic veil and her religious beliefs as integral parts of her existence. Unlike the trending symbols in the contemporary world, the veil holds different meanings for Mahshid, representing her as a symbol of identity rather than oppression. When discussing *Lolita* as a literary work, Mahshid's views conflict with those of the other six students. "I have a problem with all of this," she voiced her thought "We keep talking about how Humbert is wrong, and I do think he is, but we are not talking about the issue of morality. Some things are offensive to some people"<sup>68</sup>. Mahshid expresses her concern about the issue of morality. She points out that some things can be offensive to certain people, further condemning Humbert's actions and highlighting the importance of discussing sensitive topics respectfully.

Mahshid character contrast with the other six students' ideas and thoughts concerning religion "I mean, my parents are very religious—is that a crime?" she asked, raising her eyes to Me. "Do they not have a right to expect me to be like them? Why should I condemn Humbert but not the girl in Loitering with Intent and say it's okay to have an Adulterous Relationship? These are serious questions, and they become difficult when we apply them to our own lives,"<sup>69</sup>

Mahshid emphasizes her right to maintain her religious beliefs and practices, particularly regarding the veil and Islam. She challenges the societal condemnation of the veil and Islam, asserting her autonomy and choice to uphold her religious identity. By questioning the unfair judgment of her spiritual practices and expressing her desire to embrace her beliefs, she asserts her agency as a modern, educated woman while respecting her religious traditions and highlighting her desire to embrace her modern identity and spiritual heritage. This internal conflict sheds light on the complexities of identity and the challenge of balancing personal

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<sup>68</sup> *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, p.51

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid*, p.51

beliefs with familial and cultural expectations. Mahshid, by her side, further elaborates on a thought-provoking dialogue on the complexities of moral judgment by referencing characters from literature and questioning the fairness of condemning one while excusing another, where she questions Nafisi's action in condemning only Humbert, which raises the issue of moral standards and the influence of upbringing on personal beliefs and actions. This challenges the reader to consider the impact of familial and societal expectations on individual moral decision-making.

As the narrative of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* unfolds, the diversity of beliefs and behaviours among the characters becomes increasingly apparent. Manna, for instance, steadfastly defends her religion and beliefs, a stance that sharply contrasts with the rest of Nafisi's literary circle. This diversity is particularly evident in her interactions with Azin, a liberal female who boldly asserts, "Women who cover themselves are aiding and abetting the regime."<sup>70</sup> Mahshid response, a resolute silence, not only underscores the complexity of their character dynamics but also deepens the reader's understanding of these characters. "And those whose trademark is painting their lips fiery red and flirting with male professors,"<sup>71</sup> Manna ended her answer to Azin. "I suppose they are doing all this to further the cause?"<sup>72</sup>

The clash between Manna, Muhshid, and Azin can indeed be seen as reflecting cultural clashes within Iranian society. It's important to note that the veil and Islam may be misused as symbols in these clashes, as they can be manipulated to serve particular agendas rather than representing the true diversity and complexity of individual beliefs and identities. The clashes also symbolize the broader societal and ideological conflicts present in Iran during the period covered in the book. It represents the clash between tradition and modernity, religious conservatism and secular liberalism, and the struggle for individual freedom within a repressive

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<sup>70</sup> *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, p. 70.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, p. 70.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, p. 70.

regime. As Abu-lughod illustrates "So we need to work against the reductive interpretation of Veiling as the quintessential sign of women's unfreedom, even if we object to state imposition of this form, as in Iran or with the Taliban."<sup>73</sup> What does it mean to be free if we recognise that people are social creatures who are shaped by their social and historical circumstances, as well as their affiliation to certain communities? Is dismissing the burqa as a mediaeval imposition a breach of women's awareness of their own actions? Millions of Muslim women have various conditions and opinions that cannot be reduced to a single article of clothing. Veiling has played a significant role in international political debates.<sup>74</sup>

#### 4. READING AS A SYMBOL OF RESISTENCE

"It seems to me that it is better to leave veils and vocations of saving others behind. Instead, we should be training our sights on ways to make the world a more Just place."<sup>75</sup>

Abu-Lughod critically examines the complexities of women's suffering in the Muslim world in her book *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* She argues that understanding these complexities requires moving beyond simplistic narratives. Abu-Lughod states, "The suffering of some of these women is not totally unconnected to expectations about gender enshrined in the Qur'an or cultures in the Muslim world, or sometimes justified in terms of interpretations of Islamic law. But in all cases, their suffering has more complex causes. These are the sorts of causes we should explore".<sup>76</sup> This quote highlights that while gender expectations and cultural practices play a role, they are not the sole factors contributing to women's suffering. Instead, a deeper exploration of socio-economic, political, and historical contexts is necessary to fully understand

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<sup>73</sup> Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, 2013.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, p. 40.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, p 49.

<sup>76</sup> Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, 2013,p.49.

and address these issues. Abu-Lughod's perspective urges us to consider the multifaceted nature of these problems rather than reducing them to single causes or symbols.

Throughout the entirety of the first chapter, the seven female students embody various archetypes of Arab women, ranging from liberal to traditional. Despite their differing backgrounds and initial conflicts, these characters grow closer as the memoir progresses, and Thursday mornings become cherished memories. What initially began as a literary circle created by the author Nafisi to fulfill a dream evolves into a space of their own to express one's thoughts, opinions, and creativity without external suppression.

In Austen's novels, there are spaces for oppositions that do not need to eliminate each other in order to exist. There is also space—not just space but a necessity—for self-reflection and self-criticism. Such reflection is the cause of change. We needed no message, no outright call for plurality, to prove our point. All we needed was to read and appreciate the cacophony of voices to understand its democratic imperative.<sup>77</sup>

Literature was a path for the characters to the journey towards self-discovery and pursuing one's unique path in life, free from external pressures and expectations.

I formulated certain general questions for them to consider, the most central of which was how these great works of imagination could help us in our present trapped situation as women. 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. I remember reading to my girls Nabokov's claim that "readers were born free and ought to remain free."<sup>78</sup>

The act of participating in a literary circle outside the confines of a university environment is portrayed as a form of resistance in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Through engaging with literary works in this alternative setting, all of Nafisi female students are able to unveil a form of resistance and navigate their agency, voice, and identity.

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<sup>77</sup> *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, p. 268.

<sup>78</sup> *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, p. 19.

There was something, both in his fiction and in his life, that we instinctively related to and grasped, the possibility of a boundless freedom when all options are taken away. I think that was what drove me to create the class. My main link with the outside world had been the university, and now that I had severed that link, there on the brink of the void, I could invent the violin or be devoured by the void<sup>79</sup>

This expression of resistance through literary involvement allows individuals to assert their autonomy and self-definition outside of traditional academic structures. Reading literature filled the void in the lives of Nafisi and her girls Nassrin, Mahshid, Azin, Manna, Yassi, and Sanaz created by the social and political aims. Moreover, it underscores the influence of literature and intellectual discourse as instruments for individuals to establish their own distinct place and assert their identities.

Nafisi puts us the reader with her seven female students, each section of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* mirror different angles of their lives, personalities, experiences as Iranian women.

The characters speak, revive, and voice themselves throughout reading literary works. In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, the women in Nafisi's secret literature class use books as a way to resist the oppressive social and political norms of their society. Through reading *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov, they confront the control and manipulation they experience, seeing parallels between their situation and the novel's themes. This act of reading and discussing *Lolita* becomes a way for them to reclaim their intellectual freedom and resist the restrictive rules imposed on them.

Additionally, Nafisi herself finds solace and strength in reading *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. The novel's themes of aspiration and the struggle against societal obstacles resonate with her challenges. When they read Henry James, the group finds a way to cope with the psychological oppression of the Iran-Iraq war, drawing strength from the characters' resilience. Reading Jane Austen helps them resist the forced identities imposed by their society,

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<sup>79</sup> *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, p.24.

allowing them to explore and affirm their own identities. Through these literary discussions, they find relief and a sense of agency, creating a private world where they can express themselves freely and support each other.

It is essential to highlight the number of daily conflicts the characters face; although they differ in their educational backgrounds, societal norms, and political ideologies, they all affect the characters differently. The author, Azar Nafisi, encounters countless social or academic moments and experiences where she feels marginalized due to the patriarchal nature of Iranian society, and such events have a significant impact on her. Thus, reading each popular and banned Western novel in the group parallels a therapeutic session for Nafisi.

There, in that living room, we rediscovered that we were also living, breathing human beings; and no matter how repressive the state became, no matter how intimidated and frightened we were, like Lolita we tried to escape and to create our own little pockets of freedom. And like Lolita, we took every opportunity to flaunt our insubordination<sup>80</sup>

The literary work they engage with offers a refuge from societal constraints and political turmoil, providing a space for empathy and comfort. Through the characters and narratives within these works, Nafisi and her students found relatable experiences, emotional resonance, and a sense of connection that serves as a form of emotional therapy. The novels they read become a source of intellectual and emotional sustenance, fostering a collective space for self-liberation.

Moreover, the therapeutic symbolism of reading is further reflected in the ways in which literature provides bonds of solidarity among Nafisi and her students, as in the case of Mahshid and Sanaz; in the first days of the groups, these two females never come to terms with each other as the days passed the contrast between them disappeared totally. Their shared engagement with literary texts creates an intimate and supportive community that serves as an

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<sup>80</sup> *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, p. 25



emotional sanctuary, enabling them to navigate personal and interconnected struggles. What is more, through reading, they forge emotional connections, share diverse perspectives, and collectively heal from the traumas and disparities that define their everyday lives. This collective therapeutic experience underscores the power of literature as a refuge for healing, a tool to assert individual agency, and a way toward feminine empowerment

## **5. Conclusion**

Overall, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is a powerful literary work that paints an echoing image for Iranian women as they navigate their feminine identity within the complexities and difficulties they encounter on their journey. This chapter also aimed to analyse the feminine identity of the author, Nafisi, and her seven female students throughout the memoir. Both of them experienced marginalized, trauma, and oppression and even witnessed different stages of loneliness. For Nafisi, she was in a situation to fight for her rights as an Iranian woman or quickly leave the country. Literature and her circle of female students became her lifeline during difficult times, offering a refuge of meaning and existence. Within the students, Nafisi symbolized the very essence of life, a beacon of hope and intellectual freedom as they struggled to come to terms with their own difficulties.

## General Conclusion

A considerable amount of scholarly research has been conducted regarding Iranian women in our current era. An uncountable number of scholars weigh all elements regarding Iranian women—their identities, lives, and status. In her memoir, Nafisi captured Iranian women from different angles, providing vivid images of Iranian women.

This dissertation explores feminine identity in the context of Iranian society as depicted in Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. The initial chapter provides an overview of the Islamic Republic of Iran's historical evolution, tracing its roots from its imperial origins to its development into an Islamic state. The chapter delves into Iran's historical trajectory, starting from the ancient Persian Empire to its present-day status as the Islamic Republic. It then proceeds to examine the theoretical framework of feminism and its expansion into third-world countries.

Chapter 2 builds on previous studies of Arab women and their identities. Utilizing Lila Abu Lughod's renowned work "Do Muslim Women Need Saving?" and Ahmed's "Women and Gender in Islam" as the theoretical framework, the analysis explores feminine identity in Nafisi's memoir. The narrative in "Reading Lolita in Tehran" portrays women's navigation and occasional resistance to societal boundaries to assert their independence and autonomy, aligning with the concept of women's agency discussed by Leila Ahmed.

In addition, the primary objective was to examine how literature serves as a means of resistance and empowerment for women living under restrictive regimes.

The analysis revealed the remarkable courage and resilience of Nafisi and her students, who utilized literature not merely as an academic exercise but as a powerful tool for personal and collective resistance. By engaging with works like *Lolita*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Daisy Miller*, and *Pride and Prejudice*, these women were able to assert their intellectual

independence and challenge the societal norms imposed upon them. Each literary work provided a unique lens through which they could explore and affirm their identities, resist psychological oppression, and navigate the complexities of their lives in revolutionary Iran.

In the end, Literature has transformative power in oppressive contexts; hence, this memoir shows that literature can be a potent catalyst for change, offering women a transformative space to reclaim their voices and assert their agency.

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## الملخص

تسعى هذه الأطروحة إلى تسليط الضوء على هوية المرأة والمقاومة في كتاب "ان تقرا لوليتا في طهران: مذكرات في كتب" لاذلر نفيسي. تهدف هذه المذكرات الشخصية إلى تصوير وضع النساء الإيرانيات، وهو موضوع أثار اهتمامًا كبيرًا ونقاشات عديدة في الأوساط السياسية والأدبية، خاصة بعد حدثين لا يُنسى في تاريخ العالم: الثورة الإسلامية وأحداث 11 سبتمبر. منذ الثورة الإسلامية عام 1979، تواجه النساء في إيران تمييزًا مستمرًا في القطاعين العام والخاص بالإضافة إلى ذلك، يدقق هذا البحث في تكوين الهوية النسائية من خلال المؤلفة وطالباتها، وهو موضوع متكرر يظهر في العديد من الأعمال الأدبية، سواء كانت من تأليف أمريكيين أو إيرانيين. كان البحث عن هوية المرأة هاجسًا مشتركًا للنساء الإيرانيات ونظيراتهن الإيرانيات الأمريكيات في مختلف أنحاء العالم. لقد عانت النساء الإيرانيات من التهميش والاضطهاد سواء في وطنهن أو في أماكن أخرى. لذلك، تركز هذه الدراسة بشكل أساسي على المنظور النسوي، ويتم ذلك ضمن إطار عمل ليلي أحمد ويلي أبو لغد، من أجل تصوير هوية النساء الإيرانيات وتعزيز البحث الأدبي لفحص كيفية مقاومة الإيرانيات للنظام للنظام الشمولي لاستعادة هويتهم وصوتهم واللجوء إلى الأدب. تكشف نتائج هذه الدراسة أهمية الأدب في تكوين الهوية النسائية، إذ أن الأدب بالنسبة لنفيسي وطالباتها هو السيف المسالم الذي يُطلق من خلاله صرخات نضالهن إلى العالم.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الهوية النسائية، المقاومة، الوكالة، الحجاب، جمهورية إيران الإسلامية.