

The Psychoanalysis of Rebellion: *Reading Lolita in Tehran*

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Foucault asserts in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, that “where there is power, there is resistance” - his central proposition in what appears to be his most explicit discussion of power. This is an allusion to the seemingly inevitable and unending conflict that goes on between the forces that are formed of norms and prohibitions originating from various power positions and the overt or covert means by which individuals and groups strive to evade those injunctions. Foucault feels that there is no power mechanism that can wholly dominate all sections of a particular society for there will always be pockets of resistance to contend with. However, at the same time, no kind of transgressive behaviour can hope to escape being ‘colonised’ by the very system of power that they seek to subvert.

In recent times, more and more studies in the human sciences are occupied with the issue of the relationship of resistance to power. Lila Abu Lughod says in the context of her work on Bedouin women, “Unlike the grand studies of peasant insurgency and revolution of the 1960s and early 1970s, what one finds now is a concern with unlikely forms of resistance, subversions rather than large-scale collective insurrections, small or local resistances not tied to the overthrow of systems”.

Rebellion, say psychoanalysts, is one way of indubitably safeguarding an individual’s independence and creative faculty. From the psychoanalytical viewpoint, for an individual to enjoy a sense of self and a definite identity, there needs to be a sufficient measure of psychical wellbeing, which is established by what Julia Kristeva designates as “revolt.”

Azar Nafisi’s book, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is a powerful indictment of the assumption and arrogation of power by some members of society, the cruelty of arbitrariness and the treatment meted out to the moderate, vulnerable and the female members of that society in the name of religion and the imposition of ‘God’s law’. Set in the turbulent days of Ayatollah Khomeini’s Islamic Revolution in an Iran rocking in the eddies of its violent aftermath, the book is ostensibly about a book club that meets weekly at the author’s house to read and discuss books banned by the mullahs.

If we were to subscribe to the position taken up by Kristeva vis-à-vis language, we would then view language as a mediator that negotiates between the often mysterious, enigmatic working of the unconscious mind on the one hand and the relatively more stable socio-symbolic area of conscious cognition on the other. Placing language in the space from which several dichotomies branch out, she perceives language as the dynamic operative between the “symbolic” and the “semiotic”, as occupying the middle ground between thought and energy, cognition and corporeality, conscious and unconscious, and so on. She further

argues that using language for literary and theoretical purposes is also a form of revolt because language, in its role as mediator between the libidinal and social economies, makes room for a para-conscious conflict with the established, prevailing conditions of culture and society. Nafisi's book can thus, in this sense, be read as an account of the ways in which the repressed take recourse to literature and language in seeking to undermine or counter by subtle subversions, the perverse motives of a despotic regime.

After the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the new rules impinged on the lives of all the citizens of that country. But, as Nafisi makes clear, the women were the most drastically and significantly affected specially because of the rigid and often violently imposed so-called Islamic dress code: "the streets have been turned into a war zone, where young women who disobey rules are hurled into patrol cars, flogged, fined..." (27). The huge build up of frustration, anger, betrayal, violation and, most damaging of all, the sense of helplessness when faced with such a blatant misuse of power can be unbearable. But for some, there is a little release to be found in the escape into literature. Nafisi's book mainly explicates upon the relationship between literature and reality and how, even though literature provides succour, a welcome diversion and sense of pleasure, it also unremittingly brings us back to reality: "Curiously, the novels we escaped into led us finally to question and prod our own realities about which we felt so helplessly speechless" (38-39).

Tehran is described as a city in which its absences were more real than the presences. The women had the most extraordinarily ordinary things taken away from them. Female students could be penalised for running up the staircase if they were late for class, for allowing a few strands of hair to escape or let a patch of white skin show from under their all-enveloping chador. In such a situation, the author's living room becomes a place of transgression where the girls meet to discuss Nabokov or Jane Austen. When the girls would take off their veils once they were safely inside the house, they removed not just the mandatory headscarves. They also shed anonymity, acquired an identity, a shape, a self. If we were to analyse the term 'rebellion' in its etymological sense and as how probably Proust meant it as well, it can be described as an unveiling. It is also an act that embodies within itself, the sense of return which implies displacement and an attempt to make sense of the past by reconstructing it along with the memories and meaning.

In *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge of Islam*, Fethi Benslama identifies female alterity to be at the core of the repression that often is seen as an integral part of the monotheistic repetition in Islam. From the story of Hagar in *Genesis* (the first monotheistic text), Benslama proceeds to the effects of the dismissal of the woman in the founding of the new religion and takes an analytic look at the repressive consequences of female jouissance that threatened control of the structure after having accredited it. There is the story of the Prophet confiding in Khadija, his wife, that he has visions of an enormous being whom he cannot recognise. When this vision recurs in her presence, Khadija uncovers her head and hair at which the being disappears. She tells the Prophet to rejoice, as it is not a demon but an angel. The assumption is that an angel would not have been able to support the

sight of her uncovered head which a demon would because what she uncovers and what the demon stands for are the same. As, according to belief, the word of the *Koran* is revealed by an angel, it can be concluded that truth in Islam begins from the unveiling of a woman which in turn, threatens the modesty of the angel. The unveiling of the woman causes the angel, the truth, to flee but then paradoxically enough, it is through the very concealment of the truth that it is actually verified and confirmed.

The veil conceals and muffles up all aspects of a woman's sexuality, her very self – her eyes and consequently her gaze, her mouth and even her voice. It is not only an obvious indicator of sexual difference but also acts as a marker of the feminine strategy of 'masquerade' (in Joan Rivière's terms) which puts forth the concept of femininity as a mask. There is the masculine doubt that behind the mask is lurking danger which Jaques Lacan sees as one of the ways in which men and women cope with the psychic state of lack.

Where exactly is the veil located? Is it between, on or in front of? Is it merely something which conceals, separates or screens, effectively blinding the male gaze or is it also an external reality with which they interact? In some creative works, the veil actually makes an entrance and exit as though it were a living being, an independent character. In the feature film, *10*, by the Iranian filmmaker, Abbas Kiarostami for instance, there is a scene where a tearful young woman removes the scarf covering her shaved head after her fiancé breaks off their engagement. This gesture makes for one of the most poignant and memorable scenes in the film. Christian Jambet, reads this as exemplifying the status of the image in the modern world and more specifically in modern-day Tehran. According to Jambet, images now are devoid of that hidden dimension - the real – which had earlier accorded significance to the appearance. In the balding of Kiarostami's young woman, one may see the erasure of the obscured, the mysterious referent (esoteric) and not of the easily ascertainable (exoteric) referent. The aesthetic question thus raised about the spirit of the modern image can be seen as a symptom of the demise of a messianic faith. At the same time, there is also an element of social concern as it views the modern woman as a being abandoned to the relative callousness of a patriarchal society.

In *The Veil of Islam*, Benslama asserts that the veil averts the eye of god from the woman's body. It is a screen that shields the feminine body partially or totally, preventing it from indicating too much. As such, it is not a sign but an anti-sign, a theological logic, that of a real grasping of the body of the woman in order to bring her to reason. By negating the woman's body from the sight, the veil does not deny it or seek to absent it in any way but paradoxically, renders it present through the negation. The Hijab, whose canonical definition is the "forbidden", or "everything that forbids something", is not merely a swathe of cloth draped over the feminine body but "the organizing hand of an order that is rigorously laid-out between the subject of desire as a seeing subject and the political institution of the city."

Nafisi recalls her grandmother wearing the veil not as a political act but a pious one which characterizes her special and purely personal relationship with God.

This is further elaborated in her reference to one of the girls in her class, Mahshid who wore it voluntarily before the revolution but who, once it became mandatory found the very idea oppressive. While this may sound contradictory, it underlines the psychological aspect of the individual's freedom of choice. While Mahshid chose to wear the veil to define herself in certain ways, the compulsory diktat nullifies the special significance it held in her scheme of life and her very sense of self and identity. How would anyone looking at her now be able to make out whether she was wearing it because she wanted to or because it was thrust upon her? How was she in any way different from the rest of the veiled crowd? The compulsions of the political decree lead her towards self-doubt and depression.

This effectively underscores the issue of the free agency of Islamic women. Many women in the Muslim world actually choose to wear the veil and it is not as though, if the mullahs and the Taliban were to disappear, all the women in those countries would immediately throw away their chadors. To quote Lila Abu Lughod once more, 'Not only are there many forms of covering which themselves have different meanings in the communities in which they are used, but veiling itself must not be confused with, or made to stand for, lack of agency... Choices for all of us are fashioned by discourses, social locations, geopolitical configurations, and unequal power into historically and locally specific ranges. Those for whom religious values are important certainly don't see them as constraining - they see them as ideals for which to strive.'

Anthropologist Hanna Papanek describes the burqa as "portable seclusion". She notes that many saw it as a liberating invention since it enabled women to move out of segregated living spaces while still observing the basic moral requirements of separating and protecting women from unrelated men. The point that I'd like to make here is that the veil should not always be viewed as an instrument that enslaves or suppresses women but only that compulsion of any sort is tyrannical. The choice to wear the veil - or not - as the case may be, should rest with the woman alone.

In Nafisi's book, what is most striking is the way in which education is closely linked with psychological and emotional growth. She explicitly states that she would like the members of her book club not just to read but also try to relate the themes and characters to their own current situation in psychological and emotional terms - never mind the physical equivalences: "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." (19)

While it is true that Nafisi's book club provides students of literature the chance to improve upon their use of the tools of analysis, it can also be seen as a form of psychoanalysis in that it offers the opportunity for them to become more aware of their own selves in all its conscious and unconscious aspects. With better self-awareness comes better individuals and as a natural corollary to this, a better

society. How can one in any case separate the strands of education from psychology? Isn't education after all an unrelentingly flowing process of self-analysis? It is a process which, in giving us information, asks of us that we enter into that body of information and so have a different perspective of not only the world but of ourselves in that world. In Nafisi's words: "Perhaps one way of finding out the truth was to do what we did: to try to imaginatively articulate these two worlds and, through that process, give shape to our vision and identity." (26)

Once Nafisi has introduced us to the seven women in the group, she recreates their readings and discussion of various Western texts ranging from Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Lolita* through *The Great Gatsby* and *Washington Square* to *Pride and Prejudice*. She not only explores implicit and explicit links between the novels and the lives of people in the Islamic Republic of Iran but also draws out connections between life and literature. "Lolita belongs to a category of victims who have no defence and are never given a chance to articulate their own story. ... her life story is taken from her. We told ourselves we were in that class to prevent ourselves from falling victim to (that) crime." (41)

Why did Nafisi take up only Western texts? Was it only because they were ostensibly part of a class reading English Literature or could there be a deeper underlying psychological motive as well? One of the major criticisms levelled against the Shah of Iran by the Islamic Revolutionists was that he was too Western-oriented. The reading of Western texts - especially those banned by the regime - seems to be another strategy of subtle subversion, a declaration of intellectual independence as it were.

The book club's exploration of the theme of Nabokov's two novels dwells on tyranny as it affects the individual and shows how their own experiences of dealing with a totalitarian regime has made them more insightful readers: "What Nabokov captured was the texture of life in a totalitarian society, where you are completely alone in an illusory world full of false promises and where you no longer differentiate between your saviour and your executioner" (23).

Even though it may appear that the protagonist in *The Great Gatsby* has a quintessentially American dream, Nafisi successfully makes the link between the destruction of his dream and the dream of the Iranian revolutionaries. By bringing out the similarities between the two, she shows how the Iranian dream and the Gatsby's dream of acquiring Daisy are equally obsessive and with the same consequences. And, by analysing how Henry James's world of 'counter-reality' was his remedy for the ugliness of the world post the American Civil War and World War I, Nafisi shows that the Iranian students could thoroughly understand and appreciate his dramatization of lack of empathy because that is what they experienced everyday at the hands of those currently in power.

The reading of *Pride and Prejudice* offers interesting insights into the nature of love and communication, as Nafisi and her students cope with the challenges peculiar to women living under the regime's oppressive interpretation of Islamic tradition which seems intent on controlling all aspects of female sexuality. There is also an awareness of Austen's stylistic technique of incorporating a multiplicity

of voices that sound through the novel without drowning each other out and which the plot reflects as well in its characters who: "risk ostracism and poverty to gain love and companionship and to embrace that elusive goal at the heart of democracy: the right to choose" (307). And of course, woven into this is the unspoken thought of the Iranian women's struggle to regain the right to choose how to live their lives, the psychological emancipation of the freedom of choice.

The overarching statement that Nafisi's book makes is the way in which it draws parallels between the lives of the Iranian women and *Lolita*. For them, the Iranian Islamic Republic was like Humbert Humbert and they were in the position of a helpless Dolores Haze. They were in the unenviable space where their individual identities had been seized by the powers that be, become figments of the Mullahs' imagination and forced to live a life that had been confiscated much as Humbert takes over his child-victim's life. "Like Lolita we tried to escape and create our own little pockets of freedom." (25) As indeed Nabakov himself had done, Nafisi and her students escape into literature to transcend the horrible reality that surrounds them and try to find succour in words that create a world of tenderness and beauty.

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