

## **MARGIN VERSUS CENTER IN THE WORK OF AZAR NAFISI**

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*Abstract: Focussing on two famous novels by Azar Nafisi, the paper approaches the issues of literary tradition in the context of the contemporary movement from margin to center. Situated at the crossroads of marginal discourses such as feminism and postcolonialism, Nafisi's novels encompass both, without committing themselves to either. Rounding off marginality as the emblematic condition of the contemporary world, the author depicts the huge influence that a third marginal discourse, that of literature, exerts over a reality dominated by pragmatism and rigidity. By intertwining these marginal discourses, Azar Nafisi's novels depict a postmodern identity whose eclecticism becomes emblematic of the contemporary age. The central role in this postmodern quest for identity, be it individual or national, belongs to literature as an epiphany of truth.*

*Key words : postcolonialism, hybridization, fiction, imagination, identity.*

In an age of fragmentariness and multiplicity, when “in-betweenness” has become the natural condition of the contemporary individual, Azar Nafisi seems to epitomize the predicament of today's novelist, at the crossroads between cultures, striving to survive between the authoritarian center and the fragile marginal endeavor. Coming from a prominent Iranian family (her father was once mayor of Tehran), she was expelled from the University of Tehran for refusing to take the veil. She left Iran for good, in 1994, first for Oxford, then for the United States, where she is now a visiting professor and the executive director of cultural conversations at the Foreign Policy Institute of the John Hopkins University's School for Advanced International Studies in Washington, DC. From her privileged position, from her being conversant with two cultures and two antithetical political systems, there stemmed two famous novels, highly representative of the contemporary margin versus center debate: *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and *The Republic of Imagination*.

Azar Nafisi's novel *Reading Lolita in Tehran* stemmed from her personal experience of tutoring seven of her former students in private, at her home, after being expelled from the University of Tehran. Risking jail or worse from the "Islamic morality police", both students and teacher found release and hope in discussing the classic but forbidden works of Jane Austen, Scott Fitzgerald, Henry James or Vladimir Nabokov. Moreover, in the course of their liberating discussions, their lives became intertwined with the fictional ones they were reading about to such an extent as to shed light on the manner in which marginal discourses, be they fictional or not, are gaining ground in the contemporary world.

Particularly relevant for the Islamic world, Azar Nafisi's novel sends a message to the Western world as well, to the latter's tendency towards a totalizing discourse of power and superiority at odds with the contemporary reality of fragmentariness and multiple truths. As stated by Dina Sherzer in the article "*Postmodernism and Feminisms*", demystifying and deconstructing make feminism essentially postmodern: "This general decanonization is what feminism is about, for feminist texts deconstruct women's oppression and displace the center of attention from men in favor of women's culture and possibilities. In this sense, then, a feminist text, but also an ethnic minority, or Third World text, can be nothing but postmodern". (Smyth, 1991, 156) However, the great merit of the book is that it goes beyond these two labels, it addresses itself to individuals in general, teaching them to deconstruct already accepted truth, to question it and look for the hidden underpinnings they live by.

In this remarkable novel, there are at least two major issues whose debate lies at the core of the message it sends. The former refers to the role of literature as such in the context of the contemporary world, role that the author enlarges upon from the very beginning: "...do not, under any circumstances, belittle a work of fiction by trying to turn it into a carbon copy of real life; what we search for in fiction is not so much reality but the epiphany of truth"(Nafisi, 2003, 3). The latter issue seems to be contradicting this exploratory and metaphorical character of literature, since the author cannot help noticing how, as far from everyday reality as it may be, fiction always directs one towards his or her personal truth, as a proof of extreme flexibility and versatility. As Nafisi confesses: "If I write about Nabokov today, it is to celebrate our reading of Nabokov in Tehran, against all odds....This, then, is the story of Lolita in Tehran, how Lolita gave a different colour to Tehran and how Tehran helped redefine Nabokov's novel, turning it into this Lolita, our Lolita"(Nafisi, 2003, 6).

The meeting point of these two issues under debate is the manner in which Azar Nafisi applies fictional truth to political one, establishing thus disturbing connections between fiction and reality on the one hand, but also between two different cultures , two different ways of thinking. Confronted with a reporter's opinion about Lolita's "lack of moral center", Azar Nafisi reacted in a vehement analysis of the book's message. In an astounding parallel between Nabokov's novel and the totalitarian regime of Iran, she explained the way in which, by renaming Lolita, Humbert Humbert rewrote her, gaining thus control over her life, just like the Ayatollah imposed his will over the Iranian people: "...And that is the heart-breaking aspect of these systems. That they make you so much theirs that they rewrite you. And that is why fiction is so powerful because we rewrite them. When my girls wrote about their experiences in the Islamic Republic, they way they felt, they were rewriting what the Ayatollah had said. And they were revisiting it. And in this way they were gaining control over their lives, and that is what Nabokov was doing "(Brancaccio, 2004, 3).

The amazing performance of this novel is the way in which the author manages to approach so many classic novels, to decipher their hidden meaning and at the same time to go beyond literature, into culture and politics, into real life, without however demolishing the former. Passing from Jane Austen to Henry James and to Vladimir Nabokov in her discussions with her Islamic students, Azar Nafisi pleads for that kind of inspirational teaching that helps students teach themselves by applying their own intelligence and emotions to what they are reading. When the group reads Scott Fitzgerald, for instance, there are some puritanical students to argue that *The Great Gatsby* is a poor role model. Following the fashion of the time and place, she encourages them to put the book on trial. There are speeches for the prosecution and for the defense, but the only witness is the book itself, and she plays the book.

In her singular endeavor, Azar Nafisi materializes one of the major traits of postmodernism, namely its propensity towards dialogism as opposed to the monologic discourse. Her book is a living proof that: "Postmodernism foregrounds dialogue as opposed to monologue, and emphasizes the cooperative and collaborative nature of the ethnographic situation in contrast to the ideology of the transcendental observer. In fact, it rejects the ideology of observer-observed, there being nothing observed and no one who is the observer. There is instead the mutual, dialogic production of a discourse, of a story of sorts"( Connor, 1997, 269). Indeed, no reader could accuse Nafisi's characters of watching from a distance, of being non-committal. At

the opposite end, their exploration of fictional lives endangers their own, making them constantly face the reprimands of the totalitarian regime of Iran. Outside this world of fiction and ideas, Iranian women could seldom relax from the daily ordeals of reprimands for eating fruit “too suggestively” or a strand of hair to escape from a head scarf. Disobeying the rules could lead to jail, flogging, fines, or even rape and execution. Lives lived on the edge seems to warn the reader about what it was like to live in different zones simultaneously.

At this point the intertwining goes farther than that between fiction and reality. Having grown up in Iran before the mullahs came to power, Azar Nafisi witnessed another “schizophrenic” experience. Her father had been Mayor of Tehran and her mother was one of the first six women to be elected for Parliament. After studies abroad and living in the US, she returned to Iran in the late 1970s, just as the revolution was gaining ground. By the time her daughter was born several years later, “the laws had regressed to what they had been before my grandmother’s time; the age of marriage was lowered to nine (from 18); adultery and prostitution were to be punished by stoning to death and women were considered to have half the worth of men”(Nafisi, 2003, 18).

It is this lowering of standards and return to a primitive patriarchal totalitarianism that the writer incriminates mostly. She states: “ My youthful years had witnessed the rise of two women to the rank of cabinet ministers. After the revolution, the same two women were sentenced to death for the sins of warring with God and spreading prostitution...the minister of education and my former high school principal was put in a sack and stoned or shot to death. These girls, my girls, would in time come to think of these two women with reverence and hope: if you’d had women like this in the past, there was no reason why new couldn’t have them in the future ”(Nafisi, 2003, 134).

In this respect, one cannot help noticing that it is the future that lies at the core of Nafisi’s undertaking, that probing into both fictional and real lives will only turn out efficient when it is performed with a view to significantly changing the future. And the future does change, as nafisi tells us in the epilogue of the novel: “I left Iran, but Iran did not leave me. Much has changed in appearance since Bijan and I left. There is more defiance in Manna’s gait and those of other women; their scarves are more colourful and their robes much shorter; they wear make-up and walk freely with men who are not their brothers, fathers and husbands. Parallel to this, the raids

and arrests and public executions also persist. But there is a stronger demand for freedom as I write”(Nafisi, 2003, 341).

It turns out, therefore, that intertwining at double remove seems to be the very essence of this special book. On the one hand, the reader is faced with the confrontation between the marginal culture of Islam and the Western authoritarian one. As strange as it may seem, this confrontation is not essentially antithetical. It is true that for some of Nafisi’s students, *Madame Bovary* is a novel about adultery and *Gatsby* is but a poor example of a hero. Nevertheless, in the course of their illuminating discussions, bridges are built and gaps are filled with a view to drawing margin and center closer. Students find out that they had better “learn from *Gatsby*, from the lonely, isolated *Gatsby*, who also tried to retrieve his past and give flesh and blood to a dream that was never meant to be more than a dream”(Nafisi, 2003, 118). In a tragic way, *Gatsby*’s being killed by a bereaved husband turns out to foretell the nightmarish life that the former Iranian dream has turned out into. As Nafisi suggests to a servant of the totalitarian regime whose understanding of *The Great Gatsby* is rather poor: “Could my former comrades have predicted that one day they would be tried in a Revolutionary Court, tortured and killed as traitors and spies? Could they, Mr. Bahri? I can tell you with complete confidence that they could not. Not in their wildest dreams”(Nafisi, 2003, 115).

On the other hand, two marginal discourses, the feminist and the postcolonial ones, intertwine as the novel unfolds. Wearing red lipstick in the street is tantamount to defending a character like *Madame Bovary*. Refusing to wear the veil equals in terms of crime the reading of Nabokov’s *Lolita*. The feminist discourse is definitely one of rebellion against restricting rules and of denial of already accepted norms. It is true that their reading experience does not perform a breakthrough experience in the lives of Nafisi’s students. Most of them still continued to live along the lines they have been used to. But they also continued to meet, read Virginia Woolf and Kundera, write about films, poetry and their own lives as women. In a sense, they transformed those classic novels in the way in which they had been transformed by them: “The Austen you know is so irretrievably linked to this place, this land and these trees. This is the Austen you read here, in a place where the film censor is nearly blind and where they hang people in the streets and put a curtain across the sea to segregate men and women”(Nafisi, 2003, 338).

If in the former novel Nafisi focuses on the role of literature within a context of political and patriarchal authoritarianism, *The Republic of Imagination* builds an argument for fiction in

Western culture, stressing on the redemptive role of literature in a mercenary, utilitarian society that dismisses imagination and thought, branding passion for knowledge irrelevant.

The three books Nafisi has chosen as exemplars of why fiction must be central to the understanding of culture are Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Sinclair Lewis's *Babbalanza* and Carson McCullers's *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. Her insightful analysis of these three novels is meant to testify that "literature is not simply a path towards literacy or a necessary step in education. It is a basic need, a way to reclaim an identity confiscated by the state." (Nafisi, 2014, 15). In a more theoretical and, therefore less spectacular manner than in the former novel, Nafisi sets out on the difficult road of demonstrating that "The homeless protagonists of American fiction become the true guardians of what is best in American individualism, never identifying happiness with wealth or power" (Nafisi, 2014, 28). More than emblematic for a nation, novels become instrumental in paving the way for truth: "If we need fiction today, it is not because we need to escape from reality; it is because we need to return to it with eyes that are refreshed, or, as Tolstoy would have it, clean-washed" (Nafisi, 2014, 33).

The irony of prizing literature in Iran, where it was considered contraband, and coming to the supposed freedom of America, which disregards what can be consumed so freely, is not lost on Azar Nafisi. This only makes her ponder: "But do we need the stark contrast with a totalitarian society to be reminded of the value of free thinking? Why do tyrants understand the dangers of a democratic imagination more than our policymakers appreciate its necessity?" (Nafisi, 2014, 229). The demonstration comes thus full circle, establishing an unexpected connection between the two novels under discussion.

The reader could come thus to the conclusion that, besides feminism and postcolonialism, there exists still another marginal discourse whose influence one cannot escape, namely that of literature. And how could one call but marginal a discourse that foregrounds imagination and sensibility in a world whose dominant is that of pragmatism and rigidity? Without ever losing contact with the harsh reality, Azar Nafisi's novels are, above all, a passionate plea for the displacing of the emotionless center by the sensitive margin whose very materialization literature turns out to be. "To have a whole life, one must have the possibility of publicly shaping and expressing private worlds, dreams, thoughts and desires, of constantly having access to a dialogue between the public and the private worlds. How else do we know that we have existed, felt, desired, hated, feared?", she states (Nafisi, 2003, 339).

By intertwining these marginal discourses, Azar Nafisi's work aims at depicting a postmodern identity whose eclecticism is representative of the very essence of the contemporary age. More than citizens of Iran, of the US or of the Western civilization, Nafisi's characters become citizens of the world, able to accommodate conflicting ideas and cultures, able to perceive value where they are taught to condemn, able to rebel and openly express their opinions. The challenge that these novels provide is to the isolationism of the center and in favor of the capacity for communication of the marginal. Communication among individuals, communication through literature proves to be the only rewarding feeling of an age tortured by authoritarianism and conventionality. Azar Nafisi's work opens thus the way towards salvation from the canon through the canon, with the only notable difference that a personal, liberated reading of it revitalizes and enshrines the values that the latter encompasses.

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