A brown skin writer as an imperialistic native informer: Remembering the homeland in Reading Lolita in Tehran

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**Introduction**

Largely neglected throughout the 1980s and 1990s, in the post-revolution period, Iranian immigrant women writers have become important to a growing Western readership. One of the most striking features of this emerging literature is its obsession with the personal and collective past, which has translated into the dominance of the memoir as a genre. For the last few decades, these women in exile have been creating a literature engaged with what have become the most suitable topics of the day: immigration, exile, religious fundamentalism and women’s right (Darznik, 2008). Through memoirs, they were able to voice their political and ideological expression. Azar Nafisi, a diasporic memoirist, covers all the above-mentioned topics in her memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003). This paper aims to reveal that this author’s discourse positions her as a native informer to the west by presenting a scratched depiction of Iran and Iranian Muslim as the Other, in which myth, truth and personal interpretation of the reality are intermingled very closely. She and other memoirists of her ilk have been praised by different critics for the authenticity of the text, overlooking the fact that these life narratives can be easily turned into propaganda (Akhavan et al, 2007). We frame the argument based on Dabashi’s ‘Native informer’ (2006) and Spivak’s ‘Native informant’ (1999). These concepts will shed some light on the point that the author can create justification for imperialistic agenda of ‘war on terrorism’, attacking Iran in the name of women’s right; “white men saving brown women from brown men” (Spivak, 1988 as cited in Dabashi, 2011, 69).

Azar Nafisi, who is now based in the States, comes from an ‘illustrious’ and a well-to-do Tehran family and was schooled in Europe and America between the ages of 13 and 30. Her memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (henceforth RLT) is a 350-page memoir, describing her life before, during and after the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979. She narrates the personal and intellectual events of herself as a lecturer in University of AllamehTabatabaie in Tehran. This memoir weaves forward and backward in time and concentrates mainly on the period following Nafisi’s resignation from the University in 1995. Thereafter, she holds private classes at her home with seven of her female students every Thursday morning. These young women are Manna, Nasrin, Mahshid, Yasi, Azin, Mitra, and Sanaz, all in their late teens or early twenties. During these classes, they discuss Western classics. The major writers discussed in this group are Vladimir
Nabokov, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Henry James, and Jane Austen. Nafisi devotes a part of the memoir to each one of them.

The term ‘brown skin’ used in the title of this paper has been taken from Dabashi’s ‘Brown Skin, White Mask’ (2011), where he argues that these kinds of writers, classified as ‘Native informers’, are facilitators for the imperialism to replace “black demon with a brown one” and “a Jew with a Muslim” (Dabashi, 2011, 36). Years before in the West, there was a sentiment of anti-blackness and anti-Semitism. There were some blacks, due to their inferiority complex, wanted to have a western identity by thinking, talking, behaving like the Westerners. Fanon states his idea about the black men who wished to identify themselves with the Whites in his ‘Black Skin, White Mask’ (1958, 47); here is our black man “who through his intelligence and hard work has hoisted himself to the level of European thought and culture, but is incapable of escaping his race.” However, these days those sentiments are now displaced with anti-Muslim and anti-brown.

Iranians, as a part of Middle Easterners, are usually categorized as brown-skin in the western race classification (Pipes, as cited in Bozorgmehr, 2011). We contend the same holds true for the Iranian memoirist, Nafisi. Our analysis of her discourse will reveal the ways she marginalizes herself in the Iranian society by identifying herself with the White. Her knowledge of and respect for Western literature links her to Western readers as illustrated by her regard for Western culture and her adherence to the notion of its ‘superiority’ over the orient.

**Historical context: Iran and the Exodus of Iranians**

After the Islamic Revolution and the event of 9/11, the West became curious to know the Middle East and its people, particularly its women. The Iranian Revolution, which was a modern revolution against the West’s wishes, contradicted all the criteria of the West. The Revolution was a sufficient reason for the West to be attracted to Iran and the people. The emergence of Islam as the bête noire of the West resurrected the outdated Orientalism, as claimed by Dabashi, “Among those who made out of glorifying western civilized and lamenting this vulnerability to the threat of Islam is Bernard Lewis” (Dabashi, 2011, 11), who depicted Islam as the major threat to the totally elevated ideals of the West. The Islamic Revolution in Iran became an exemplary of such a threat to the West and their interests in the Middle East.

Iranian Revolution of 1979 was the main catalyst for the influx of Iranian emigration and later on the explosion of memoirs written by women. Karim (2008) believes the reason for such an event, the 1979 Revolution, sits in the history of political animosity between Iran and the United States of America. Rampant dissatisfaction across all sectors of Iranian society and the perception that America has interest in Iran both politically and economically, led to the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979. Collective national protests against American interference increased as the opposition to the ruling monarch, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, strengthened in the late 1970s (ibid, 2008, 1). Some historians, including Keddie (1981), believe that 1953 was the root to all the political discord between Iran and the United States. It was the time when the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) funded and staged a coup to topple the popular prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddegh. His nationalist agenda, especially his idea for the nationalization of the Iranian oil industry had put him in confrontation with the Shah and the British government, which had the Iranian oil reserves and production in control through the
Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. Once Mosaddegh was toppled, the Shah was reinstated. This event, mostly forgotten by the Americans, was carved in the collective Iranian national memory that eventually erupted in the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution (Keddie, 1981, 138-40).

There were some other factors involved in the occurrence of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Mohammad Reza Shah’s modernization program following his father’s westernization program is one of the significant reasons for the people to demonstrate rallies against the Shah. Although the Unveiling Act of 1936 was abolished by Mohammad Reza Shah, there was still a discriminatory policy in the government against the veiled women. Hoodfar (1993) claims veiled women were denied access to employment in the government sector. Iranians grew dissatisfied with the Shah’s modernization programs. Many Iranian women not only participated voluntarily in the practice of veiling but also claimed that the veil is the mark of resistance, agency and cultural membership. According to Milani (1992), a great number of Iranians believed that the practice of veiling should be strengthened to eradicate the rupture of the Iranian culture and identity. She further argues that the veil as a sign of anti-imperialist resistance was gaining popularity. Veiling became a sign not only of abhorrence to the Shah and repudiation of the Western control but it also brought back their culture and identity that was fractured earlier. Having seen himself in jeopardy, Mohammad Reza Shah decided to restore religion in politics. As Sandra Mackey (1996) writes, in 1978 the Shah of Iran “tried to restore some of the royal family’s credentials. Publicity was given to the following events: Empress Farah went on pilgrimage to Mecca and the Shah touted the amount of money he had spent on the beautification of the shrine at Mashahd’ (1996, 280). Princess Shahnaz, Mohammad Reza Shah’s daughter appeared with rusari (scarf over one’s head), which covered her hair fully, in public. One of the Queen’s maids had turned into a religious person, going from miniskirt to the veil (Milani, 1992, 37). However, restoring religion into the Iranian politics was too late to mend as “the political winds were already blowing in another direction” (Naghibi, 2007, 58).

The issue of women and veiling became central to the grassroots of the Iranian people. In 1979, the anti-Shah movement plucked enough courage to come to the streets and shout slogans against the Shah. Unlike the common perception that the 1979 revolution was Islamic, “it was supported and enabled by Iranians who held radically different political and national visions but who came together in their one shared desire: the overthrow of the Shah” (Naghibi, 2007, 58-59). Veiled and unveiled women also had participated in the rally in great numbers. One month after the Revolution in March 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini proclaimed that women should not wear a miniskirt to work and they should wear the Islamic form of modest dress. Milani (1992) asserts that this was the cause of the first massive demonstration in which women appeared unveiled. Immediately after the demonstration, the prime minister of the time, Mr. Bazargan, announced that Khomeini’s statement had been distorted by the corrupt royalists and counterrevolutionary people, claiming that Khomeini never forced veiling on women and Islam is the religion of encouragement not coercion or force. Finally in 1983, Ayatollah Khomeini ratified the Veiling Act which made women not to appear unveiled in public (Milani, 1992, 37-38); the Family Protection law was also abrogated and the Iranian regime imposed some strict rules upon women in the country. Women were no longer free to choose either to veil or not to veil. As Keddie (2007) states:


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The Family Protection Law was annulled, and Islamic law [was] reinstated, including polygamy, child marriage, child custody to the father and his family, free divorce for men but not for women, and for a time, a minimum age of nine for brides...In the early years of the Islamic Republic women were discouraged from working outside the home, the women’s labor-force participation declined in most spheres, with a gradual comeback since the 1990s. (113)

As a result of the 1979 Revolution, this is the first time in Iranian history that such a large number of Iranians migrated abroad. The Iranian exodus commenced with the monarchists and capitalists followed by “members of religious minorities who left the country out of a fear of persecution in the event of the collapse of the monarchy” (Shoamanesh 2010, 1). The day of the Revolution of 1979 was a great happy event all-over Iran. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of the great civilization, had been forced to leave Iran apparently ‘on vacation’ but never to return. The day of rejoice, however, soon turned sour. According to Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi (1987, 1), “The popular movement suddenly lost its cohesion, the unity of negative opposition, and began to divide into countless parties; groups and orientations as discussion developed over the future shape of Iranian polity.”

If the upheaval of the Revolution caused many Iranians to leave their country, the subsequent Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) became a stronger reason for others to leave Iran. The protracted Iran-Iraq war began officially on September 22, 1980 mainly because of religious, political, and geographical differences. The problems between these two countries started long before the war actually began. However, it was after the Iranian revolution that Iraq decided to attack and invade. According to Marr (1985), Iraqis knew that it was a psychological moment to attack, because Iran was already weak from the revolution and it would be difficult for Iran to defend its territory. Many Iranians fled Iran because of a serious deterioration of economy. Alimagham (2010), states that many secular republicans also found political life in a country ruled by the Islamic Revolution as unfit, and they left Iran alongside many other Iranians who simply desired a better life elsewhere. Iran’s economy was in recession due to the dire consequences of revolution, the post-revolutionary power struggle, and the disastrous Iran-Iraq war. Therefore, many Iranians who could manage to leave did so with the hopes of finding a life with more opportunities for advancement.

The most current surge of Iranian emigration - continuing from the mid-1990s to the present- is a continuation of the brain drain of the immediate post-Revolution period, with one extra new group: working-class migrants in search of upward social mobility. As claimed by Shoamanesh (2009: 3), asylum seekers, refugees and internally displaced persons are constant in these migration flows - to date, over 100,000 in number - leaving Iran because of the government’s poor human rights record and crackdowns on political dissidents. The author of Reading Lolita in Tehran, Azar Nafis, fled Iran in 1997.Having witnessed the Iranian revolution and the consequential rules upon women, such as the compulsory veiling, she decided to leave the country for America. Those women who were against the veil preferred to either leave Iran or


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remained confined to their homes. Veiling was a must despite the differences in religion, ethnicity and class. Therefore, a great number of people fled the country because the women in the family resisted to veil and could not and did not want to obey the stringent rules. This sentiment is supported by Shoamanesh (2010), stating that those who left the country “simply looked unfavorably upon the changing face of Iran - restrictions on civil rights; gender inequality; forced hijab laws; and so forth - and sought a more promising future for themselves and their children” (2). Those who left the country had the financial resources at their disposal, an advantage available to very few Iranian people.

Many women started to write their stories once outside their homeland. To name just a few diasporic writers, Marjane Satrapi (2000), Azar Nafisi (2003), and Marina Nemat (2007) are those women who left Iran; their narratives reveal they were not happy with the political and cultural status of the country. The life narrative which was earlier a taboo genre for women in Iran (Goldin 2004), now gave these women the opportunity to illustrate their lives. These memoirs of Iranian women diaspora are replete with their personal secrets and taboos. Never before were they allowed such a freedom to talk or write about their personal life or express their political ideas. It is the focus of this paper then to reveal how Nafisi’s discourse assists western imperialism to further its agenda and it provides an excuse for ‘war on terror’.

Re-living the homeland in memoirs

Memoir is a recently acquired tool of expression in the Middle East, especially in Iran. These memoirs gained prestige and became well-known worldwide only after the revolution, indicating that it is a political and ideological phenomenon. Memoirs became a tool for the authors to express their ideology and political thoughts. Darznik (2008) asserts that these diasporic women have been making a literature engaged mostly with topics such as immigration, exile, religious fundamentalism and women’s right. These memoirs, which were written in a diasporic environment, have adopted Western orientalism (Saljoughi 2008). Edward Said in his Orientalism (1978) theorized orientalism as a discourse by the west of the Other. However, these memoirists present and represent their own homeland from a western perspective. For instance, Naghibi (2007) claims, these authors represent the Iranian women as victims and oppressed under the oppressive Islamic regime. These writers, especially Nafisi (2003) and Satrapi (2000), use the issues of compulsory veiling, the Iranian patriarchal society and its government and put them center-stage in their memoirs. They depict their homeland, Iran, in a way the West wants them to represent or they repeat whatever has been represented by previous Orientalist discourses. With all these representations, they try to get the Western readers to sympathize with them. In a broader sense, as Shanthini Pillai (2010, 3) states, when these authors “are taken to be authentic renditions of ethnic heritage as part of multicultural politics in the cosmopolitan, the implications of these are highly serious as they are largely constructions of decidedly essentialist discourse of the older country”; their discourse then serves as an imperialistic project. The authors of these life narratives are at the service of the empire when they present a gloomy depiction of Iran in which the border line between truth and lie is not discernible.
To an increasing number of critics, writings by immigrant Iranian women, particularly the memoir, “constitutes a pernicious outcome of contemporary military campaigns in the Middle East: a restaging of Orientalist and imperialist ideologies by a cadre of native informers” (Darznik, 2008, 1). What reinforces the momentum of writing their memoirs is the nostalgia amongst the Iranians in exile and the Western’s curiosity about Iran. Goldin (2004) believes that:

The amazing explosion of memoir writing by Iranian women in recent years could also result from the fact that, in Jill Ker Conway's terminology, we are finally willing to take "agency" for our life stories; that we realize our stories not only matter, but that they can be received enthusiastically; that these khatar, these memories are worth taking the risk for. Most importantly, with the wealth of material on Iranian history and the fallout from the Iranian Revolution, and western curiosity about a country that was recently labeled as an axis of evil by the Bush administration, it is possible to have a personal story that is not totally private; it is possible to write a life narrative that is more political than confessional (Goldin 2004: 2).

All of these memoirists have been praised by different critics for the authenticity of the text; however, the critics failed to consider the fact that these life narratives can be easily co-opted into propaganda. According to Akhavan et al (2007), these memoirs presented as life narratives are forgeries to achieve political aims because at a time when the neo-colonial and imperialistic projects desire to build a case for a military attack against Iran, these memoirists are guilty of complicity in the imperialistic projects. They further American imperialistic agenda and confirm Western derogatory perception of Muslim women. According to Saljoughi (2008), these texts have been of great interest to Western readers consumed with imagining the veiled Muslim women. The literary market is replete with this genre and continues to absorb a myriad of such publications, showing that the popularity of these books are very much linked to a deeper desire for authoritative knowledge about the Middle East (Akhavan et al, 2007, 2).

When writing about the homeland from a distance, the discourse of these diasporic writers can be an open invitation for sanctions under the name of women’s right. Sanctions modify gender relations and roles. For instance, according to Khanlarzadeh (2009), in modern Iran, women are looking for rich men who can support their future life. Financial stability became a good replacement for the marriage values such as love, education, and social class. It is also true for some men who look forward to marry a girl with an affluent background. The life narratives of these women unfortunately result in the imposition of sanctions. Sanction is the cause to lay-offs in companies. Many of the laid-off men became street vendors after losing their industrial jobs. One can feel the humiliation these men go through, as in the Iranian society, due to a traditional root; usually men are in charge of supporting the family financially. When men are not able to do so because of imposed economic sanctions, women have to support the family financially, by selling their jewelry. When a woman, during an economic crisis, sells her valuable belongings such as gold, she finds herself fragile and vulnerable, hence, more susceptible to patriarchy. These economic sanctions are ineffectual in crippling the targeted government. Instead, these sanctions bring the grass roots to their knees, which is a repulsive fact (Khanlarzaeh, 2009, 3-4).
Thus, life narratives are seemingly helpful when they reveal the complexities of life in Iran but they too apparently lead to further suffering of the women who did not leave the homeland.

In the 1990s, there were only few Iranian women writers in the West, but now a search on Amazon (“Iran, Memoirs, and Novels”) yields nearly six hundred results. Most of these books were published in 2000 or later. What Iranian women wrote mostly are memoirs. The questions that arise are, as Pillai (2010) asserts, do the writers in exile “become, however inadvertent it may seem, spokespersons for the countries they write of by virtue of their link to it by birth?” (2010: 4) Are these life narratives interesting enough to merit a book? Is there a market for all these memoirs? What are some of the latent reasons behind writing this increasing genre? Why are most of these memoirists women? From the number of publications, it seems that there are publishers in the West who have found the subject worth investing in. Since the West considered the 1979 Iranian Revolution as being against its own interests, it had tried to portray a negative depiction of Iran in the media. In this paper, we argue that the writings of Iranian memoirists have been made to be an appropriate justification to attack Iran under the name of women’s right. By focusing on Azar Nafisi’s Reading Lolita in Tehran, we show how her writing created a justification for the West administration’s war on terror. Hence, as claimed by Dabashi (2011), such memoirs advance the aims of imperialism by making the issue of Muslim women as a plight in the Islamic world, which needs immediate attention of the westerners as the saviors of the brown women, and yet puts this crisis right at the disposal of American warmongering. Negar Mottahehdeh claims “it seems undeniable that Reading Lolita in Tehran and its author have been promoted, at least in part, to fulfill the ends of total war” (2004,1). In a similar stand, John Carlos Rowe asserts that Reading Lolita “re-legitimates Western Cultural texts as forerunners of the political revolution and regime change in Iran that the Bush administration has openly advocated” (2007, 271).

### The writer as ‘Native informer’

Spivak (1999) introduced the concept of the ‘native informant’. These memoirs can be categorized as a ‘native informant’ (Spivak, 1999) text, which means that the authorial voice is embedded with a certain level of authority, due to the author’s origin and propensity to share information that is of use to her reading audience. The native informant mediates between colonial/imperial discourses and indigenous discourse. Its embedded authority is necessary for the production of knowledge in the development of hegemony. Saljoughi (2008) claims memoirs have been of great interest to Western readers consumed with imagining the veiled Muslim woman. The native informant memoirs thus appear in response to the circular relationship between the public’s desire for knowledge about the Islamic World and the production of hegemonic Orientalist notions reinforcing the binary of a ‘good’, democratic, civilized ‘West’ and an ‘evil’, barbaric and oppressive ‘East’. In the case of the Iranian memoirist, the embedded authority stems from the fact that these memoirs relay certain memories about life as a woman in the Islamic Republic of Iran that serve current Western interests in the Middle East. These writers put themselves in a different position with other people in their country. Moreover, these texts are combined with a staged position of marginality and difference, and work to whet the Western reader’s appetite for an authoritative account of what women experience in the Iran.
marginality and difference is staged explicitly at the outset of these memoirs and is a cliché that conjures empathy from the Western reader, who can also imagine herself as an outsider in a Muslim society.

However, Dabashi (2011) categorized these writers as ‘native informers’. He draws a line between the two concepts: ‘native informant’ and ‘native informer’. “Where informant credits comprador intellectuals with the knowledge they claim to posses but in fact do not, informer suggests the moral degeneration specific to the act of betrayal”(Dabashi, 2011,12). He asserts that these native informers “are more effective in manufacturing the public illusions that empires need to sustain themselves than in truly informing the public about the cultures they denigrate and dismiss” (2011, 13). He believes that since the commencement of “war on terrorism” an increasing body of memoir by people with Islamic background flooded the Western literary market. These kinds of memoirs legitimize concerns and worries about the predicament of Muslim women in the Islamic world. Islam in these texts is violent and abusive of women. Therefore, fighting against Islamic terrorism means to save the women from the evil of their men, hence the “white men saving brown women from brown men” (Spivak, cited in Dabashi, 2011, 60). It is, then, true that these texts create Islamophobia, an abhorrence of Islam or Muslim. Dabashi argues that in this era “Islam is the new Judaism, Muslim the new Jews, Islamophobia the new anti-Semitism, and brown the new black” (2011, 137). He is of the opinion that these authors can be a native informer and colonial agent whose writing has cleared the way for an upcoming exercise of military intervention on Middle East. He labels them a "comprador intellectual” whose task is to fake “authority, authenticity, native knowledge, Orientalised oddity” (2011, 72) and to manufacture consent for “war on terror” (2011, 21). In our reading of RLT, we position Nafisi as a native informer and we seek to unveil the ways her discourse betrays the concerns of the Iranian women.

Dabashi sees the Iranian diasporic memoirs as basically being propaganda for the American administration to attack countries like Iran and Iraq. He accuses the memoirists of collaboration with the US program for hegemony in the Islamic world, suggesting that these works enhance a “selective memory” of historical events that encourages “collective amnesia” regarding US action abroad. He believes that these memoirs offer a justification for the American administration’s war on terror and, by extension, its current campaign against Iran (Dabashi, 2011). He believes that these diasporic memoirs bring back the memory of the British colonization in India, “when for example, in 1835 a colonial officer like Thomas Macaulay decreed: ‘We must do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, a class of persons Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, words and intellect” (Dabashi, 2011, 71). The diasporic memoirists can be the personification of that native informer and colonial agent, publishing their works for an American version of the very same project and creating an excuse for the West to impose sanctions against Iran. By utilizing Dabashi’s concept, we demonstrate Nafisi’s writing as that of a “comprador intellectual” (Dabashi, 2007, 5) and is at the service of American imperialistic project. By extracting the distortion of truths, exaggerations and the selective history from her discourse, we will help the readers to comprehend the reasons for labeling the author as a ‘Native informer’ for the American administration.
To further substantiate that these memoirists can be native informers, Whitlock (2007) illustrates the history of how women’s autobiographies from the Middle East have been accepted by neoliberal ideology, displaying the power of life narratives to affect the worldwide reader. Due to the genre’s hereditary claim to fidelity, the autobiographical narrative from overseas certainly figures in the average reader’s opinion formation and subsequent support or lack of political contestation towards engagements abroad. She opines that while these memoirs play a crucial role in showing the unheard and unseen events of people, these writings can be called soft weapons because they can be easily co-opted into propaganda. Whitlock (ibid) expands her analysis to memoirs written from elite positions like that of journalists “embedded” in Iraq and Iranian diasporic memoirs. Since privileged members of a society write these memoirs, there is a possible peril to distort reality as they are being considered accurate insider accounts. The ‘I’ of these memoirs can produce a dramatic impact upon the material world. It gives the author agency, emphasizing that what they say is true. Moreover, the testimonies of the memoirs confer false legitimacy to life narratives. The testimonies of the memoirs can be used as propaganda; a tainted testimony: “speaking untruth in the interest of power” (ibid, 19). What confers them legitimacy should be scrutinized closely. Therefore, the memoirists can personalize the history and historicize the personal that makes them in collusion with imperialism (ibid, 2007). The same can be true for Nafisi, as her biography shows; she is from the privileged sect of the society with affluent background.


Nafisi portrays the status of Iranian women exquisitely, trapped by the post-revolutionary restrictions. From her depictions of life in Iran, we feel empowered by her resistance to the enforced dress codes and feel sympathized with Iranian women as subordinated to enact the male Islamist patriarchal rules. However, we feel alienated as she generalizes and reduces the whole nation as extremist Muslims with radical views. RLT overtly “opens itself to ideological rescripting from a dominant U.S context” (Donadey et al 2008, 632). Right from the start, Nafisi establishes a binary opposition. For instance, the title of RLT attracts the readers by initiating this opposition. “Lolita” stands for the West; “Tehran” connotes Islamic theocracy and oppressed Muslim women. RLT links these two worlds together for both the women in the memoirs and the readers of the memoir. By using “Lolita” Nafisi sensationalizes the Iranian women’s situation. The title is traumatic in the Iranian context and enticing in a Western one. Even the illustration of the cover – two young women wearing headscarf with heads bent forward, staring at an object (presumably a book) – adds to the predictable marketing package by catering and pandering to the Western audience’s expectation (Abbott, 2004, 106). What exactly they are reading is hidden from view. Above the picture, it reads “Reading Lolita in Tehran”. The immediate suggestion that comes to mind is these two young women are reading “Lolita” in Tehran. However, Dabashi (2011, 75) argues that the illustration of the cover “is an iconic burglary from the press, distorted and staged in a frame for an entirely different purpose than its original circumstances”. The photo is cropped so that the readers do not see the newspaper. In the actual picture, the two girls were reading the result of a major parliamentary election. Thus, RLT’s scratched depiction of truths starts right from the very beginning; this tainted beginning accentuates her role as a native informer.
Considering that the veil is a significant symbol of Islam for the West, it should be of no surprise that RLT, which is framed in the West for the western audience, opens with the image of the headscarf as a sign of women’s oppression. Here, Nafisi uses an Orientalist perspective in respect to the Veiled Muslim woman to marginalize herself in the post-revolutionary Iranian society, an outsider inside. She believes that a woman with a veil is invisible and in western dress she is not invisible; rather becomes robust and conspicuous:

I have two photographs in front of me now. In the first there are seven women... They are according to the law of the land, dressed in black robes and headscarves, covered except for the oval of their faces and their hands. In the second photograph... they have taken off their coverings... I could not get over the shock of seeing them shed their mandatory veils and robes and bust into color. 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. Our world in that living room with its window framing my beloved Elburz Mountains became our sanctuary, our self-contained universe, mocking the reality of black-scarved, timid faces in the city that sprawled below. (2003, 3-4)

In the excerpt above, Nafisi establishes a binary opposition between the imposed veil, as a homogenizing sign of women’s oppression, and the effulgent individuality characterized by various clothing and hairstyles. One can feel that this piece of cloth prevents the women from expressing themselves as individuals. What she believes is tantamount to the idea that veiled women can have no agency and they cannot retain their individuality. While describing one of her students, Sanaz, when she wears chador, she takes an Orientalist stand by stating that Sanaz’s gait has changed and it is “in her best interest not to be seen, not to be heard or noticed”(2003, 26). As Saljoughi (2008) believes, it is indeed Nafisi’s own belief about Muslim women in Islamic societies. She explicitly states that women can only be present when their scarves are taken off.

In another instance, Nafisi confirms her negative perception of veiled women. She describes bumping into two of her students at the university. Both of them had been in her private reading class, hence she knew them very well. “One was Nasrin, with her usual pale smile. The other was dressed in black chador that covered her from head to foot. After staring at this apparition for a while, I suddenly recognize my old student Mahtab” (2003, 217). Mahtab is immediately indistinguishable as she chose to wear chador. She is cast as the ‘Other’ and reduced to a phantom. According to Saljoughi (2008, 28), there are a variety of ways for women to dress in Iran. They range from “headscarf …to the full-bodied covering of chador to the fitted manteau accompanied by a brightly colored, slipping hijab which is currently de rigueur for fashionable Tehrani women”. She further states that “one can presume that if Mahtab is wearing the chador, it is because she is choosing to do so” (Saljoughi, 2008, 28). Nafisi depicts Mahtab with no agency and no political stance, and as a dejected and sullen woman. Thus, as seen in both instances of veiling, Nafisi becomes a voice representative of interests of Imperialism by making the unveiled body as a universal norm.

Nafisi’s portrayal of the majority of Iranian women with low self-esteem and lack of confidence is abundant in RLT. Those private students of Nafisi are often depicted as jealous of the pluck
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and courage shown by Western fictional figures such as Daisy Miller. Mitra, a member of the reading group, confesses, “She envied Daisy’s courage” (Nafisi, 2003, 109-200). The students have a baffling picture of themselves. Razieh tells her teacher, “you must think about where we are coming from. Most of these girls have never had anyone praise them for anything. They have never been told that they are any good or that they should think independently. Now you come in and confront them” (Nafisi, 2003, 221). This narration of Iranian women is reinforced through repetition of negative and elimination of positive experiences. A Western reader will probably take this as a whole picture, as Nafisi does not portray domestic intelligent and brilliant women in her life narrative. This is in contrast to the post-revolutionary Iran where women are everywhere, including in the legislative body. Iranian women, like Iranian men, have engaged in any possible activity since the Revolution of 1979 (Keshavarz, 2007). According to Dabashi (2011), Nafisi is a native informer because her discourse promotes the goals of imperialism by depicting the issue of Muslim women as a plight in the Islamic world.

In the memoir, men are depicted as arrogant and aggressive; if they are not so, then they are cowards. Physical and psychological abuse of women is rampant worldwide which is a saddening fact and Iran is no exception. RLT’s concerns and worries about the men’s abuses over women are absolutely justifiable; however, not all Iranian men are abusive. An example of an abusive man is Azin’s husband. Azin is depicted as such: “she was all bruised, claimed that he had beaten her again and taken the little girl to his mother’s house” (186) and if she goes for the divorce “he would take the child away from her” (186). Mahshid, another student, had to wear the chador even before the Revolution. Her father was a religious man and a passionate supporter of the Revolution. In her class diary, Mahshid writes about “the lonely mornings when she went to a fashionable girls’ college, where she felt neglected and ignored-ironically, because of her then-conspicuous attire” (8). Nasrin, Azin, and Sanaz talk unhappily about their respective father, husband, and brother. They say that these men physically “abuse,” “dictate” their will, “forbid” learning, and “confiscate” the women’s possessions, among other things (Nafisi 2003: 48, 54, 17, 15). Sanaz’s fiancé is dubious whether he is ready for marriage or not. He calls to say his apology and breaks the engagement “pleading… he would always love her.” Nafisi gives a curt remark on that: “bloody coward” (278). As the depiction continues, these cowards, aggressive and arrogant men are also portrayed as religious and extremist followers of Islam; Nafisi’s choice of characters hints at the non-existence of secular or moderate Muslim men in Iran. Nafisi’s position as a native informer for the imperialism is visible where her discourse, as Dabashi (2011) believes, legitimizes worries and concerns about the predicament of Muslim women in the Islamic societies as these women are portrayed under the control of belligerent men, either their husband or their father.

Selected matters regarding the Islamic law are inaccurately shown in the text. Unclear and general explanations about religion are conspicuous in the memoir; “to say that he was active meant that he was one of the more fanatical” (250). Another instance of religion in the text demonstrates that religious law permits men to beat up their wives. Azin says, “This guy wants the rule of law? Isn’t this the same law that allows my husband to beat me and take my daughter away?” (318). Currently, physical abuse can lead to divorce in Iran and child custody is not automatically given to either parents. Abusive husbands, unsympathetic judges, and women not cognizant of their legal rights can indeed be found in Iran, but “they are neither an Iranian nor a
Muslim novelty” (Keshavarz, 2007, 120). Nafisi’s perspective concerning religious law is so distorted that it creates Islamophobia. Nafisi’s text explains that “good Muslim” consider all non-Muslim dirty and do not eat from the same dishes (180). In fact, there is no such a law. RLT enhances the idea that Muslims are all the same. Moreover, their lives consist of nothing but religion. An example of this can be seen in Yassi when she says, “Our religion has defined every single action that we have taken. If one day I lose my faith, it will be like dying and having to start new again in a world without guarantees” (327). We do concede with the fact that in Iran religion defines every single action but out there, it can be easily seen that people have different views regarding religion, and there are secular Muslims as well. According to Keshavarz (2007), through Nafisi’s perspective, religion (Islam) does not enrich a life; rather it totally takes it over. To Nafisi, anything Islamic and Iranian, such as literature and culture, is not good. Instead, anything western, such as music and literature, is highly praised. Dabashi (2001) argues that Nafisi’s depiction of Islam as abusive of women creates Islamophobia which is one of the traits of a native informer.

The West, particularly America, is depicted as good in RLT. There is not a single statement implying that the West is responsible for the direct or indirect involvement of doing anything wrong. The West is associated with everything positive. Right from the opening pages, the Western readers are informed that they are fundamentally different from the backward Iranians whose culture is not interested in the future: “I told them … we in ancient countries have our past- we obsess over the past. They, the Americans, have a dream: they feel nostalgic about the promise of the future” (109). Before the readers get the chance to question the validity of such a statement, this narrative bolsters this dichotomy. The Western readers are guarded against this bitter fact. The victims in the text all love American products unconditionally. For example, Manna and Nima, the newlywed students who just cannot afford to rent their own apartment, buy a satellite dish and are so “euphoric” about watching American movies every night (67). In another instance, Miss Ruhi, the menacing Muslim woman activist, confesses that she has named her daughter Daisy, after Daisy Miller. “Because” she says, “I want my daughter to be what I never was- like Daisy. You know, courageous” (333). Nasrin tells the other girls in the class that her grandfather sent her Mom to an American school. “The American school?” said Sanaz, “lovingly playing with her hair” (2003, 53). When Nasrin plans to leave, she leaves a notebook behind for her teachers with a note on it which reads: “Be seeing you in Florida. Things go better with sunshine” (2003, 328). In the above examples, Nafisi shows the characters’ obsession with America and Western ideas and refrains from depicting the same reverence for Iranian culture. Her biased attitude towards the west as reflected in her discourse would reflect her position as a native informer.

In spite of copious references to the 1980 Iran-Iraq war, Nafisi never mentions the courage, devotion, honor, or any other qualities like motivation among the Iranians who gave their lives to resist the aggressive Saddam Hossein. Rather, she portrayed those going to war as “very young and caught up in the government propagandas that offered them a heroic and adventurous life at the front and encouraged them to join the militia, even against their parents’ wishes” (208). According to Keshavarz (2007), obviously, there are people who rush to war in response to a promise of a hero’s reward. These kinds of people can arise anytime and anywhere even outside
of Iran. Is there any war without propaganda? The answer is no. For example, the American soldiers fought in Iraq and Afghanistan, thousands of miles away from their home. Can anyone say there is no propaganda involved? After all, Iraqis were the aggressors; they were the one who first began to attack (Keshavarz, 2007). While Nafisi condemns both the Islamic Republic and Iraq’s leader Saddam Hussein, she never criticizes the U.S politics in the region, never mentioning that the United States backed Iraq during its war against Iran and omitting the CIA staged coup d’état to topple the democratically elected Prime Minister, Mohammad Mosadeg. Rather she mentions the hostage crisis of the American embassy in Tehran. Another characteristic of a native informer, as Dabashi (2011) states, is the “selective memory” of historical incidents that writers such as Nafisi apply in their texts. Nafisi apparently deleted some events in her text in favor of the west which highlights her position as a native informer.

Nafisi glorifies the West in the text. She concentrates too much on western literature and fails to include Persian literature. Her background in and respect for Western literature links her to western readers when she illustrates their regard for western culture and their adherence to the notion of its ‘superiority’ over the orient. The entire groups of Iranian who produced momentous work before, during, and after the Revolution are erased from RLT. The Iranian figures are neither religious, revolutionary, anti-revolutionary nor are they for or against the West. According to Keshavarz (2007), most of them respect other people’s belief, love their country, and are against extremism or war. These people including authors, poets and filmmakers published, produced, and staged much of their work in post-revolution. Moreover, they exerted dramatic impact upon the formation of the contemporary Iran. It can be concluded that they are absent from the text since if they were included the perfect darkness portrayed by the author would be attenuated. Their exclusion from the text was a conscious act of the writer, re-writing Iran with an agenda of promoting the imperialistic project.

Conclusion

The significant issue about Azar Nafisi’s work is what she claims as a truth in her work is an amalgamation of distorting the truths and selective reality which has been processed through her ideological and political and class stands. The text is an apparent show of the writer’s selective memories, basic disdain for the practice of religion, disrespect for traditional cultures, and an accolade of Western canon which altogether enlighten the readers on the author’s position as a ‘Native informer’. While we never repudiate the fact that stringent rules are imposed upon women, Nafisi’s life narrative is less to unveil those outrageous behaviors than to promote them in a manner that best serves the empire they help to maintain. Nafisi portrayed the contemporary Iran as one-sided and extreme, reduces the entire nation to its extremists’ behavior. Nafisi’s connection to neoconservative milieus (she thanks Foad Ajami and Bernard Lewis in her acknowledgement) may also help affirm her position, as a native informer. Nafisi’s RLT continues to be of great attraction to Western audiences who are seeking to realize the ‘Other’ at a time when America and many other Western countries are suspected at sites of violence such as the Iraq war and the invasion of Afghanistan. Nafisi’s RLT creates Islamophobia and Iranophobia concurrently. Her discourse helps the imperialism to further its aims of hegemony.


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and her perspectives on Iran and Iranian people which is depicted in the text can provide a good justification for the ‘war on terrorism’.

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**Works Cited**


