

Illusions in America will not help Iranian women

Fri, 25/07/2008 - 15:41

Review of Reading Lolita in Tehran

Reading Lolita in Tehran is an autobiographical work which recounts Azar Nafisi's struggle as a professor of English literature in the Islamic Republic. Educated in America and determined to defend academic freedom in the face of a repressive regime, she eventually resigns her teaching post in 1995. She then decides to invite a group of women, passionate about literature (her girls?) to her house for weekly discussions of banned books.

Literature is invariably a target for dictatorial regimes, as it was Hitler's Germany or the Soviet Union. Oppositional views, banned from public debate in the media, find expression there. Even classical works can take on an oppositional meaning by embodying alternative values to those officially allowed. This is true in Iran where, as Nafisi describes, fires were set to publishing houses and bookstores for disseminating immoral works of fiction. One woman novelist was jailed for her writings and charged with spreading prostitution. Through discussing English language works such as The Great Gatsby, Daisy Miller, Pride and Prejudice and, of course, Lolita, Nafisi and her girls hoped to find a link between the open spaces the novels provided and the closed ones we were confined to.

These books are seen as giving a different colour to Tehran and the work makes astute points about the regime's hypocrisy in banning them. Lolita is taboo because it describes a sexual relationship between a middle-aged man and a young teenager yet the Islamic Republic allows girls as young as nine to be married off, often to much older men. The chapter on Jane Austen begins with the ironic statement from one of Nafisi's girls, '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.' The girls sadly remark that 'The Islamic Republic has taken us back to Jane Austen's times' whilst many of their mothers chose who to marry, today their daughters have little choice in the matter.

Nafisi rightly detests the strict dress codes imposed on women and recognises the importance of the right to wear or not to wear the veil. She tries to subvert the code she never really learns to tie a hijab correctly and always leaves a few strands of hair loose to show her defiance. When her girls attend the class for the first time, she describes how she could not get over the shock of seeing them shed their mandatory veils and robes and burst into colour. 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.

In its broader descriptions of life in the Islamic Republic, the novel gives an abundance of examples of the terrible oppression imposed by the regime, particularly by the 'Blood of God' militias that patrol the streets to make sure that women wear their veils properly, do not wear makeup, do not walk in public with men who are not their fathers, brothers or husbands.

Anecdotes range from the absurd (a group of women reprimanded for eating apples too seductively in a University yard) to the draconian (a class of primary school girls suddenly dragged out of a lesson for body

searches and inspections, resulting in one girl's slightly-too-long nails being cut by the headmistress (so close that she had drawn blood?).

Perhaps the most shocking incident is when a search warrant is issued on a group of girls, (properly dressed, with their scarves and long robes). When it yields no alcohol or forbidden tapes and CDs, the girls are nevertheless taken to a special jail and kept overnight, forced to submit to two virginity tests observed by students, and eventually (made to sign a document confessing to sins they had not committed and subjected to twenty-five lashes.)

Of course, as a work of fiction it is feasible that some stories could be exaggerated, but there is no doubt that it gives a poignant picture of the awful realities of life as a woman in the Islamic Republic. Another strength of the book is its powerful account of the Iran-Iraq war. The terror of attacks by bombs and chemical weapons, the destruction and desertion of Tehran, and the waste of thousands of lives as young men lined up to become martyrs for Islam. It also vividly describes the aftermath, including the horrifying mass execution of political prisoners.

What is really missing from the book is any discussion of ways that this repressive regime could be changed. Nafisi describes the classes as helping her and her girls rediscover themselves as (living, breathing human beings) and (to escape and to create our own pockets of freedom.) Instead of actively resisting the regime, they create a private space where they can hide from it and temporarily escape their real lives. That millions of women and young men are obliged to do this is itself a condemnation of the hidebound but brutal theocracy which established itself on the wreckage of the Iranian Revolution of 1979

Nafisi thinks that herself and her students (had not become part of the crowd who watched the executions, but they did not have the power to protest them, either). Therefore the only way to avoid being complicit in the regime's crimes was (to find a way to preserve one's individuality, that unique quality which evades description but differentiates one human being from the other.) She is alienated not only from the Islamism of the mullahs, but also from political opposition to it.

It is no wonder then that she expresses her admiration for (the nineteen year old Nabokov who, during the Russian Revolution, would not allow himself to be diverted by the sound of bullets. He kept on writing his solitary poems while he heard the guns and saw the bloody fights from his window.) In the second chapter when she goes back in time to her period of study in America, she admits that she joined the Iranian student movement reluctantly (attracted by the romantic atmosphere, but repelled by the Confederation's direction over its members' lifestyles and by (the long and confrontational meetings between rival factions.)

She wishes she could be left alone to study, discuss and teach great works of literature; she wants literary works to be appreciated for what they are and not simply as (handmaidens to ideology.) Besides the fact that her own literary work is clearly written for ideological reasons as well, just for a different liberal one Nafisi falls into real intellectual snobbery on several occasions. She describes many young men (from the provinces or from traditional families) as (the usurpers, who had been admitted to the university and given power not because of their own merit and hard work but because of their ideological affiliations) (that is, they are lower class people who should not be mixing with the intellectuals in their university.

However, the most serious problem is that Nafisi's condemnation of the Islamic Republic blinds her to the defects of US society and the crimes of US imperialism. It was the US (and Britain) that overthrew the democratically elected regime of nationalist Mohammad Mosaddeq in 1953, instituting a twenty-five year dictatorship under the Shah. With the blessing and logistical support of the Americans the brutal secret police SAVAK terrorised intellectuals and political oppositionist, in a manner as bad or even worse than

today.

The virtual siege that Iran has been subjected to ever since, the present threats to attack it are not the ministrations of a friendly democratic power longing to liberate its intellectuals. Rather they are the actions of an imperialist bully seeking to loot the country's oil reserves and give a lesson to all countries to knuckle under to the slightest whim of the USA. The mass of the Iranian people will, quite rightly stand up to this bullying and if the liberal intelligentsia make s the fatal mistake of trying to encourage the US to intervene they will be isolated from and despised by the masses as traitors and stooges of the US.

Columbia Professor Hamid Dabashi has argued that the book sees 'perfectly legitimate critiques [of women's oppression in Iran and under Islamic law] mutate into entirely illegitimate formulations at the service of facilitating the US global domination.' Throughout this book Nafisi refuses to take imperialism seriously as a threat. She criticises her friend Mahtab's Marxist organisation (whose name is not mentioned) for wanting to deal with the imperialists and their lackeys before women's rights. Of course fighting for women's rights is not counterposed to fighting imperialism: should re-enforce one another. However, she goes on to ask: 'What imperialists, which lackeys?' I.e. military action against Iran She describes the day in 1979 that the US embassy was occupied by what she calls a 'ragtag' group of students, when 'A tent was raised on the sidewalk and filled with propaganda against America, exposing its crimes around the world' without showing the slightest recognition of what these crimes were.

In truth, this occupation was a diversion by the Ayatollah Khomeini, aimed at consolidating his Islamic counterrevolution over what had started as a progressive, working class revolution against the pro-imperialist Shah. While Nafisi states that she and others participated in the revolution because they were demanding more rights, not fewer, such bourgeois 'a-political' intellectuals will never understand what can and what did go wrong with a revolution. They can only see it as a catastrophe and blame the uneducated and uncultured masses It is for this reason that her book offers no help for understanding the condition of working class people in Iran today, and their struggle against both their reactionary regime and US imperialism.

To bourgeois intellectuals like Nafisi, all revolutions are the same. She writes - 'The revolution Gold desired was a Marxist one and ours was Islamic, but they had a great deal in common, in that they were both ideological and totalitarian.' So finally and not surprisingly given this attitude, Nafisi is actively involved in pressing the US to assist with bringing about 'regime change in Iran.' Indeed books like hers - appearing in huge numbers in popular editions - play a subtle but real role in spreading the idea that a war against Iran will be a war for women's liberation. You would think that some one who has seen what has happened in Iran's neighbours, Afghanistan and Iraq, might hesitate before appealing for such 'salvation' for her own country.

Source URL: <https://fifthinternational.org/content/illusions-america-will-not-help-iranian-women>