

## Intersections of Memory, Politics, and Identity in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*

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### Abstract

*This research analyses the role of cultural memory in (re)shaping identities in the memoir of Azar Nafisi's Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books (2003) to expose the hegemonic construct that silences and devalues women in society. The theoretical framework used for this research is drawn from New Historicism and Assman's Cultural Memory Theory. It explores how politics and religion eliminates one's private life. Women become instrumentalized as passive objects, living an act of meaningless existence under the gaze of the Blind Censor. Her work highlights the need to dismantle the political agenda that takes away one's identity. By recalling her experiences as a teacher, she foregrounds the stories of her girls to (re)invent a new meaning at the backdrop of the Islamic Regime. The author recounts memories of the past to fill the void left behind by the Iranian Revolution. By embodying the works of literature in her memoir, she forms a counter-reality, one, where memory acts as an escape from the strict policies and repression of women under the Islamic regime. It also observes how veiling had become a way of stripping away the individuality and personality of women. The research illuminates the author's aim to remember and expose the dehumanizing impact of the Iranian government on the lives of women. It also focuses on Azar Nafisi's writings to analyze how she has (re)shaped the identities of her students by constructing an alternative narrative and forming a link between fiction and reality.*

**Keywords:** Cultural Memory, Identity, Iranian Revolution, Veiling, Repression of Women

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### Introduction

The memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by the Iranian-American writer Azar Nafisi was first published in 2003. Her works are regarded as carriers of autobiographical accounts with her Iranian experiences to explore the issues of violence, gender inequality,

alienation, loss of identity, and repression of women, among many others. *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, like Nafisi's other memoirs, is an Iranian experience that amalgamates fiction and reality and allows the readers to experience being drawn towards a multi-textured tapestry of forgotten and discovered dreams. The memoir

focuses on the plight of women, highlighting the rigid policies of dominance that were used to create false identities of women in the Islamic regime.

The 1979 Revolution, which overthrew the monarch Reza Shah and established the revolutionary Iranian Republic and its principles, is celebrated in Iranian history. Ayatollah Khomeini was known as the "Father of the Revolution", because he led the revolution, Khomeini's followers were convinced that he would lead people down the Islamic way, and he was regarded as the savior of Islam. However, Nafisi's memoir focuses on the plight of women, highlighting the rigid policies of dominance that were used to create false identities of women in the Islamic regime. Her account of personal events, which includes traumatic situations and loss, alters the general view of the Iranian revolution as being the savior of Islam.

Through the memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, this research attempts to study the Iranian experience of the author and her girls, as she draws parallel between the Islamic totalitarianism regime and the 'Lolita effect' to (re)invent their own history that is not masked by tyranny and

injustice. By the textual analysis approach, this research explores the implication of the political form intruding into individual lives. It demonstrates how the blind censor rendered life unbearable for individuals as victims of the authoritarian regime, which interfered in individuals' personal lives and enforced its visionary dream on everyone. Because of this, the external reality restricted them from forming an individual identity separately from the "colourless censor of the blind censor" (*Reading Lolita in Tehran* 24). The memoir amalgamates both fiction and reality that focuses on personal narrative, which is linked together by both individual lives and their experiences. Nafisi links the past and present to construct an alternative narrative by amalgamating fictional texts to dismantle the historical reality of the Iranian Revolution.

The memoir combines fiction and reality and focuses on personal accounts, in which individual lives and experiences connect these two worlds. Nafisi has seen the fundamentalist Islamic state engage in inhumane acts in the name of religion. During the Iran-Iraq conflict, she experienced terror, endured sleepless nights, and felt

uncomfortable and constrained under the Iranian Regime. The memoir becomes a historical record of individual experiences across the Iranian revolution and the Iran-Iraq civil war.

The research attempts at analyzing *Reading Lolita in Tehran* through the lens of New Historicism (Greenblatt, 2000), to explore and argue in what ways Nafisi transgresses the limitations of time by incorporating the fictional narratives of different times and linking them to the present socio-political, and cultural situation in Iran to produce a counter reality, one where memory acts as an escape from the strict policies and repression of women under the Islamic regime. New Historicists declared that every narrative of a culture should be unfolded and analyzed to showcase how all the other discourses interact with each other, people, and other elements of culture. By emphasizing how all texts are records of their social condition, not only showcase but also respond to their historical situation. Nafisi forms her own subjective history by documenting the atrocities committed under the banner of the Iranian Revolution. The study will also take into account the Cultural Memory

Theory of Jan Assman, from his book, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis* (1995) the research contends to highlights the hegemonic structure at the intersection of culture, politics, and religion in Iran. Assman (1995) notes, “cultural memory has its fixed points,” and it does not change with the passage of time. The cultural memory theory tries to connect the three sides of memory (the near past), culture, as well as society to each other. A memory may appear stuck, but a closer examination indicates that memory is fluid and links the three temporal components; it is recalled in the present and alludes to the past, but it is continually looking towards the future. It will focus on the role of memory in linking the past, present, and future together by documenting the individual experience of the common public.

New Historicism argues that reading and interpreting literature helps in uncovering the often overlooked but crucial political, social, and cultural aspects of a time from a subjective lens. It considers literary works to be historical records of the relevant time period. Stephen Greenblatt, an American critic, created the phrase "New Historicism," in his book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From*

*More to Shakespeare* (1980) which is regarded as its main source. New Historicism regards history books with skepticism, seeing them as nothing more than a warped, idiosyncratic account of records by those in power. New Historicism argues that history is simply a narrative that can be reinterpreted, based on the claim that it is moulded by the person who writes it. Louis Montrose, an American New Historicist defines it as a tool in which “the textuality of history and the historicity of texts” are expounded. Based on the idea that memoirs can also be read as a historical narrative, the study seeks to analyze Nafisi's subjectivity of the Iranian Revolution. Nafisi recounts her story by repositioning the centre and placing women in circumstances that undermine the concept of female sexuality, due to which they are reduced as objects for the state.

### **Research Methodology**

Since this research is text-based, it employs content analysis to study *Intersections of Memory, Politics, and Identity in Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003) by Azar Nafisi. In addition to the primary texts, the above-mentioned variables will be compared to the references, articles, critics'

reviews from the secondary sources of the New Historicist Stephen Greenblatt (2000) and Jan Assman's *Theory of Cultural Memory* (1995).

Viewing the texts as a historical production of its time, the term New Historicism was coined by the American critic Stephen Greenblatt. New historicists focus on three aspects: 1) the life of the author, 2) the social rules and dictates found within a text, 3) the reflection of a work's historical situation as evidenced in the text. (Greenblatt 3-6). Similarly, Jan Assman, in his *Theory of Cultural Memory*, argues that “Memory also has a cultural basis since only then can we understand that human beings are anchored through their memories in a time frame reaching back over thousands of years” (1).

The research, by focusing on the relation between memory, identity, and politics, attempts to vivify the notion of how fiction and reality help to (re)shape identity and to form a counter reality.

### **Literature Review**

Based on the juxtaposition of past experiences and the fictional realm, Azar Nafisi invites seven of her female students to create a book club, a

'space of their own (7). Reading banned books then becomes a rebellious act for them because it enables them to cope with difficult sorts of circumstances by allowing them to create their own reality through fiction. As Nafisi says, to take influence from Nabokov, readers could see how the ordinary things of daily life could be turned into something grand "through the magic eye of fiction" (5). So, we see that cultural memory and identity bring together the espionage of landscape which defines an individual. It explores the dynamics of how memory is shaped and functions in society. It also has become an evocation of presenting the past as present by re-visualizing the forgotten truth.

Nafisi sought to recollect a lost dream by embodying fictional texts into her memoir. For instance, in the article, *Re-Reading "Reading Lolita in Tehran"* by Amy DePaul, the author argues that the readers found solace in literature during times of chaos, which demonstrates the true essence of fiction. The memoir's first few pages set the tone for the rest of the text. Nafisi compares the story she's about to share to that of *Lolita* in Tehran, explaining how *Lolita* gave Tehran a new perspective "how Tehran helped

redefine Nabokov's novel, turning it into this *Lolita*, our *Lolita*" (6). As Nafisi herself compares her girls to Nabokov's love interests, who are helpless in the face of male authority, the *Lolita* effect can be compared to an authoritarian dictatorship. *Lolita*'s predicament can be seen as, "Like my students, *Lolita*'s past comes to her not so much as a loss but as a lack, and like my students, she becomes a figment in someone else's dream" (27). As they delved into the fictional world, Nafisi asserts that it had led them to questions and probe deeper into their own realities, "about which we felt so helplessly speechless" (29). *Lolita*'s dreams of a normal life, like the ordinary dreams of the young Iranians who feel trapped by the strict policies of the regime, are subordinated to the fact that they, like *Lolita*, were enacting figments of someone else's imagination. As Manna points out that Khomeini imposed his vision of Islam on their personal lives and fiction (36). Through this interaction, we get to see how in the beginning, the girls could form no clear identity on their own, as their outside reality was formed by the people they despised, which allowed them to gain control and defy the repressive reality and (re)create their own through the world of fiction.

Another way Nafisi draws parallels between fiction and reality is when she asserts how Lolita “went against the grain of all totalitarian perspective” (26). She further draws a comparison between the authoritarian regime, and the plight of Lolita, by probing deeper into understanding other works by Nabokov, such as *Invitation to a Beheading*. These fictional works can be viewed as a subtext to understanding the political scenario in Iran. *Invitation to a Beheading* (1936) depicts a character called Cincinnatus, stuck in a society controlled by oppressive authorities with Russian names, whom Nafisi links to Islamists, exclaiming, between Iranian executioners and Cincinnatus jailers, there was little or no difference. They took control of all the private spaces, attempting to mold every act, “And that itself was another form of execution.” (77). Whereas Humbert's demeaning intentions towards Lolita are linked to Iranian authorities' view of women as sexually provocative. Nafisi recounts, “The nightmarish quality of living in an atmosphere of perpetual dread” (17), is the environment Nabokov produces for the readers in *Invitation to a Beheading*, not the real physical suffering and censorship of an authoritarian dictatorship. So, not only

does Nafisi intricately links the female oppression in Nabokov's stories, but she also links the fear of tyranny taking over the lives of women.

Extending Nafisi's point about the implications of the political intruding into people's personal lives, Walter Corbella in the article, “Strategies of Resistance and the Problem of Ambiguity in Azar Nafisi's '*Reading Lolita in Tehran*'” says that to be a woman in Iran within the Islamic regime is equivalent to existing as a non-identity, “and of meaningless existence, except in those terms dictated by the male-dominated cult” (3). In an attempt to dominate, repression of women at the hands of the regime can be seen with the restrictive dress code. Nafisi recognizes that for every woman for whom the veil is an eraser of identity, it is also a way to protect identity for others. Latter can be seen as a choice, whereas the former is cultivating someone else's dream. As Nafisi discusses her grandmother's opinion on veiling, the readers get to see how women became the victims of the authoritarian regime's repressive rule, “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” (68). The policies of control of women at the intersection of politics and religion can be seen stripping their identity.

Zahra Kamalkhani, in her book, *Women's Islam: Religious Practice among Women in Today's Iran* (1998), argues about the subjection of the female body as, “The sexual danger of the women in its visible and invisible forms is believed to be so powerful and impulsive that it can lead to the moral corruption of men and society” (136). Extending her argument, Helie-Lucas, in her article, “What is your Tribe? Women's Struggles and the Construction of Muslim-ness” argues that “all struggles for women's human rights, be they from within the frame of religion or from a secular perspective, are equally seen as a betrayal” (27). It can be noted how women's individuality becomes a threat to the ruling clerics. According to previous research, the representations of the veil are primarily influenced by the historical, cultural, socio-political, religious contexts in which it occurs. Many different interpretations of the veil can be found in Iran's history. Reza Shah's modern ideals and the notion of liberal women were a result of his

efforts to modernize and westernize the state by simply accepting western codes and culture in the 1930s, created various meanings for veiling in Iran. People's opinion toward the veil changed in the era of Reza Shah, as the ruling elite adopted a westernized code of life, which included the dress codes, whereas the working people recognized the veil as a symbol of integrity. The veil is still recognized as an important aspect of their identities and selves for Iranian diasporic women who had to flee Iran either hesitantly or willingly. Mahshid's father was a religious man, and Nafisi's careful study of veiling tradition and the fact that she wore the scarf well before the revolution placed veiling in question as a religion or a political power. Nafisi, while writing about Mahshid, describes her as, “before the revolution...she had worn the scarf as a testament to her faith. Her decision was a voluntary act. When the revolution forced the scarf on others, her action became meaningless” (RLT, p. 9).

### **Veiling and Religious Identity**

Referring to how the veil is interlinked with women's identity, which Nafisi notes as “When my students came into that room, they took off more than their scarves and robes.

Gradually, each one gained an outline and a shape, becoming her own inimitable self" (4). Women lose their individuality as a result of the enforcement of the dress code, which takes away their identity, and they can only be identified by the "oval of their faces and their hands" (2). As a result, the practice of unveiling enables the girls to create a new reality and become their individual selves. In Nafisi's memoir, the connection of unveiling with a burst of colour can be interpreted as two contradictory versions of the truth and identity of the women's existence. The analogy of colour relates to the state taking away women's autonomy by enforcing a code of conduct; they appear as each other's projections, one colour, and a mass without any discernible or definitive self or personality.

Nafisi depicts every woman's transformation into a new individual, each gaining "a form" and "an identity" after the imposed dress code is removed. This highlights how their seemingly homogeneous presence gives way to complex personalities, values, and viewpoints. The full overview of her seven students' appearances and perceptions show the extensive and yet unexplained

variability in their dress, personalities, and values. When the veils are removed, their selves and personalities are exposed; they take the shape of a new individual, with their individual opinions and values. Nafisi also addresses her inner attempts to stop being forced to veil that contributed to her dismissal from her job as a teacher. The memoir is indeed a discreet declaration by Iranian women for someone with the ability to experience the possibilities and for those who are practising mandatory veiling or unveiling, forces them to develop new identities. When women have to veil, it turns into a way of concealing their personalities, consequently, the issue of veiling turns more urgent.

Judith Newton argues, New Historicists talk about identities that are formed socially, developed from different contexts of a particular culture, rather than the 'autonomous self' or 'individual.' (88). By the textual analysis approach, this research explores the implication of the political form intruding into individual lives. Nafisi records the events through her 'subjective' lens and seeks to recount the story by reading different texts. The tasks of New Historicists are briefly described by Aram Veaser. According



to him, the New Historicists' primary purpose is to examine various texts to demonstrate that those writings play a vital role in regulating power relations inside the state. Second, they consider writings to be inextricably linked to other discourses and forms. Finally, they agree that literature, like various written narratives, increases the risk of revolution against the state. According to Stephen Greenblatt, New Historicism is set on the postmodern premise that our views about core issues such as sex, women, colonialism, identity, and love are "taught" rather than "given" (Robson 27).

This "learning" occurs in the memoir as a result of reading *Lolita*, which leads to self-awareness and self-realization. While reading any text, Greenblatt points out that aim, genre, and historical context must all be considered. New Historicist texts record the changes in value and interest that result from social and political struggles (Goring 189). Meanwhile, Nafisi historicizes the memoir by reading four different texts in relation to the events in Iran. Through the reading of fictional texts, Nafisi and her students criticize the strict policies of domination by the Iranian Regime.

Forrest G. Robinson finds a distinct characteristic shared by New Historicists, which he refers to as a developed pleasure in the finding of 'doubleness and subversion' disciplined flexibility, a keen sight to the inaccuracy across all aspects (Guerin 248). Nafisi also employs this method to expose the deeper meaning within the texts to subvert the dominant narratives written both in fiction and reality.

### **Religion and Morality**

Morality is closely linked to religion as women are humiliated under the strict laws because the male gaze views women as sexually provocative. Nafisi highlights, disobedient young women are thrown into police vans, put in prison, beaten, charged, "forced to wash the toilets, and humiliated." (20). As a result, through the role of memory, Nafisi documents the conditions of women since 1979, as they were forced to undergo virginity checks by guards, stoning, ban on hanging out with male friends, strict dress codes, and even executions in jail.

Similarly, Gatsby's fate is inextricably connected to Ayatollah Khomeini's vision of taking back the illusory past. Embodying works of

fiction against the backdrop of the revolution helps to construct a non-fabricated counter-reality. At the time of executions, prisoner confessions, Nafisi selects *The Great Gatsby* (1925) instead of selecting Mike Gold. The book is placed on trial when her Marxist students start condemning *Gatsby* for his lavishness and the Islamists for his adultery. As she uses *Gatsby* to explore an individual's dream that took control of his reality, *Gatsby*'s predicament becomes interlinked with Iranian's fate. Nafisi exclaims, "Was this not similar to our revolution, which had come in the name of our collective past and had wrecked our lives in the name of a dream?" (96). The role of memory helps her to highlight how the regime had forced everyone to change internally and externally. To analyze how the memoir can be seen as a (subjective) historical record, the theoretical framework of New Historicism and Cultural Memory Theory has been used for this research.

The ideological dimension of the book begins to emerge in the way Western classics are interpreted. Despite the speaker's positioning as a rescuer, in the remembrance of Scheherazade, ultimately Western Classics are posed as the savior.

Donaday and Ahmed-Ghosh claim, 'that it was written exclusively in terms of an Iranian context, yet written for a U.S. audience' (628) that means they comprehend the work in any other way than through Western eyes.

She started writing the book after leaving Iran, before that she was unable to pen down her experience, says Nafisi when she thought of writing the memoir. Nafisi arrived in the US on June 24, 1997, and this book was released in 2003. The time and space gap between both the migration from Iran and the writing about Iran are many years, allowing for a time and space split in the narrative.

Assmann argues in his Theory of Cultural Memory that how do people recount their past and argues how memories are a social and cultural phenomenon. As a religious state founded on the principle of Sharia Law, Iranian society limits one's identity and deprives them of having their own voice, turning them into an object to control. The void within them is filled by reading four different fictional texts to find the freedom they lack. Nafisi wrote the memoir after arriving in the US, hence for her, memory served as an escape from the political scenario she was stuck in. Halbwachs claims that

human beings only develop their memory through interacting with each other (Assmann *Religion and Cultural Memory* 1). Our memory that we have as human beings with a consciousness lives only in ongoing contact with other human memories as well as "objects," external symbols (111). Similarly, like Cincinnatus C., Nafisi and her students don't give in to conformity and rely on their imagination and memories to form their own reality.

*Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003) is about individual encounters during the Iranian Revolution that can be treated as a historical narrative. New Historicism focuses on understanding and analyzing literature with its social, cultural, and political details from a subjective perspective. So, according to New Historicists, history is also a text that can be analyzed through different lenses. Women are subjected to violence, killings, and abused under the guise of moral policing, which can be seen in the memoir. Nafisi was expelled from The University of Tehran for refusing to wear the veil in the university. As Nafisi laments, I asked myself, Are these my people, is this my hometown, am I who I am?" (74). Not only that, she also embodies and narrates other fictional texts from a

"subject position" (Newton 87).

The memoir breaks the limitation between fiction and reality and interlinks both to transgress the restrictions placed by the Iranian regime. Nafisi claims, "the living room becomes their space of transgression" (8). Nafisi manages to historicize fiction through the process of reading different fictional works at the backdrop of the revolution. In this way, she forms a counter reality that transgresses beyond the dominant historical discourse related to the Iranian Revolution. Nafisi proclaims in an interview with Asia Society on *Literature as Celebration and Refuge*, "I always had this preoccupation with the way reality and fiction mingle, the way that reality is transformed through fiction and vice versa," she notes that while writing the book, it fascinated her to write about different time periods while reading Nabokov. "In the last chapter of *Anti-Terra*, I did a little bit of that. But in Iran, I could not tell the truth about my life; not only in a political sense but in a personal one". (asiasociety.org)

The situation of *Lolita* is used to explain the idea of dominance. Nafisi manages to draw a comparison between Humbert and the strict Ayatollah

Khomeini. Following the death of Khomeini, she exclaims, "Like all great mythmakers, he had tried to fashion reality out of his dream, and in the end, like Humbert, he had managed to destroy both reality and his dream. Added to the crimes, to the murders and tortures, we would now face this last indignity the murder of our dreams" (246). By the act of writing this memoir, she questions the dominant power that Ayatollah withheld and the lives that were lost under the banner of religion and morality. The political intermingles with the personal, as through the work of fiction, the girls openly condemn the political sphere that had dominated their lives. Nafisi ponders the definition of the word "posh lust," which was a term created by Nabokov to explain the relation between banality and brutality. It is defined as, "Posh lust is not only the obviously trashy but mainly the falsely important, the falsely beautiful, the falsely clever, the falsely attractive" (17). The falsely historical and falsely factual can also be included to highlight how much of Iranian history is hidden. Moreover, the atrocities committed under the banner of the Iranian Revolution are not mentioned. Thus, this is how Nafisi manages to document the falsification of the

historical texts by closely reading the fictional texts. She states, "Sharia Law replaced the existing system of jurisprudence and became the norm" (197).

After the death of Khomeini, people felt disarrayed. As Nafisi recounts one instance where she was interrupted during her class when they heard a student had set fire to himself, she says, "It was one of those scenes which, while happening in front of everyone's eyes, have already acquired the quality not just of a dream, but of a memory of a dream" (165). Due to the revolutionary spirit, the students lost their individuality and turned into "revolutionary, a martyr, and a war veteran, but not an individual" (166). Similarly, at the intersection of culture and memory, Nafisi explores works of history to understand the dominant historical discourse. She reads *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) with keeping repression of women in mind. It helps them to give a voice to their predicament.

Her own self-reflection and conversations with her magician, demonstrates the vital significance of fiction can be seen as she states, "You know, I feel like all my life has been a series of departures." Then she goes on,

*I told him that I wanted to write a book in which I would thank the Islamic Republic for all the things it had taught me – to love Austen and James and ice cream and freedom... He said You will not be able to write about Austen without writing about us, about this place you discovered Austen... This is the Austen you read here, in a place where film censor is nearly blind and where they hand people in the streets and put a curtain across the sea to segregate men and women. (205).*

By narrating the dehumanizing impact of the Iranian regime on women's lives, Nafisi introduces her class to Western literature that helps them to take charge of their identities. We get to know, "Fiction was not a panacea" but it provided us with a critical lens through which we could assess and comprehend the world, not

only our own but also that other world that became the focus of their dreams (282). Like Nafisi, the girls also surpass the limitations of time and space, as in the beginning, the girls have no clear idea of themselves. When asked, "What is your image of yourself?" Nassrin had written, "I am not ready for that question yet" (38). Slowly, as they are exposed to the work of fiction, they are able to better grasp their realities and make something of themselves.

### Conclusions

The Revolution is viewed as a 'divine cause' in the Iranian historical narrative, instead of a brutal endeavour to showcase strict policies of domination. In her memoir, Nafisi appears to feel driven to write in order to give structure and order to her experiences, to come to grip with them, and, most of all, to give them significance in the act of remembering. Nafisi's idea of forming the book club, as well as her decision to write this memoir, is a protest by a woman who refuses to be confined to a ruling authority.

By taking control of their career and rigorously fighting for their lives, they manage to take hold of their identities. This research has shown the

role of memory at the intersections of culture, politics, and religion in the memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* to highlight the predicament of women under the Iranian regime. Chiefly it is the strict policies of domination and objectification that result in a loss of identity and reality that causes a *lack* of memory. My research by focusing throughout on the role of memory and history vivified the notion that the Revolution had stripped an individual's identity resulting in many deaths. However, by drawing parallels between fiction and reality, Nafisi managed to create an alternative narrative that helped (re)shaping the identities of her girls.

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