



The Personal and the Political: Azar Nafisi's Memoir as a Feminist Lens into Iranian Society

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Abstract

This paper highlights the points that Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books brings out the social and political life of people in Iran. It is a memoir by Azar Nafisi that explores the intersection of literature, personal freedom, and the oppressive political climate in Iran. Reading Lolita in Tehran is a poignant memoir that takes readers on a journey into the heart of post-revolutionary Iran, where Azar Nafisi, a literature professor, forms a secret reading group with her female students. Against the backdrop of a repressive regime, Nafisi uses the works of Western literary classics, particularly Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita, to examine the complexities of personal and intellectual freedom. Through the lens of literature, Nafisi explores the lives of her students and delves into the power of literature to challenge societal norms. The narrative weaves together the personal struggles of the women in the group with a broader commentary on the impact of political upheaval on individual lives. Nafisi's courageous exploration of the transformative power of literature serves as a testament to the enduring human spirit and the pursuit of intellectual freedom in the face of adversity.

Keywords: Feminism, personal, political, struggle, freedom.

1. Introduction

This paper addresses to understand the social, economic, political and cultural situation of women in Iran where the patriarchal social system exists and male domination is prominent. Patriarchal society, wants women to align into the marginalized framework of society. The men have always enjoyed a free life while women have been in constraints. Patriarchy either rejects woman's choice, or restricts them. It promotes the philosophy of women subjugation, it employs exploitative standards and methods for refusing their rights. In most of the cases, we find women are conditioned to suppress their self in order to conform to the norms of society and live under the conditions of patriarchal hegemony. As woman's conduct is not a matter of her choice, rather it is conditioned by the norms set by patriarchal establishment. In male dominated society, the wives are expected to be modest, submissive and dutiful to their husbands and other members of the family [1-4]. Culture of many societies does not permit equality between

men and women. Patriarchy values male dominance as a natural, inalienable right, thereby, enforcing the inferiority and subordination of women. Being a victim of patriarchal system, Azar Nafisi saw things very closely about how women in Iran are given the position of a dependent where they cannot assert their right to liberty, the right to a fulfilling life and the right to independence in any form. As a result of that she dared to challenge this patriarchal culture and gender stereotypes in her memoir. She made all efforts to encounter and defy this sexist mind-set apart and subvert the theory through her actions and other female characters in her memoir.

2. Objectives

- To study the literature of selected novel through the lens of feminism
- Tracing social and political background leading to women subjugation
- To explore the inner turmoil and battles of female characters in the patriarchal society



3. Literature Review

The review of literature will comprise of a detailed study undertaken by various agents in the set fields

- Books
- Thesis
- Journals
- Articles
- Reviews

4. Methodology

Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books is a unique work in literature. Azar Nafisi after her expulsion from the university conducted workshops in Iran for selected women students on the relationship between culture and human rights. She has expatiated and written extensively on the political implications of literature and culture, and the human rights of Iranian women and girls. The purpose of writing this research paper is to delve into the personal and political forces of patriarchy prominent in Iran through the lens of feminism. The author has made efforts to show how women have been broken through cultural norms and values that have oppressed them through the centuries. A society that expects males to dominate in all family decision making is termed as patriarchy [5, 6]. It describes a political and social system ruled by men in which the women have inferior social and political status, including basic human rights. In a patriarchal society authority is vested upon the man who takes the responsibility for maintenance of the family and play a dominant role to take any decision of the family. In many cultures women are devalued as human beings from the day they are born. From very early childhood girls are made conscious of the fact that unlike their brothers, who are assets to the family, they are liabilities. In the process of civilization, girls are made to understand from their childhood that once married, they should learn how to adjust with their husbands. Adjustment means 'total submission' to the wills of husbands and other members of the family. They also learn to accept the inferior status of women in society. We will critically and analytically study the selected feminist literary piece and have a deep insight of the personal and political background of the people in Iran.

5. Discussion

In Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books, Azar Nafisi reflects on the challenges faced by women in Iran during Ayatollah Khomeini's regime. The central question posed by the author is how can one forcibly impose, allow or facilitate misogyny and patriarchal privilege. The incidents described in the text prompt the author to delve into the history and evolution of Islamic social and political background regarding women and gender. She focuses on understanding the changes in the society, the ways in which new rules were changed and implemented, and how they influenced women in Iran. Azar Nafisi had to leave her job at the university because she refused to wear the veil. She tells of the effects of the eight yearlong Iraq/Iran war on the women of Tehran. She also brings forth the tyranny of the religious leaders who issue their decrees as though they came directly from God. "Living in the Islamic Republic was like having sex with a man you loathe". As Islamic morality squads staged arbitrary raids in Tehran, fundamentalists seized hold of the universities, and a blind censor stifled artistic expression. The girls in Azar Nafisi's living room risked removing their veils and immersed themselves in the worlds of Jane Austen, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Henry James, and Vladimir Nabokov. Nafisi could not forget of the green gate entrance to the university, through which female students were forbidden to go. Instead, they had to enter via a curtained entrance on the other side where they would be searched from top to toe before being allowed to attend class. Nafisi escapes from this violence into the imaginative world of Western novels where she finds democratic ideals expressed in fiction's ability to help us empathize with other people. This novel provides a detailed exploration of the challenges faced by women in the sexist society, rooted in a deeply ingrained patriarchal structure. It emphasizes the systemic inequality and societal norms that perpetuate the subjugation of women in various aspects of their lives. The reader is also made aware of the patriarchal structure in the society which is identified as the foundational problem, reinforcing traditional gender roles and



portraying women as vulnerable and suitable only for traditional roles. Women in the country are depicted as holding the bottom rung of the socio-economic class. Women lack an independent identity and are instead treated as commodities, fulfilling different roles such as daughter, sister, wife, and mother. Cultural values in the patriarchal society contribute to stereotypical prejudices against women. Men are conditioned to believe in their right to dominate women, even by using violent means. Nafisi writes about a society in which a woman can be jailed for dancing, punished for allowing a few strands of hair to fall on her face, disciplined for revealing her singing voice, or expelled from a university for the way she might eat a peach. The book closes with her decision, in the late 90s, to immigrate to the States with her husband and two children. In the final paragraph, she describes how her momentary sadness gives way to elation: "I went about my way rejoicing, thinking how wonderful it is to be a woman and a writer at the end of the twentieth century." (20) It must have been extraordinarily difficult for her to leave Tehran. Her mother, she tells us in the acknowledgments, died in Tehran in early 2003 after a long illness, and Nafisi was not allowed to visit. Whatever the faults of reading *Lolita*, Nafisi does not offer any political message. Rather, she extends a more therapeutic solace stating great literature makes you feel better, irrespective of how repressive the political world can become. So, to read Nafisi's elegantly crafted Memoir is to enter two worlds simultaneously: the world of literary imagination in the works of Vladimir Nabokov, Jane Austen, Henry James, and F. Scott Fitzgerald and life in the university against the backdrop of the geopolitical world of Tehran from the end of the Shah's regime to Nafisi's departure from Iran in 1997. Every Thursday morning for two years in the Islamic Republic of Iran, the bold and inspired Nafisi secretly gathered seven of her most committed female students to read forbidden Western classics. As Islamic morality squads staged arbitrary raids in Tehran, fundamentalists seized hold of the universities, and a blind censor stifled artistic expression, the girls in

Nafisi's living room risked removing their veils and immersed themselves in the worlds of Jane Austen, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Henry James, and Vladimir Nabokov. In most of the cases, we find women are conditioned to suppress their 'self' in order to conform to the norms of society and live under the conditions of patriarchal hegemony. As woman's conduct is not a matter of her choice, rather it is conditioned by the norms set by patriarchal establishment. In patriarchal society, the wives are expected to be modest, submissive and dutiful to their husbands and other members of the family [7-9]. The sole purpose of this paper is to describe the enlightening experience of Azar Nafisi and her students while reading proscribed works of literature that not only allow, but require, an open mind and critical thinking. 'Patriarchy,' wants women to align into the marginalized framework of society. The men have always enjoyed a free life while women have been in constraints. Patriarchy either rejects woman's choice, or restricts them. It promotes the philosophy of women subjugation, its exploitative standards and methods for refusing their rights. Culture of many societies does not permit equality between men and women. Azar Nafisi saw things very closely about how women are given the position of a dependent where they cannot assert their right to liberty, the right to a fulfilling life and the right to independence in any form. She dared to challenge this patriarchal culture and gender stereotypes in this novels, to break this sexist mind set apart violently and subvert the theory through the reading of selected pieces of literature. The government decrees that women must wear a chador, or a veil with a long robe, to completely cover their bodies. Nafisi was forced to leave her job as she denied to wear the veil. These inhuman restrictions anger Nafisi, but they also force her to grow intellectually and as an educator in unexpected ways. Being expelled from the University of Tehran leads her to her writing career. She also reads more books in different genres, especially during her sleepless nights during the Iraqi bombing of Tehran, which leads to a more diverse syllabus when she teaches again. The experiences of Azar Nafisi on the



oppression of women in Iran in the post liberalization era are discussed [10]. The streets of Iran are patrolled by militia who make sure that women wear their veils properly, do not wear makeup, do not walk in public with men who are not fathers, brothers or husbands, enter the buses through rear door and sit in the back seats allocated to women. The slightest provocation, a hair out of place, a bared ankle, maddens Humbert just as it does their own tormentors. In the alternative world of Nafisi's apartment, where not the horrors and humiliations waiting in the street below but the mountains of Tehran were reflected in the antique oval mirror that hung on the far wall of the living room, Nafisi and her group of hand-picked students used banned literature to surpass the intolerable veracities of an outrageous life and find a place where art, sensitivity, and magnificence carry the day. From its provoking, intriguing title to its very last page, the book, partly a narrative biography, partly a history of a nation and its people, and partly critical analysis of great American, British and Russian authors, is astonishing, enlightening, and important. However, it is not simply a memoir on the inadequacies of Iranian society. Nor is it simply a memoir about a secret literary discussion group but overtly brings out the social and political forces leading to the victimization and subjugation of women. It also explicitly celebrates the luminaries who breaks the shackles of patriarchy and struggles to attain liberation.

Conclusion

Overall, the author sets the stage for a comprehensive exploration of the dimensions of Islamic law, particularly regarding women and gender, and invites readers to consider various advancements in the Western context for comparative analysis. In the book, the author discusses the overlooking and dismissal of women's gender-specific suffering in this culture. She delves into the complex interplay between Islamic law and gender constructs. She examines issues of discrimination, male norms and linguistic representations. Azar Nafisi has highlighted the portrayal of women's dilemmas regarding religion,

family, and society. Azar emphasizes the efforts of women to break free from cultural patterns that inhibit their development as independent beings and to strive for equality, dignity, and justice [11]. The novels also shed light on the various layers of violence women experienced including practices such as molestation, early and forced marriages, limited rights, and reduced control of assets. The text further highlights the rise of religious fundamentalism in the country. This fundamentalism often seeks to diminish the status and rights of women. The interweaving of religion and state is discussed, with the murky waters of equality and self-determination unravelling due to the influence of religious laws and customs. While the constitution and state laws may theoretically offer protection and equal citizenship, religious laws often prevail in practice [12-15]. The text also addresses the politicization of gender, viewing women as the upholders of virtuous communities and bearers of cultural standards. The memoir outlines the control exerted by the state over women, involving laws, sanctions, violence, and a failure to recognize their rights. It mentions instances of public beatings for not adhering to dress codes, the alarming situation of women who faced physical molestation in the name of checking. The text also highlights that government institutions promote the belief that women's subordinate roles are dictated by religious tradition. Ideological manipulation discourages women from challenging biased moral codes and societal norms. The oppression of women is linked to religious injustice and a patriarchal culture deeply embedded in male domination. Women are often viewed as possessions, and men are considered the superpower in families. The prevalence of violence against women has significant social and economic implications, limiting women's options in various spheres of life and eroding their health, self-esteem, and self-confidence. The text overall underscores the complex challenges faced by women in Iran due to deeply ingrained societal norms, gender stereotypes, and cultural values. Reading *Lolita in Tehran* provides a comprehensive exploration of the



challenges and inequalities faced by women in Ayatollah Khomeini's regime. It covers various aspects, including the impact of social, political, patriarchal structures, forced marriages, feudal hegemony, and societal norms that contribute to gender discrimination. In this novel we saw the resilience of the protagonists who notwithstanding the poignant traumatic events in their lives battled against all odds, emerged triumphant and surpassed subjugation to attain liberation [16]. Patriarchal society confined women in houses and deprived them of social roles and their overlooked desires. Feminist writer Azar Nafisi has provided an opportunity to the female characters not only to defend themselves but gain individuality and social roles.

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