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RESEARCH ARTICLE

READING LOLITA IN TEHRAN AND A THOUSAND SPLENDID SUNS: THROUGH HISTORY, POLITICS, GENDER.

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Abstract

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Introduction:-

‘My mother wears a burqa, my father does it too. I have to wear a burqa, the burqa it is blue. [...] We all now wear a burqa, you don’t know who is who. If you want to meet your sister, it can be your uncle too.’¹

The burqa, a full body covering veil worn by Muslim women has not only been an individual act of expressing one’s faith throughout history, but due to the circumstances it has at times been compulsorily enforced by law. In the 21st century, countries such as Saudi Arabia and Iran observe strict laws regarding women covering their bodies in public. In places such as Afghanistan the code of covering is audited by social convention. The Occidental world, (the West) which reinforces stereotypes of the Middle East as ‘backward’ or ‘unenlightened’² through the portrayal of Muslim women being suppressed by the burqa, chooses to ignore a recent history of the region that testifies to a drastically opposite reality of women, one that was liberal and progressive.

In order to understand the almost pendulum swing shift in the lives of both women and men, one finds the year 1979 key to the connections and overlaps of a series of events in the contemporary history of the modern and post modern world, especially due to the cultural and political shifts in Iran and Afghanistan. Both nations witnessed a dramatic shift in politics as the Pahlavi and Shah Dynasties were overthrown and replaced by radically fundamentalist coups in the two respective countries. Iran became the Islamic Republic of Iran under Ayotallah Khomeini, who became the face of the Sharia Law that pervaded the legal, political and social system.³ Simultaneously, Afghanistan in the December of 1979 witnessed the invasion of Russia and subsequently the formation of the Taliban as a force to fight the Russian invasion, which later on paved the way for the Taliban’s rule. This paper is an attempt to examine of Reading Lolita in Tehran and A Thousand Splendid Suns as direct responses to the discourses espoused by two fundamentalist forms of government and also as counter cultural representations of women perceived by the West as the ‘other’, to the contrasting image of a “western woman as triumphant in the realization of equal rights and social equality.”⁴

¹ Lyrics transcribed by Anna Kathrina Hofleinger, Anne Lavanchy and Jahine Dahinden of a song ‘Burka Blue’ from a German Music Workshop in Kabul, found in the essay, “Introduction: Linking Religion and Gender.”

² Edward Said’s Orientalism, 1979.

³ These dates are as given by Abrahamian in A Modern History of Iran.

⁴ Introduction to Helma Lutz’s essay, ‘The Myth of the “other”: Western Representation and Images of Migrant Women of so called “Islamic Background.”’

To map the interlinks forged by the overlapping of events that are central to the narratives of both texts taken into account in this paper, one begins with Azar Nafisi's memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. In the midst of the political upheaval in Iran post the Islamic Revolution of 1979, a voice of resistance came from Nafisi, who at the time was a Professor of English literature in Tehran. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* articulated and captured the voices and spirit of women being challenged by newly imposed laws such as the compulsory wearing of the niqab⁵. After the Islamic revolution, social life in Iran rapidly altered. Ayotallah Khomeini became the supreme leader, whose words and ideology were taken as God's belief. He appeared as the ruler chosen not only by people, but also through a Divine Right, exemplifying a theocratic nation, which placed him above and beyond the Iranian citizenry.

In the chaotic rush of exercising dictatorial power, one of the main loci for control was a woman's body, which became a site of contestation for the state. Sexuality and women were to be two separate binaries. Women were no longer allowed to wear makeup and physical proximity in public with men who were not family members was seen as criminal as well as sacrilegious. As pointed out by Ursula King, gender and religion are "not simply two analogues or parallels existing independently of each other, but they are mutually embedded within each other" (King and Beattie 8). The interdependent relationship of the two became even more complicated as the State became a dictatorial regime, determined by religious law that pervaded the legal system.⁶

It is important to note that in 1963 Ayotallah Khomeini was a Professor of philosophy at the Fayziyyeh Madrasah where he had spoken against the White Revolution. The government arrested him and he was later exiled. He continued to rage against the King in exile and his speeches were smuggled into Iran during the 1970s. His powerful rhetoric fueled public opinion already dissatisfied with the incompetent economic policies of the King against the King. When Khomeini gained absolute power after a referendum in April in 1979 after which he declared Iran to be an Islamic state. This newly named nation identified itself with everything that was not Western⁷, and therefore Iranian. The overthrown dynasty, which was familiar, was to be the 'other'. The hegemonic monarchy that represented modernization through Westernization was met with a counter hegemonic force discourse vocalized by Khomeini.

Such a transformation thrust upon the citizens of Iran left them with no choice but to be engulfed in the wave of religious cleansing. Universities were under surveillance by the new government, eager to maintain its rule and autonomy, which it sought to naturalize through institutions under its control. This is reiterated by Kate Millet in the introduction to her seminal book *Sexual Politics*,

"...fundamentalist Islam has built its entire political program on a new subjection of women. Dictatorships return again and again to a more virulent patriarchy. The length of patriarchy is its greatest strength, its seeming permanence; its pretensions to a divine or natural base have been repeatedly served by religion, pseudo science, or state ambition. Its danger and oppression are not easily done away. But surely the very future of freedom requires it not only for women but for humanity itself." (7).

Nafisi belonged to a generation of women who had already left their home at an early age for education. She had attended school in England and Switzerland. Her accessibility to the ideals of the French Revolution (Equality, Liberty and Fraternity) due to her European education granted her the necessary tools to critically look at her own society. She taught at the University of Tehran till she was forced to resign as she refused to wear the veil to her lectures. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* published in 2003, is not simply a memoir, which aims to archive the memory of her homeland and of a book club she began, but rather, a personification of the literal and metaphorical space that literature and the possibility of revolution occupy in minds. Memoir, memory and history gain life in this text and the form allows for an exploration of these various components in writing as resistance.

⁵ A veil that covers the whole face, except the eyes.

⁶ The marriageable age for women changed from 16 years to 9 years. Not a single woman held a cabinet position in the parliament, whereas during the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi, numerous policies were adopted that promoted women's education and even the veil was banned. The period in which these changes occurred in came to be known as the White Revolution.

⁷ Iran' declared the official name instead of Persia in 1935 by Mohammed Reza, the erstwhile Pahlavi King. The changing to the Islamic Republic of Iran demarcates a shift from the adoption of the previous name as the previous King was seen as the ally of the West.

As we move from Iran to Afghanistan, in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini we find interesting overlaps in terms of themes and the issues of gender in a recently born fundamentalist world. The genre of the novel allows Hosseini to explore the pre 1979 past as a testament to a hopeful future. The women protagonists in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* who become agents of change and may not be as literate as the women in Nafisi's memoir, but they too possess the element of criticality that allows them to see beyond their present time, a time dictated by religion alone.

Hosseini, like Nafisi relocated to the United States. It is in the democratic space of their newly found cultural identities that they are able to articulate alternate histories and perspectives of their countries and the women living in them. The numerous parallels as well as asymmetries found in the two texts trace the tumultuous history of both countries. Reading *Lolita* in Tehran and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* assert and create spaces, a sort of Third Space as defined by Homi Bhaba, allowed by the genres of memoir and novel wherein history is revisited and rewritten. Nafisi turns to reading and invites a group of seven women to read, critique and discuss literature in the private sphere of her home. This does not come as a choice but as the only viable option to sustain one's imagination and thereby freedom, which exists least for women post the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Domesticity ceases to simply become a site for refuge, as these women refuse to be "angels in the house"⁸, and it is in the home that a revolution of the mind can begin. It is home that allows for freedom in thought and expression. The home is not containment, and the public and private sites get inverted as their roles are interchanged in Islamic Iran. Domesticity is overturned and textual politics are determined by sexual ones.⁹

The title *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is a careful, yet bold choice. *Lolita* in the western world was rejected by numerous publishers and was finally published in France in 1955. Before 1979 English novels were found in major bookshops in Tehran, but after Khomeini rose to power and sought to purge Iran of Western and therefore Satanic influences, several books such as Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* and Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* as well as *Lolita* were banned.

Lolita would not be seen as an obvious choice for a text that discusses women and their struggle in an oppressive political system as critics have often reduced to it a paedophilic tale of its protagonist Humbert's illicit relationship with his step daughter *Lolita*¹⁰. Nafisi skilfully appropriates the reading *Lolita* as an analogy to the Iranian State, in order to delve into questions on the novel being represented as Tehran, the girl and the city having no agency or choice in choosing their lived realities imposed by men. Nafisi writes, "The desperate truth of *Lolita*'s Story is not the rape of a twelve year old girl by a dirty old man but the confiscation of one individual's life by another. (33). This "confiscation" is being done by the Iranian state and that is what makes *Lolita* an appropriate choice in understanding and undermining the appropriation done by the government to the people through its imposition of arbitrary laws. *Lolita* is symbolic of suppression, which is more so due to the politics of sexuality and gender. Through a reading of *Lolita* that is localised by being in Tehran, Nafisi asks, who is it in the world who gets to decide the definitions of what is right and what is wrong? In *Lolita*, it is *Lolita* who is wronged and deprived of a conventional and safe relationship with her father. It is she who suffers at the hands of Humbert, who like the state ideally should have protected her, but become the perpetrator of sexual and psychological crimes.

Nafisi mentions the necessity to, "poke fun at our own misery in order to survive." (23). Literature at this time became a "necessity and not luxury." (25). Nafisi throughout her text reiterates the absurdity of her present reality and points out to the lack of "normalcy" with which the women in Iran live daily. She compares their lives to *Lolita* being akin in wanting to be a "normal girl." (49).

Nafisi's narrative on the surface seems to be categorised neatly into sections by authors, but underneath this demarcated map, she shifts in time, space and memory that allow her to construct a world permeable by the reader. Her perspective of Iran is through the eye of an insider, where the rulers become the intruders. She writes, "It seemed as if, apart from literature, the politician has devoured us, eliminating the personal or the private." (237). This painful blurring of the two is the moment that is to be analysed in order to understand the reality of the absurd life of women in Iran.

⁸ The understanding of the figure of the 'angel in the house' that contested with the 'madwoman in the attic.' Gilber, M Sandra and Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Imagination*.

⁹ Toril Mori's *Sexual /Textual Politics* (1989)

¹⁰ Mimi Dejanikus, "Women against Pornography Protest *Lolita* Adaptation." *Off Our Backs*.

Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* acts as an ally to Nafisi's narrative of providing a history of two nations prior to fundamentalist regimes, highlighting the most visibly marginalised¹¹ and oppressed group, women. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* does not boast of college going educated women, but that is not to assume that the protagonists aren't bold, brave or lack agency. It is yet again, similar to the members of Nafisi's book club that female solidarity is found in the confinement of the home and it gives birth to the idea of freedom.

The novel begins with the protagonist Mariam, who in the first page, we learn is a harami¹² and the lack of acceptance the word imposes on an innocent child, already displacing her and her mother, Nana, to the margins of society in both social relations of illegitimacy and in physical deracination. The father, Jalil visits Mariam on Thursdays and resides in Herat with his, "three wives and nine children, nine legitimate children, all of whom were strangers to Mariam," (italics mine) whereas Nana and she have been exiled to a hut outside the city. Mariam has no access to the lifestyle her father represents.

She travels alone to Herat to visit him, only to return disappointed and find her mother dead, hanging on the tree. Mariam is moved to Herat, only to be married off to a much older man, Rasheed. Concurrently we hear the news of the world through mostly men, "He passed on to her things he had heard on the streets, like how the American president Richard Nixon has resigned over a scandal." (63). The reader knows that this alludes to the 1974 Watergate scandal. The text constantly evokes familiarity for the reader to illustrate the connectivity that the world had with Afghanistan and to contrast it with the isolation the Taliban regime sought to entail on Afghani citizens. The reader learns that the 1997 film *Titanic* was incredibly popular¹³, "*Titanic* fever gripped Kabul. People smuggled pirated copies of the film from Pakistan-sometimes in their underwear." (296). The absurdity and desperation that people face are similar to the people of Iran. Every day events that were before commonplace now are illegal and invite punishment. It is in this dungeon life existence that a friendship is formulated between the central characters.

Hosseini divides the novel in to three parts, wherein the chapters of the final part are alternately titled Mariam or Laila. This bilateral viewing through the two female protagonists depicts the interweaving of two generations, trapped in a marriage to the same man. Mariam and Laila may have served as foils in the narrative due their characterization being an inversion of the other, but Hosseini succeeds in establishing an eventual friendship between the two fostered due to kinship based on sisterhood in an abusive marriage. While Mariam is "uneducated" in the modern sense and has been brought up not to question, Laila on the other hand comes from liberal parents. Her father believed that, "it's a good time to be a woman in Afghanistan," (133) meaning Soviet occupied Afghanistan.¹⁴ Her parents tragically die during shelling and she has virtually no option but to marry Rasheed in order to hide her illegitimate pregnancy. This brings her closer to Mariam's story; they now share this title of harami. It is the illegitimacy that brings them together and allows Mariam to feel less alone, or more of an equal with Laila. To quote Hosseini,

"...Laila and Aziza-a harami like herself, as it turned out –had become extensions of her, and now, without them, the life Mariam had tolerated for so long suddenly seemed intolerable...The years had not been kind to Mariam. But perhaps, she thought, there were kinder years waiting still. A new life in which she would find the blessings that Nana had said a harami like her never would see. Two new flowers had unexpectedly sprouted in her life, and as Mariam watched the snow coming down, she pictures mullah Faizullah twirling his tasbeh beard, leaning in and whispering to her in his soft, tremulous voice, But it is God Who has planted them, Mariam jo. And it is His will that you tend to them. It is His will, my girl." (250).

It is Mariam who in the end becomes the agent of freedom, tragically at the cost of her own life. This reminds the reader that freedom comes at such a high price and even after that how free can freedom truly be? Hosseini's work is not simply a fictional response to the Taliban regime and its aftermath. It is a detailed testimony of a radical history

¹¹ Visibly made invisible due to the compulsory enforcement of wearing the burqa, a full body veil, covering even the eyes with mesh under Taliban rule (1996-2001). One must compare this to therefore the relatively less conservative niqab, which doesn't cover the eyes, as implemented by the Iranian government.

¹² ¹² Farsi word meaning bastard, therefore illegitimate.

¹³ An article dated 16th November 2000, "*Titanic* Craze Grips Afghan Capital"

¹⁴ Article IV of the 1964 Constitution of Afghanistan carried forth by the Soviets. "Primary education shall be compulsory for all boys and girls between the ages of seven and fourteen." P 30. Samady R. Saif, Education and Afghan society in the Twentieth Century.

of Afghanistan that has been erased, like the bombing of the Bamiyan Buddhist statues. The reader delves into the narrative and Afghanistan's rich past through the portrayal of a range of characters that represent the various attitudes of the people in Afghanistan at the time. Laila's father, Babi uses most of his salary in order to take Laila, Tariq and another friend to Bamiyan to witness the soon to be wiped out secularism and tolerance the 5th century statues represented.

Babi's insistence on Laila's education is impertinent. Laila's marriage to Rasheed shows the only fate left for women in a fundamental state is to be one marked by illogical religious laws that have the power to sanction death at will. Mariam's trial proves to be a fatal one in the Taliban regime. The judge does not deny that Mariam's husband might have been a cruel man, but it is ironically his job to make sure Allah doesn't ask him why he let Mariam go free. The sheer irrationality of her trial and subsequent death makes the tale painfully tragic.

The arbitrary rule of the Taliban is met with the linear progression of time in *A Thousand Splendid Suns* through its chapters titled with years in order to provide a framework. The transgenerational characters provide shifts in narrative and depict alternate ways of life in Afghanistan. Mariam belongs to the working class and is doubly marginalised as an illegitimate child. Laila has been born and raised in Kabul, where her father taught and women are known to attend university. The harsh reality of Afghanistan becomes that no woman can escape the state. Schools are banned for girls and the Islamic Police, as seen in Iran patrols the streets. It is important to note that the only noticeable change that occurs in Rasheed, privileged namely due to his gender is that now he grows a beard.

A central theme in both *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is the problematization of the veil, burqa or Niqab. In Sharia law the implementation of the veil is central to the rules of Islam. Mariam has led an isolated life till her marriage and the impositions of honour represented and protected by the veil are seen as correct codes of conduct to her conditioned mind. Rasheed imposes the same on Laila when he marries her, "you'll get used to it", is what he tells Mariam, but Laila feels the unnaturalness of confinement that the veil circumscribes to her physically and mentally.

The reader also learns that despite the strict laws in Afghanistan against "illicit" things such as films, television sets and VCRs were smuggled. It is through the escape provided by them that so many Afghans found a way to escape their reality, just as Nafisi's students did with literature. The trope of desire being illicit recurs through the novel. Laila's love for Tariq must be concealed in a State where women were being pushed into the veil, cloaking them physically, socially and politically.

Throughout the novel the reader witnesses Afghanistan through the eyes of these women and feels the circumscribed life that they lead due to the laws of the State. This is constantly contrasted with accounts given of a completely different Afghanistan by people who reiterate that Herat once was a city, "[Jalil] was fond of sitting her on his lap and telling her stories, like the time he told her that Herat, the city where Mariam was born, in 1959, had once been the cradle of Persian culture, the home of writers, painters, and Sufis." (17). "Of course I love Herat too. City of artists and writers, Sufis and mystics. You know the old joke, that you can't stretch a leg in Herat without poking a poet in the rear." (310).

The insider's panoramic view of the city is a skill both Hosseini and Nafisi possess, although some critics argue against the "authenticity" of Hosseini's writing as an "Afghani."¹⁵ Statements such as, "He went out of Afghanistan as a kid and now he's writing a story not because he knows about it, [but] because he has heard it,"¹⁶ Such reservations against diasporic writing can be extended to Nafisi as well, though she spent a considerable amount of her life in her home country. Hamid Dabashi a Columbia Professor wrote an essay, 'Native informers and the making of the American empire,' ranting against Nafisi, "Meanwhile, by seeking to recycle a kaffeeklatsch version of English literature as the ideological foregrounding of American empire, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is reminiscent of the most pestiferous colonial projects of the British 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 colour, but English in taste, in opinions, words and

¹⁵ Jannette Edwards in her essay 'Expatriate Literature and the Problem of Contested Representation The Case of Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*' interviews two Afghani men residing in California who argue against potential of his Hosseini's work by stating that it "perpetuates humiliating stereotypes of their people." Pg 3

¹⁶ Direct quote page 6 of the same essay.

intellect." Azar Nafisi is the personification of that native informer and colonial agent, polishing her services for an American version of the very same project."

Debahshi's viewpoint misunderstands the nuances which are woven into the text by Nafisi, that refute such monolithic interpretations. The struggle of individual citizens is highlighted and there may be admiration for the American State, which does not mean that Nafisi undercuts her own heritage. In fact, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* precisely attempts to deconstruct the Occidental notions of the West of Iran as the "other". The choice of authors Nafisi selects appears to be highly canonized, but the readings and their contextualisation in the Islamic Republic of Iran do not perpetuate existing hierarchies of cultures, but rather dissolves them and paves way for a more contested and conflicted method of meanings.

Yuval-Davis in *Gender and Nations* writes, "constructed notions of nationhood usually involve specific notions of 'manhood' and 'womanhood' " and these are the ideals that are challenged by Nafisi and Hosseini. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* are not merely literature marketed for a post 9/11 audience¹⁷. Nafisi and Hosseini have also been termed as the "New Orientals" that have created a new sub genre of literature for a layman sort of an audience.¹⁸ Reducing Nafisi and Hosseini to only borrow such terms, robs both writers of the resilience that the women portray in their texts. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* dismantle beliefs that Iran and Afghanistan did not have a rich past, overlooked both at home and globally. The title *A Thousand Splendid Suns* is from a seventeenth century poem by Saib-e-Tabrizi which speaks of a sensuous Kabul, now behind the veil that is retrieved through the novel. Their histories as constructed for the reader offer a plurality in perspective to recognize the power of fiction embodied by the State.

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¹⁷ Alluding to the title of the Routledge Studies in Contemporary Literature: *Literature After 9/11*, edited by Ann Keniston and Jeanne Follansbee Quinn.

¹⁸ Fatemah Keshavarz's *Jasmine and Stars: Reading More than Lolita in Tehran*, 2008.

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