

THE LIMITS OF MULTICULTURALISM AND THE RIGHT TO FICTION**Oana-Elena STRUGARU, PhD, “Ștefan cel Mare” University of Suceava**

Abstract: Multiculturalism and diversity seem to be such common concepts of the contemporary world, that we cannot conceive a society functioning without including them. Still, not all societies embrace a multicultural pattern, opting more for isolation and exclusion due to their religious and cultural doctrines. In such societies that identify themselves in a negative comparison with multicultural ones, the individuals feel trapped and struggle to gain their most basic forms of freedom. More often than not, they find refuge in the cultural products of the outside world, living their life on the fringes of the official regime. In the present paper we will take a look at two novels that pose the problem of the individual status in such autarchic societies: Reading Lolita in Teheran by Azar Nafisi and The Yacoubian Building by Alaa Al-Aswany and we will focus on analyzing the ways in which multicultural patterns make their way into such an enclosed society.

Keywords: fiction, multiculturalism, autarchy, identity, narration

Any form of autarchy, be it political or religious, explains Hannah Arendt¹, aims at controlling the human beings from within. The purpose would be that of annulling any form of difference, so that the individuals turn into shapeless masses, easy to be manipulated for particular purposes. This erasure of differences is performed by imposing an official hegemonic fiction over a society, taking advantage of the need of masses for escaping reality into an alternative, coherent fiction². In constructing this fiction based on the social and spiritual deracination of individuals, an 'enemy' is projected in an equally narrative manner, as a negative term of comparison. Furthermore, the past is rewritten, so that the power narrative, claiming to construct solid notions of truth, ethics, and morality, is legitimated by history. In this sense, the fiction of power centers on an utopian model of society, promising people a better life conditioned they renounce their individuality and subscribe totally to this project of rewriting identity itself. When such a fiction, generated by the shortcomings of everyday life, is imposed upon a society by a body of power, conflicts are generated between individual freedom and the role of people in implementing this fiction at a cultural and social level. Therefore, everything, from social behavior to cultural products, is evaluated according to a very rigid system of values, and what does not fit the official paradigm is rejected as negative. Basically, what falls outside this dichotomy is, essentially, the enemy.

To this extent, the Islamic regimes in Iran and Egypt, the cultural spaces of the novels chosen for discussion, do not function differently. Centering on a religious fiction transformed into state policy that projects Western values as being essentially negative, this form of semi-religious autarchy aims at ordering one's life in all its aspects, be it social, political or intimate. To this extent, an identity pattern is constructed with which all individuals must comply. They become thus subjects to a process of identity reconfiguration according to a

1 Hannah Arendt, *Originile Totalitarismului*, Humanitas, Bucharest, 1995, P. 461

2 *Ibidem*.

model based on unequivocal values. In this way, they are turned into characters of the official fiction that, despite the fact that it is coherent in itself, isolates the individual by prohibiting an unbiased view on the complexities of the other cultures.

Imposed palimpsestically on reality by Quran-inspired slogans meant to control the intimate spaces of the individual life, the official fiction is aimed at annulling individual freedom, all in the name of a religious code of behavior. In *Reading Lolita in Teheran* this code is imposed by propagandistic methods, on walls and buildings. Furthermore, the police exceeds its purposes, supervising not only the abiding by the laws of the citizens, but abiding by a certain code of public behavior that is aimed at erasing differences between individuals: at the entrance of universities, for example, policemen make sure that female students are appropriately dressed, checking even for signs of makeup and nail polish; a woman is not allowed to walk in the company of a man other than her immediate family. In the *Yacoubian Building*, this code seems more liberal, people being able to choose to what degree they follow dress or act appropriately. Still, just like in the other novel, Islamic religion narrative serves as a narrative used to coordinate a daily routine. People follow step by step all religious customs of everyday life, a mere shell of an ancient set of values, implemented more at a personal level and not justifying a relation between the individual and Divinity. Public behavior is not so much subject to control, and people visibly manipulate the official religious narrative to serve their personal purposes, in a total oblivion of any moral or ethic rule. If in *Reading Lolita in Teheran*, the focus is on how the official fiction imposed on society at large requests a certain code of public behavior that should resonate in personal life, in *The Yacoubian Building*, the official fiction remains only a veil hiding corruption and social inequality, used against the weakest people who claim their rights. The emphasis is laid in the Egyptian novel on the inequality of social classes, people trying to find a personal way to deal with injustice, poverty, and abuses, all justified by the exact official narrative that should erase such differences.

In both novels, all official social and cultural practices must be justified by the narrative of power, and the individual is left with no other choice, but to accept it. Existence is, as Azar Nafissi explains, the world of the blind censor who expands the borders of the official text, including all aspects of reality; in such a world, individuals become “figments of someone else's imagination”³. To this extent, official ideology exceeds the manipulation of masses and it tries to turn every individual in a character, in a life ruled by “an absurd fictionality”⁴. Caught between personal and social, and trying to resist identity reconfiguration, people deal with a schizoid existence, living their life, as the narrator herself confesses, in the open spaces, in the chink created between private space and the “censor's world of witches and goblins outside”⁵. The only escape, continues the narrator was to “try to imaginatively articulate these two worlds and, through that process, give shape to our vision and identity”⁶.

To this extent, both public and private spaces are subjected to a process of fictionalization, because, trying to escape the claustrophobic world of the outside, the

3 Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita In Teheran. A Memoir In Books*, Random House, 2003, P. 7

4 Ibidem

5 Ibidem

6 Ibidem

individual constructs his own haven of personal freedom, shaped, in both novels, by narratives of West. In *The Yacoubian Building*, for example, Busayna escapes reality by watching American soap operas, constructing an image of an ideal world she dreams of visiting. She later finds an alternative in the stories Zaki tells her. There is also the case of Hatim, the homosexual, who promotes a different system of values in his French-language newspaper. In *Reading Lolita in Teheran*, equally fictional works outline an ideal image about the multicultural environment of the West. Here, the literature teacher Azaar Nafisi, daring to remain faithful to her passion for literature in a social context that forbids unofficial fictions, selects seven of her best students which she invites in her home to discuss about Western canonical literary works, like *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabukov, *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, *The Great Gatsby* by F. S. Fitzgerald.

Reality is thus lost between various layers of fiction of both the official and the non-official. Furthermore, these layers generate conflict whenever they are compared, one sieved by the value system of the other. To that extent, the stories themselves carry their own destiny, as they too become victims of the autarchic regime. As any form of hegemony, this too fights against the unofficial. In *Reading Lolita in Teheran*, fictional stories are allowed just as long as they serve to strengthen the official narrative; books that do not serve the regime are banned and can only be read in illegal copies. This is justified on absurd grounds, the narrative being distorted and manipulated, and the interpretation thus generated aims at emphasizing the negative aspects of the Western culture. For example, says the narrator, the word 'wine' is removed from texts, not to offend the "Islamic sensitivities" of the students⁷. These genuine exercises of interpretation, performed by the censors on every narrative (even fairytales), involve the confrontation of two fictional realities: the power narrative imposed on society and the narrative of an unofficial, system of values. The conflict reaches its climax when the novel *Great Gatsby* is literally brought to trial. The class is divided in two groups, with a prosecutor (the delegate of the student Islamic party) and a lawyer of defense. The trial is a proof of how critical analysis is manipulated into fitting a pre-established scheme of interpretation in accordance to the power narrative. Here is on what grounds the prosecutor starts his discourse:

Our poets and writers in this battle against the Great Satan," Nyazi continued, "play the same role as our faithful soldiers, and they will be accorded the same reward in heaven. We students, as the future guardians of culture, have a heavy task ahead of us. Today we have planted Islam's flag of victory inside the nest of spies on our own soil. Our task, as our Imam has stated, is to purge the country of the decadent Western culture (...)"⁸

The interpretation skills of the censor are distorted so that they construe from any text a meaning at the advantage of the official narrative. The trial is left without a verdict, in order to underline just how the complex layers of signification of a literary work can be reduced to its most superficial aspects, in a process of interpretation that focuses on political propaganda. The entire trial can be interpreted as a reading of a fictional narrative by the means of another narrative, the latter with a hegemonic role. In this way, the narrator proves the dependence in interpretation of a literary work from the social and political context in which it is read. In

7 *Ibid.*, P. 219

8 *Ibid.*, P. 82

fact, even the novels the narrator chooses for discussion reflect the interaction between herself and the real arrested by the autarchic fiction. The novels are not just canonical works, symbols of the Western culture, but bring into focus some problematic social issues: *The Great Gatsby* is brought to trial in the context of political prisoners' investigations. *Pride and Prejudice* serves as a pretext for discussing the role of women in the Islamic society and the abuses they undergo. *Lolita*, also giving the title of the novel, is read as a metaphor for a nation captured by the power narrative of the political regime.

In such a world where reality itself is lost under layers fiction, the individual, resisting the process of identity reconfiguration, finds refuge, not only in an alternative inner world, but in real places fashioned according to Western values. These places become heterotopias of multiculturalism, because, despite the fact that they are real, they function, according to Foucault's definition of the term, outside any hegemonic conditions⁹. In these heterotopias of multiculturalism, multiple systems of values are juxtaposed, without power relations being yet established. Furthermore, these places are outlined by fictions of the Occident and function of the margin of the predominant society. They are liminal spaces, at the border of the autarchic regime in which the West presents itself as a counter-narrative based on the relativization of values and the articulating of cultural differences. They are places of negotiating identity, as characters who enter them are subjects to change. They are caught in a state of 'in-betweenness' that generates, in Homi K. Bhabha's words, new signs of identity¹⁰. Here, people are caught in a 'double-narrative movement,' to use Bhabha's words¹¹, a back and forth between two layers of fiction.

In *Reading Lolita in Teheran*, such a place is the teacher's living room, where she meets with her students to talk about literature. These meetings frame some kind of secret society of fiction, as they have to take place far from the scrutinizing eyes of the police. The intimacy of the house becomes in this way the intimacy of the spirit, as, in this space ruled by fiction, the women allow themselves to give up the anonymity imposed by the regime and to interpret every book according to their own personal experience and critical spirit. Thus, framed by the language of fiction, a haven of cultural diversity is created, in which one enters by an act of reading that, in turn, generates identity interrogations. Starting from the novels they read, the protagonists share their personal views on reality. The book club becomes not only a place for celebrating difference and liberty of opinion, but a place for negotiating new signs of identity for individuals struggling to create a connection between their private and public life. And no wonder that this connection is created by narration, in all its forms. Entering this space by reading, the girls feel the need to tell stories. The teacher herself involves them directly in the act of narration, asking them to keep a diary of their reactions to the stories they read. Starting from here, the exterior, with all its distopic features, is encompassed in a narrative perspective. Characters narrate, not only their inner reaction to reading, but also aspect of the outside world and their personal daily routine. In this way,

9 Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias", Available At [Http://Foucault.Info/Documents/Heterotopia/Foucault.Heterotopia.En.Html](http://Foucault.Info/Documents/Heterotopia/Foucault.Heterotopia.En.Html), Visited On 01 November, 2013, 12.30

10 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location Of Culture*, Routledge, New York, 2005, P. 1

11 Homi K. Bhabha, "Disseminations: Time, Narrative, And The Margins Of The Modern Nation" In *Nation And Narration*, Homi K. Bhabha, Routledge, London&New York, 1994, P. 297

reality proves again as a negotiation between layers of fiction, but, in this case, in an environment functioning outside the official narrative imposed by the regime.

The characters themselves are shaped by narration, and the relations between them focus on this aspect of sharing stories about their experience, manipulating reality into their own personal fiction. Sharing stories, they manage to escape the status of character in a reality deformed by an official fiction imposed by the regime, and become their own protagonists. This seems the only way to impose their own identity, by reinterpreting reality and the novels they read in a manner characteristic to their own internal configuration. In fact, as the narrator herself confesses, reality bares visibly the signs of fiction, generating equally narrative relations:

“It had become a habit with us, a permanent aspect of our relationship, to exchange stories. I told them that listening to their stories, and through living some of my own, I had a feeling that we were living a series of fairy tales in which all the good fairies had gone on strike, leaving us stranded in the middle of a forest not far from the wicked witch's candy house. Sometimes we told these stories to one another to convince ourselves that they had really happened. Because only then did they become true.”¹²

In fact, in this novel, the action seldom escapes spaces of narration. Rarely do we step outside the teacher's living room or the classroom, and when this happens, it is just in order to contextualize another narrative act. In a similar manner, but not conditioned by reading, we find refuges from the world outside in the other novel, *The Yacoubian Building*. Here, the restaurants *Chez nous*, frequented by Hatim, the homosexual editor at the French-language magazine and *Maxim's*, which is visited by Zaki (the names of the restaurants themselves already pointing to cultural diversity) function as heterotopias of multiculturalism. For example, *Chez nous*, located beneath the entrance of the Yacoubian building is described as follows:

“The old lanterns of Viennese design, the works of art sculpted from wood or bronze and hung on the wall, the Latin-script writing on the paper tablecloths, and the huge beer glasses—all these things give the bar the appearance of an English «pub».”¹³

It is a gay bar, a refuge for people of different sexual orientations that are not accepted by the official religious regime. Still, as the author describes it, the place does not limit itself to this purpose, but it becomes a hiding from daily life¹⁴, and, furthermore, because of the sexual liberty it advocated, without encouraging any scandalous acts, it became an attraction for Western tourists.

The other restaurant, *Maxim's*, equally designed according to multicultural patterns, function as a time-machine, transporting the visitor in a different period when Egypt was not yet redesigned according to the official religious-political regime:

Everything at *Maxim's*—from the brightly painted white walls hung with original works by great artists, the quiet lighting emanating from elegant wall lamps, [...] and glasses of various sizes are set out in the French manner, [...] bears the stamp of the elegant past in the same way as do old Rolls-Royces, ladies' long white gloves, hats decorated with feathers, gramophones with horns and gold needles, and old black-and-white photos in wooden frames

12 Azar Nafisi, *Op. Cit.*, P. 33

13 Alaa Al Aswany, *The Yacoubian Building*, Harpercollins, 2004, P. 35

14 *Ibidem*.

that we hang in the sitting room and forget about and which, when from time to time we do look at them, make us feel tender and melancholy.¹⁵

These places, escapes from the harsh realities of the outside, are refuge for people who find themselves estranged from the world they live in. Here, the individual does not identify himself only in a relation of exclusion subscribed to a unequivocal narrative of power, but by relating with others in a non-hegemonic system of values in which everyone is free to express their inner, unconstrained needs for human interaction.

Two characters identify themselves with the cultural model vividly encompassed by these spaces, both of them caught on their own limit between the two different types of fiction: official and non-official. Despite the fact that narration is not a necessary condition here for entering these heterotopias of multiculturalism, as it is in the other novel, fiction is aimed at negotiating relations between individuals. In fact, both power narrative and the counter-narrative have a seductive purpose, aiming in manipulating the individual into a certain type of behavior.

On the one hand there is Hatim, the homosexual, who was raised in a multicultural and multi-ethnic environment (father Egyptian, mother French), but who was sexually corrupted at an early age by one of the servants. He constructs a haven of personal freedom in his apartment from the Yacoubian building in which he lures his lover, Abd Rabbuh. Seduced by wealth, social favors, or sexual interests, (the novel does not state clearly what is Abd Rabbuh's motivation), he remains a simple, religious man, seduced by the multicultural world of Hatim. Inevitably, this generates a forced reevaluation of his unilateral system of values; and this reevaluation leads to conflict – in the end, Zaki is killed by his lover who tries to make sense of the misfortune of his child's death by fitting it in the strongest power narrative: the religious one.

On the other hand there is Zaki who lives with the fantasy of an old cosmopolitan Egypt, one before the Islamic revolution. He builds around himself a fiction of the West in which Busayna is caught, as Zaki tells stories about a different world of multiculturalism in which he used to live: “I was educated in French schools and most of my friends were foreigners. Says Zaki. I studied in France and lived there for years. I know Paris as well as I do Cairo. [...] The whole world's to be found in Paris!”¹⁶. The relation between the two does not generate conflict as the previous one, as Busayna is already seduced by such fictions she knows from the soap operas she watches as a shelter from the abusive society.

A similar case is that of the narrator from *Reading Lolita in Teheran*. She, too, is educated abroad and tells stories about her childhood lived in a freer social environment. By the means of this personal narrative shaped middle way between the official and the personal, the reader comes to know both Iran and Egypt, before being redesigned according to the official fiction imposed by the Islamic revolution, as places of individual freedom, multiculturalism and occidental values. It is the nostalgia for a personal past in which both the narrator Azar Nafisi and Zaki return, in a continuous oscillation between the dystopic present and the idealized past. To this extent, both novels are structures on dialectical oppositions between past and present, inside and outside, official and non-official, all subjects to

15 *Ibid.*, P. 107

16 *Ibid.*, P. 137

fictionalization. And amid all these opposites the protagonists are caught, trying to make sense of where they fit in the world, between the multicultural seductive world of the West and the a space called home, smothered by the autarchic regime.

Still, not only fictions of multicultural values have a seductive role. The official one does also, serving as an alternative to the dystopic layers of social interaction that uses the official fiction as a veil for corruption. Failing in his attempt to succeed socially, just because these reasons, Taha, Busayna's friend, is seduced by the Islamic religious code manipulated into an alternative to every-day life. He will sacrifice himself in a terrorist attack, believing in the fact that his suicide will be interpreted as a heroic act, according to the religious code of the Quran.

Despite the fact that both novels are an open plea for Western values, the authors do not discredit Islamic culture (as they have been criticized to do); on the contrary, they include it in the much broader picture of multiculturalism. All characters in the novel connect to some extent to Islamic narrative, some of them being sincerely religious, but in a moderated way that does not exclude the right to individual freedom. What both authors criticize, is the manipulation of a religious code for political and financial purposes, and the control of the individual in all aspect of his life. The novels question the right to fiction as product of an uncensored imagination, and of freedom of choice. The attempt to dominate the individual in the most intimate aspects of identity, by controlling what books must be read and what sexual orientation is legal, is equivalent to trying to control his freedom to create, both for himself and for the others, an alternative world in which to find refuge from the realities around him.

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