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## AZAR NAFISI'S "READING LOLITA IN TEHRAN": A NEW-ORIENTALIST NARRATIVE

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### Abstract

There is a growing demand for an authentic narrative from the East and the Muslim world by the Western reader. Azar Nafisi is among the diasporic writers that have been successful in responding to this demand by writing her memoir, called *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. The book enjoyed a huge fame and reception upon its release in the West. It was crucial in creating a new image of pre- and post-revolutionary Iran and bringing it to the American audience. The picture painted by the writer though is nothing but a black and white continuation of orientalist narrative. The writer consciously or unconsciously has created a narrative that reinforces to the "Westernization of Goodness" and "Islamization of Evil". As a New-Orientalist narrative it instigate the images of backwardness, and Oppressed Muslim women that are associated with Middle East and Muslim world. This paper try to demonstrate how *Reading Lolita in Tehran* perpetuates the New-Orientalist discourse that is anchored in the dichotomy of the East as backward and inferior, versus the West as civilized and superior. Lastly, this paper offers a discussion that, New-Orientalist narratives instigate the negative relationship between the East and the West and exonerate the contemporary western expansionism in the name of their enlightening mission.

**Key Words:** *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, New-Orientalist Narrative, Demonization, Glorification, Stereotypes

### Introduction

Iranian revolution and the historical events of seizing American embassy by a group of students coupled with images of blind folded American hostages haunted the minds of western and American public in particular. From being a close ally, suddenly Iran changed into an enemy with western media flooding the minds of the public with destructive images of Iran. These images gave rise to anti Iranian sentiments in US. In the after math of

9/11 and declaration of war on terror by Bush's administration, calling Iran, Iraq and North Korea as the axis of evil, the interest in getting an inside view of peoples of these societies, reached its peak. This growing appetite gave rise to creation of a memoir genre. The memoirs were mostly written by native or semi native female writers from Middle East.

Despite being written by different writers from different backgrounds, they had one thing in common; meaning was their focus on the plight of

marginalized groups, religious minorities, and women under the Islamic states in particular. These memoirs were instrumental not only in reviving the dark images of Iran in the minds of the western readers, but also contributed to the stereotypes of Muslim women being oppressed.

The best selling and most popular among these memoirs was Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, which maintained its position at the top of New York Times best sellers list for almost a year and half. The book chronicles the accounts of Nafisi's life in Iran and her teaching experiences in multiple universities prior to Iranian Revolution. Though originally born in Iran, Nafisi has spent major parts of her life abroad. She has the experience of having lived in London, Switzerland and the United States.

The major parts of her memoir focuses on her experiences of teaching English literature in Tehran and Allameh Tabatabaee Universities, where she was forced to resign due to her denial of wearing the compulsory hijab. Nafisi's memoir received ample criticisms by Iranian scholars. One of these critics is Fatemeh Keshavarz that labels *Reading Lolita in Tehran* as examples of a "New-Orientalist Narrative" (Keshavarz 15).

The term New-Orientalist Narrative was first used by Keshavarz. She Uses the term to describe those "native or semi native" writers who have authority in the eyes of readers due to their Islamic background or immediate knowledge of Middle East and their native countries. These writers and their literatures rose to prominence after the 9/11 terror attacks. According to her these New-Orientalist narratives:

They provide a mix of fear and intrigue-the basis for a blank check for the use of force in the region and Western self-affirmation. Perhaps not all the authors intend to sound the trumpet of war. But the divided, black-and-white world they hold before the reader leaves little room for anything other than surrender to the inevitability of conflict between the West and the Middle East (Keshavarz 85).

By sharing their narratives, they promise the western readers an insight in to their native countries but, instead of breaking the commonly held stereotypes about the Orient they ended up playing a critical role, in "facilitating public consent to imperial hubris"(Dabashi 79) and catering to war mongering and Islamophobic forces within the United States.

The emergence of New-Orientalist narrative is mainly due to the increasing appetite of the public, for understanding the Orient, especially Muslims and the menace of Islamic fundamentalism continuously repeated by their leader after 9/11. So, these memoirs played a fundamental function not only in cultivating the public opinion against the Orient but also in reproducing false stereotypes about the Orient, particularly Iran.

In his essay titled "Native informers and the Making of the American empire", published in 2006, Hamid Dabashi accuses Nafisi of being a "native informer" and a "colonial agent".

According to him:

*Reading Lolita in Tehran* is reminiscent of the most 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 intellect" (Dabashi, "Native Informers and the Making of the American empire").

Dabashi also criticises her for her close relationship with American New conservatives. His criticism seems valid, considering the fact that Nafisi has dedicated her book to George W. Bush's Deputy Secretary of Defence ,Paul Wolfowitz, who is a major architect of the Bush Doctrine.

The native background of these writers as credible sources supports the validity of Dabashi's criticism. This article will argue that *Reading Lolita in Tehran* perfectly fits within a New- Orientalist discourse that tries to instigate the Oriental stereotypes and cater to neo conservative narrative

of waging wars in Middle East. One of the problematic issues in New- Orientalist narratives is their monolithic approach in depiction of the Orient as evil and the Occident as the absolute good.

Another problematizing issue in these narratives can be attributed to the conscious or unconscious, efforts made by these authors, to create a dichotomy that propagates the supremacy of the Occident as the rational and modern, and Orient as backward, and barbaric. In one of her interviews titled *A Reading from 'Lolita', with Scott Simon*, Nafisi says:

There is so much miscomprehension about this book. Unlike what some people acclaim, this book is not a celebration of a paedophile's love for a 12-year-old child. But it is, in fact, about the cruelty of not seeing other people's reality, of imposing your own desires and your own illusions upon someone else's life and reality, the way Humbert did with Lolita (Simon, *A reading from Lolita in Tehran*).

It is ironic how Nafisi who condemns Nabokov's critics of failing to comprehend the real essence of the book which is, "cruelty of not seeing other people's reality"(Simon, *A Reading from 'Lolita'*), falls in the same trap by imposing her own perceptions and experiences of Iran on to the whole novel. Contrary to the assumptions that the emergence of writings by and about orient could lead to eventual dismantling of the West's archaic attitude toward the Muslim women, these "misery memoirs" (O'Neil), penned mostly by women, reiterate the most worn out "myth of Iran" coupled with feminist clichés such as women's oppression, compulsory hijab, which resonates with western audience.

In a conversation with "Random House Reader's Circle", Nafisi voices her resentment of the excessively politicized image of Iran in US as well as the reductionist mythology about Iran spouted by the US government.

She says:

When I came to the U.S, I was really surprised at how politicized the view of Iran

had become. I had hoped that when I came here, people, because they are free to read and to know, would see the multiplicity of images that exist in Iran—the contradictions, the paradoxes. But unfortunately I felt that the dominating images of Iran were those that the government had talked about. It was a very "reductionist" mythology, the myth about Iran (qtd. in Powells, "*Reading Lolita in Tehran*").

She adds, "...There was a "myth" of Iran in this country, and it was a very politicized and distorted mythology. It has little to do with the Iran that I know, or its history."(Random house)

What Nafisi fails to notice is that her own account is nothing more than a "misery memoirs" about the plight of women, which confirms the pre-existing reductive myth of Iran, as a country where women are the helpless victims of Islamic rules. Even the cover of book attempts to conjure up the picture of oppressed Muslim women.

Featuring two veiled girls on the cover of the book, despite the progressive content of the memoir is a marketing strategy which leads to reinforcing the western misrepresentation of hijab as the symbol of female oppression.

#### ***Reading Lolita in Tehran as a New-Orientalist Narrative***

Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* perfectly fits in the category of New-Orientalist discourse. Her memoir justifies the imperialist rhetoric of force in Middle East. According to Edward Said these New-Orientalists writers take upon the task of Orientalists by playing the same role in justification of imperialism in the Middle East: in his book "Orientalism" Edward Said declares:

Using the same clichés, the same demeaning stereotypes, the same justifications of power and violence (after all, runs the chorus, power is the only language they understand) in this case as in the earlier ones (Said 5).

Said exposes the New-Orientalist propaganda cloaked in humanitarian guise, to justify the imperialistic mission promoted by Bush administration and other new conservative in the. He condemns the so-called enlightening mission of imperialism in Middle East:

Every single empire in its official discourse has said that it is not like all the others, that its circumstances are special, that it has a mission to enlighten, civilize, bring order and democracy, and that it uses force only as a last resort. And, sadder still, there always is a chorus of willing intellectuals to say calming words about benign or altruistic empires, as if one shouldn't trust the evidence of one's eyes watching the destruction and the misery and death brought by the latest mission civilizatrice (Said 4).

In "The New-Orientalism and the Democracy Debate", Yahya Sadowski shares Said's opinion regarding New-Orientalist writers who repeat the narratives of Orientalists by portraying Islam as "a kind of family curse that lives on, crippling the lives of innocents, generations after the original sin that created it" (19). They turn a blind eye to the atrocities committed by imperialism in Muslim world namely Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya. Neo-Orientalists consider the Orient inferior to the Occident. In this regard, Yahya Sadowski reflects their perspective:

When the social scientists held that democracy and development depended upon the actions of strong, assertive social groups, Orientalists held that such associations were absent in Islam. When the consensus evolved and social scientists thought a quiescent, undemanding society was essential to progress, the neo-Orientalists portrayed Islam as beaming with pushy, anarchic solidarities. Middle Eastern Muslims, it seems, were doomed to be eternally out of step with intellectual fashion (19).

Nafisi's memoir is the embodiment of what Keshavarz calls the "Islamization of Evil" and the "Westernization of Goodness" (119). The book demonizes Muslim world by glorifying western

values and reduces Iranians to the level of sub humans portrayed as coward, unintelligent and backwards. Nafisi "posits good on the side of the West and evil squarely in the Muslim camp. She presents her "selective memory" as an authentic narrative of post-revolutionary Iran which reinforces false dichotomy between the East and the West.

During the Shah's reign, Nafisi was part of élite circle with her father holding the position of mayor of Tehran and her mother being a parliament member. She pursued her studies abroad and spent major part of her life in London, Switzerland, and United States. Due to her education and long stay in the West, she developed a Western taste rather than an Eastern one. Nafisi comes across as an Iranian infatuated with the Western lifestyle who feels alienated in her home country after the Islamic Revolution. Sharing her fascination for the West, she states "I was longing to talk to someone who spoke English, preferably with a New York accent, someone who was intelligent and appreciated Gatsby and Haagen-Dazs and knew about Mike Gold's Lower East Side" (Nafisi 106-107).

In 1995 Nafisi selects seven of her intelligent female students for a private literature class. Nafisi and her students in their literally gatherings discuss Western literary masterpieces by Vladimir Nabokov, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Henry James, and Jane Austen. Nafisi's choice of canonical Western literary works reveals her new-Orientalist perspective and her preference of Western literature and culture. Said "warns against an imperial culture that sweeps over the world through the amount of literary works that certain Western writers produce. Since Nafisi's memoir is a combination of imagination and reality it can be categorized as those "cultural forms like the novel" which Said assumes "were immensely important in the formation of imperial attitudes, references, and experiences" (Said 21).

Lack of reference to well-known Iranian writers and women activists including Feroz Farrokhzad, Simin Behbahani and Simin Daneshvar, in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, exposes the author's bias toward Western literature. She dismisses Iranian literary masterpieces and instead encourages her

students to take refuge in the utopian world promised by western literature. Reading occidental texts creates a sense of freedom in students.

Nafasi wrote "It is amazing how, when all possibilities are taken away from you, the minutes opening can become a great freedom. We felt when we were together that we were almost absolutely free" (28).

She paints a distorted picture of Iran by ignoring historical reality. Her novel operates from a position of moral righteousness and supremacy. Surprisingly the writer's act of teaching Western literature authors implies a level of heroism that is truly remarkable. According to the students, their smiles were "meant to tell" how important it was for the learning to continue "at whatever costs to myself or them" (Nafisi 68). "The misinformed reader is thus led to believe that studying Western literary works is prohibited in post-revolutionary Iran. It has been depicted as an act that is so dangerous that it might put the reader's life in jeopardy" (Keshavar 112).

In suffocating atmosphere of post revolutionary Iran, the author strives to enlighten her students with revolutionary concepts embodied in Twain and Fitzgerald. She depicts Iranians as dependant creatures who have to find enlightenment and freedom in the light of Westerns teachings. Surprisingly Nafisi's narrative of West is entirely innocent. She overlooks the colonial history of Europe and the pain and suffering that western colonialism imposed on the colonized populations.

Another problematic issue is that, Nafisi's narrative is not authentic since it does not subscribe to historical context of pre and post-revolutionary Iran. She consciously or unconsciously generalizes her own experiences by associating all good old days to Shah's regime and all horrendous days to the Islamic Regime. Dabashi contends Nafisi's memoir turns a blind eye to the tyranny of Shah's monarchy which was terminated by Islamic regime and the "text has assumed a proverbial significance in the manner in which native informers turned comprador intellectuals serve a crucial function in facilitating public consent to imperial hubris" (Dabashi, "the Native Informers and the making of the American

Empire"). Nafisi's New Orientalist perspective endorses the partial knowledge of Western readers about the Iranian women. The majority of Iranian women were in favour of Islamic codes especially wearing a veil. Her sweeping generalization makes Western readers believe that all women were against hijab while most of women voluntarily participated in the revolution as activists. When she says: "young women who disobey the rules are hurled into patrol cars, taken to jail, flogged, fined, forced to wash the toilets, humiliated" (Nafisi 27). Readers take this description as the full picture of women's condition in Iran. Later on, she again revives the image of women's suppression when, one of her students says, "You must think about where we are coming from. Most of these girls (her female classmates) have never had anyone praise them for anything. They have never been told that they are any good or that they should think independently" (Nafisi 24). In Western perspective practicing veil automatically signifies Muslim women's oppression. Nafisi's contempt for hijab revealed when she considers veil as a fundamental barrier for Muslim women in expressing their identity, "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" (Nafisi 6) It seems that for Nafisi hijab is a barrier in the way of women to express their identity or their real selves.

Final issue with Nafisi's memoir is that, her distortion of facts is not limited to her depiction of women; it also includes Iran-Iraq war. Iraq's invasion of Iran in 1980 is entirely misrepresented in her narrative. It is a well-known historical fact that Saddam Hussein was the aggressor and the patriotic Iranian soldiers only defended their country against the enemy. Nafisi's narrative gives the impression that Iranian soldiers were misled by the state propaganda, and went to war for the promise of heaven. She says: "they were told that when they were martyred, they would go straight to heaven." She robs these soldiers of any agency and describes them as passive victims who "Were caught up in the government propaganda that offered them a heroic and adventurous life at the front and encouraged them to join the militia, even against their parents"

wishes" (137). Not only—does she not mention the devotion, honour and courage of Iranians who recaptured the city of Khorramshahr from the Iraqi's invasion, but also her narration is a mockery of Iranian soldiers who sacrificed their lives during the Iran–Iraq War. When she says:

After class, I joined a few of my girls who were standing together outside in the yard. They were making fun of the dead student and laughing. They joked that his death was a marriage made in heaven—didn't he and his comrades say that their only beloved was God? This was an allusion to the last wills and testaments made by the martyrs of the war, which were given a great deal of publicity. Almost all claimed that death by martyrdom was their highest desire, because it promised them ultimate union with their true "Beloved" (Nafisi 138).

Nafisi' narrative ridicules martyrdom and sacrificing one's life to defend one's land while failing to mention that Saddam Hussein was the aggressor and Iranian soldiers were merely protecting their soil.

*Lolita in Tehran*, also paints a black-and-white picture of Muslim men. Nafisi's chapter on Jane Austen starts with the demonization of Muslim men. She starts her vilification through the sarcastic replication of Austen's well-known quote, "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a Muslim man, regardless of his fortune, must be in want of a nine-year-old virgin wife" (257). This statement subscribes to the Orientalist stereotypes of lascivious Muslim men and their obsession with virginity as well as subjugation of Muslim women. The novel is littered with numerous references to Muslim men as villains. Muslim males who are mostly students or colleagues described as "faceless," "ugly" and coward Islamic extremists. We do not know much about them but their behaviour exemplifies the revolution's radical ideas. We do not know their first names, like we do with female students. Mr. Forsati, Nyazi Ghomi, Bahri, and Nahvi are some of the examples of faceless men in the book. Nafisi targets Islamic identity of these revolutionary characters by describing them only with their last names, which

mostly carry negative connotations. For instance Nahvi means "(Arabic grammarian), Ghomi (from the religious city of Ghom) and Forsati (opportunist)" (Keshavarz 114). In comparing Nahvi, with Elizabeth Bennet, the author reduces the character to the level of a subhuman, "You are as different as man and mouse" (Nafisi 290). Like Nahvi who hates Austen' ladies, Ghomi dislikes Western literature and thinks Daisy Miller deserves to die. Forsati is a hypocrite colleague activist who is not "devoted to the religious ideals" but only desires "self-promotion" (Nafisi 206). The revolutionary guards are also described as cowards who hide behind the maid of the author's house. Furthermore the author clearly calls Sanaz's fiancé a: "bloody coward" for breaking his engagement with Sanaz and Yassi's suitor an "idiot" only for not asking her "why she is suddenly walking faster" in the park (Nafisi 278).

She also describes the fathers, husbands and brothers of Sanaz, Nasrin and Azin, as abusive and dictators. The wrath expressed in the novel is not targeted towards traditional culture in general, but is aimed directly at Islam. It is interesting that in contrast to the negative characterization of Muslim men, Baha'i boy though brought up in the same culture is portrayed in a positive light. He is Courageous, honest, and loving.

The "kid" is an honourable, smart, loving, and courageous Bahai boy who comes to our attention because his grandma has died, and we learn more about him in the story. He is at a loss on what to do since "there were no cemetery places for Bahais" in his hometown (Nafisi 230). This piece of information is later challenged by the claim that dissidents of the state and Baha'is were refused headstones and were instead buried in common graves, which was later proven to be false (Nafisi 244). Though Baha'is were subjected to persecution as a result of their religious views, particularly in the immediate aftermath of the revolution but the issue here is the stark contrast displayed between the intellect and sincerity of the Baha'i kid with the personalities of Muslims. The Bahai boy is caught between the evils of Muslim hypocrisy and the feeble personalities of the Muslims with whom he comes into contact. According to the narrative he

has fallen in love with a Muslim girl, but the girl marries a “rich older man,” for financial considerations. She appears to retain her feelings for the boy and later attempts to “make up with him as a married lady”. Religion seems to be the most important driver of moral behaviour in this context, and gender seems to be irrelevant. There are numerous examples of corrupt Muslim behaviour provided in the book that confirm this assumption. There are numerous examples of corrupt Muslim behaviour provided in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. The majority of these occurrences, there is commentary on Islam’s authoritarian and fundamentalist nature.

### Conclusion

Throughout her memoir Nafisi strives to render an authentic account of the actual situation of Iranian women, but she fails to give an objective picture of the realities on the ground. Her black and white narrative is fraught with anti-Orientalist cliché’s and stereotypes. It is not inappropriate to write about the shortcoming of a specific country, religion, or government, but it is improper and disingenuous when an author’s writings systematically dehumanizes and relegate an entire religion and culture to the actions of its extremists. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is a gross misrepresentation of the reality on the ground. It fails to give an impartial image of the real social, political and historical context of Iran. The author attributes goodness to the West and places Muslims and evil in the same camp.

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