

## **I. Dialectics of ‘Authenticity’ in the ‘Liberation Narrative’ of a Transcultural Memoir**

The memoir/autobiography *Reading Lolita in Tehran* written by a western educated-Iranian woman, Azar Nafisi, which is infused with illuminating narratives, describes the difficulties faced by Iranian women in the Islamic Republic. In particular, it centers on the group of students, formed by Nafisi herself as ‘a core study group’, and their narratives where students articulate their predicaments under totalitarian in revolutionary Iran. However, Rastagar contradicts “The transcultural quality of the account forecloses ‘authenticity’ and the question of authenticity and representativeness becomes a major problematic for Nafisi as she track between presenting the work as a highly personal, individual memoir and as a statement about Iranian women’s experiences as a whole” (111). Nevertheless, reviewers’ readings of her work highlights that when it is read in the Western context, it poses only a highly circumscribed challenge to assumed “facts” and existing prejudices about Iranian women’s experiences. “Nafisi, like other writers” Matthes considers, “seeks to tell more than her own story, and her reading of Western literature through an Iranian context exhibits such a dialogical engagement” (70). And Manijeh Mannani argues “Nafisi’s memoir entails some exaggerations and omission that reflect decisively on Iranian culture, religion and politics” (322). The criticisms of Nafisi’s memoir leads to the other aspect of the memoir: Muslim women’s rights and their representation in her memoir.

The memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* weaves together many important stories concerning Iran’s post-revolutionary politics, the fate of women under Islamic rule, and the difficulty of teaching literature in a climate of political upheaval. However, the narrative strand is used most frequently to describe the book that involves seven young women who meet clandestinely at Nafisi’s house from 1995-1997 to discuss western literature that was

considered counter-revolutionary, starting with Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. In effect, the women constitute a subversive book club- a free space where they are shown removing their government-mandated shawl's and overcoats, and sitting down together, with books in hand, to savor language and discuss outlaw literature in a deliberately all-female setting. In this space they also commiserate over their loss of freedoms, drink tea and eat sweets, and tell the stories of their own lives. To put it in simple, the book centers on the group of students, formed by Nafisi herself as 'a core study group, and their narrative where students articulate their predicaments under totalitarian Iran. Those narratives of the students lend the text's legitimacy and promise to non-Muslim readers as a source of truth about Iranian women and Islam. In this way, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is both an account of the devastating rise of Islamicism in Iran since the Islamic Republic was established and a textual engagement with literary works that helped her cope with it.

This is a memoir, and so Nafisi comes to us in all her roles; foremost as a teacher, but also as a woman, citizen, wife, mother, daughter, friend, reader, and writer. She was born into an intellectual and influential family. Before the Mohammad Reza Shah threw her father in jail, he was Tehran's youngest mayor, and her mother was among the first women elected to Parliament. Nafisi studied and lived abroad from age 13 to 30. An early mismatched marriage brought her to the University of Oklahoma during freewheeling 1960s. There she became involved in the Iranian student movement, through half heatedly, since she fashions herself more rebel than activist and was unwilling to sacrifice her long hair and beloved counterrevolutionary writers to the revolution's demands. In the fall of 1977, the Shah made his last official visit to the United States and Nafisi Married Bijan Naderi, a fellow activist. The marriage held, the Shah's rule did not. When the Shah was deposed, Nafisi and Naderi were caught up in the excitement and

returned to Iran. Soon after, she began teaching at the University of Tehran, but from the beginning, she chafed at the dictates of the increasingly orthodox administration and students.

The memoir describes Nafisi's experience as professor of English-language literature in Iran from the time of the 1979 revolution until 1997, when she and her family immigrated to the United States. From a prominent secular family, Nafisi left Iran at thirteen, studying in Europe and the United States, and returned to Iran as a professor following the overthrow of Mohammad Reza Shah. She currently teaches at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, where she is also the director of the Dialogue Project, which seeks to promote the development of democracy and human rights in the Muslim world.

The memoir is divided into four parts, each framed in relation to specific western novels and writers which are the places afforded to her by the literary classics such as *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Lolita* and *Daisy Miller*-all western books that became Nafisi's refuge when she felt overwhelmed by Islamic rule. In each section, Nafisi deftly interweaves biography, ideas, politics, and literature. She describes events comments on them, then comments on her comments as well. At the core of the book, is a clandestine class she convenes in 1995, after the administration at the University of Allameh Tabatabai has driven her from her teaching post. (Earlier she was dismissed from the University of Tehran for refusing to wear the veil.) Selecting her best and most committed students-all women, because it is too risky to gather unrelated men and women in a private home-she declares the theme of the class to be the relationship between fiction and reality. We first meet Nafisi's students in descriptions of paired photographs: in one, only their faces and hands remain uncloaked; in the other, they emerge from their robes and veils like butterflies from chrysalises. They are Manna, Yassi, Azin, Mitra, Sanaz, Mashid and Nassrin. (Nafisi has renamed and disguised them for protection.) For nearly

two years, seven young women come to her house on Thursday mornings to read and discuss the increasingly unobtainable classics of Western Literature, taking heart from and arguing with the books as if their lives depended on it.

The first section, “Lolita” describes the private study group Nafisi held from 1995 to 1997 with seven female students, focusing on how their lives were controlled by the regime. To these students, Suellen opines “The Islamic Republic was like Humbert Humbert and they were like Dolores Haze-controlled by an authority, who confiscates their individual identities and replaces them with a cipher of his own imagination” (209). One prominent Iranian critic DePaul draws the parallel situation between Lolita’s plight and the suffering of Iranian women as:

Nafisi reads *Lolita* with an eye toward the young women of her book discussion group, who, like Nabokov’s love interest, are powerless in the face of male authority. Lolita’s tragedy, then, is not individual’s life by another. Lolita’s dreams for an ordinary life, like the ordinary hopes of the young Iranian women who felt trapped by post-revolutionary restrictions, are subordinated to the demand that they, like Lolita, enact someone else’s fantasy, thus becoming figments of someone else imagination. (89)

As Nafisi has described about how women were subordinated to enact male Islamist fantasy is beginning with strict dress restrictions to conceal body and hair; laws forbidding unmarried men and women to consort publically; the institution of other Sharia codes limiting women’s rights in divorce, inheritance, rape prosecution, and child custody; and extreme punishments, such as stoning, for women convicted of adultery and other sexual offences. For these students, reading Nabokov, reading Persian and western classics, reflecting on and being transformed by what they read, was ultimately an act of subversion.

The second section, "Gatsby," treats the period immediately following the revolution and the ideological battles fought within Nafisi's classroom and the universities. It becomes the subversive book for students precisely because it focuses unapologetically on a single individual's dashed dream at a time. Gatsby, a character who ends up destroying himself by trying to re-imagine his past, is an apt metaphor for the Islamic Regime - a cabal of Ayatollahs that sacrificed the present by enforcing their own dream of a collective past on Iran. In other words, Fitzgerald's novel *Gatsby* in Nafisi's memoir evokes a sort of prelapsarian moment, a nostalgia and yearning for a mythic past of purity and perfection. Similarly, Nan Levinson in her review of Nafisi's memoir comments about the book "Gatsby as a paean to dreams and optimism" (20). She underplays the fact that it's a peculiarly American optimism, but shrewdly points out those ancient countries such as Iran dream of past glories, while Americans are nostalgic for some idealized future. The two visions are connected by their consequences. She quotes Nafisi to find the parallel situation of the novel with Iran "What we in Iran had in common with Fitzgerald was this dream that become our obsession and took over our reality, this terrible, beautiful dream impossible in its actualization, for which any amount of violence might be justified or forgiven" (qtd. in Levinson 144). Nafisi thinks Reza Shah's rule was ideal time for women's freedom which focuses on unveiling. So, she presents the Iranian women lamenting over the past as Gatsby wants to regain his idyllic past with Daisy.

Similarly, in the third section, "James," describes the period of the Iran-Iraqe war (1980-88) and the entrenchment of the new regime. Throughout, Nafisi's classroom discussions of these works serve as means by which to analyze the aftermath of the revolution.

And in the final section, Nafisi reads *Pride and Prejudice* with courtship in Iran amid diminishing women's rights in mind. She also uses the novel to discuss power relations as she

believes Jane Austen sees them, saying that negative characters never truly hear or are influenced by the people around them- who lack empathy and democratic values. Levinson comments about the discussion of Austen in Nafisi's class as:

The novels of Austen and discussing love, sex, courtship, and the lives of women in the thaw that follows the long and debilitating Iran-Iraq war. Nafisi notes that, in contrast to the values of the revolution, the 19<sup>th</sup> century novel focuses on individual happiness and rights. These are what she wishes for her girls, or, as she imagines the "Dear Jane Society" her students once jokingly proposed "We would meet and dance and eat cream puffs, and we would share the news". (24)

Thus, the Austen section, though the most gossipy and playful, is also suffused with longing and regret for all the pleasures, sensual, social, or simple, that her students have been denied, for all the intellectuals who have been tortured or assassinated, and for all the places and moments in her country that she loves.

When Nafisi wrote this memoir (2003), Iranian women's autobiographies were becoming phenomenally popular in the West. In the period between 2003 and 2005, about nine memoirs by Iranian and Iranian American women were published. However, they coincide with an increased U.S. intervention on Iran as justifying as humanitarian acts of liberating those living under Islamic or authoritarian regimes.

Scholars of the Oprah Winfrey "phenomenon" have shown how contemporary book clubs offers members power and privilege that transform lives through powerful affective or spiritual experiences and that offers lessons in tolerance, taste, or self knowledge. It means human right issues (particularly those affecting women) are at the center of Oprah Winfrey book club. But Theresa A. Kulbaga questions Nafisi's book club saying "Eliciting compassion through

personal narratives –whether real or fictional–can serve an individualizing function that obscures social, political, and economic licenses and constraints” (510). Thus, he claims the memoir offers the alluring image of Iranian women reading Western literary classics and, through them, discovering their own humanity.

In the above mentioned situation, the thirst in the West for these autobiographies appears unquenchable, and the prevailing interest in ethnic autobiography invokes a history of a prurient Western impulse to unveil the secrets of a feminized East. These autobiographies are often ghostwritten, raising important questions about voice and representation. Most of the books have covers with tantalizing photographs of abject veiled women who promise themselves in their tell-all narratives. Nima Naghebi in her article “Revolution, Trauma, and Nostalgia in Diasporic Iranian Women’s Autobiographies” dubs over the representation of Iranian women’s lives in Nafisi’s memoir as:

The text promises the Western Reader access to the East, a promise that invokes a long history of colonial desire to unveil the simultaneously eroticized and abject Muslim woman. This colonial history to know and therefore to own the Orient needs to be understood as part of a civilizational discourse also forms part of a narrative of universal human rights, and tell-all memoirs have to negotiate their ambivalent positioning within a genre of political engagement and right discourse, within which they can serve as “a soft weapon”. (81)

Naghebi’s thesis here is that colonial history in Orient all the time advocated for civilization and progress in the East. And it is not accident that the memoir became so popular in the West.

Nasrin Rahimieh in his article “Jasmine and Stars: Reading More than Lolita in Tehran” speculated that “the book's popularity is rooted in its representation of life in the Islamic

Republic as relentlessly oppressive, particularly as experienced by women” (535). The memoir’s production, marketing and its popularity speak to its complicity with a system of knowledge production that markets and packages the exoticized and simultaneously reviled East for the consumption of the West. So, any critical engagement with Iranian women’s memoirs thus needs to take into account their complicity as “a soft weapon.” More specifically, Nafisi’s representation of women as victims of state violence in Iran becomes a problematic thing in this memoir.

The highly uncritical and positive reception of the memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran* can be understood in terms of how the work reiterates, in modified form, the orientalist tradition. Rastegar Mitra quotes different writers in her essay “Reading Nafisi in the West: Authenticity, Orientalism, and “Liberating” Iranian women” to show how Nafisi has highlighted her study group as offering a unique opportunity to achieve freedom from oppression:

The study group is noted as being “a refuge and place of transgression” (Guppy 2003), “an air pocket in the suffocating atmosphere of the Islamic revolution” (Goodman 2003), and a place that “made [the students] sterile and frightening lives more bearable” (Rayan 2003). It is “an escape to a true republic where they are all able to discover another reality- themselves” (Allen 2003) and a place where “masterworks of literature in English...open up in inviolate private space for personal feelings in the face of state control (Stoffman 2003). (qtd. in Rastegar 122)

Rastegar thus quotes these different writers to show how reviewers understand the memoir as about the universality of great Western literature saying that Nafisi shows the power of western literature to cultivate democratic change and open-mindedness.



Although Nafisi does show that Western culture is widely admired and treasured in many Muslim countries, she gives her audience little reason to admire and treasure any aspect of Iranian culture, whether Iranian arts and literature or the meaning-making aspects of daily life in Iran. Ultimately Nafisi wants to prove that it is the West that is the source of the values of humanism, democracy, and individualism, which appear to be lacking and necessary in Iran.

Similarly, Amy Depaul fails to recognize the politics behind Nafisi's memoir and gives the reason for choosing those different western books to read her classroom. For example, Depaul gives the reason for reading F. Scott Fitzgerald *The Great Gatsby* in his article "Re-Reading Lolita in Tehran" as "Gatsby becomes a subversive book for her students precisely because it focuses unapologetically on a single individual's dashed dream at a time" (75). According to him, Nafisi "reads *Pride and Prejudice* with courtship in Iran amid diminishing women's right in mind" (75) and she reads *Lolita* with an eye toward the young women of her book discussion group, who, like Nobokov's love interest are powerless in the face of male authority.

Anne Donadey and Huma Ahmed-Ghosh keeps a very suspicious eye on Nafisi's narrative as "she like Nobokov's narrator and seducer not just of *Lolita* but also of us, exactly the way Nafisi addresses her reader" (643). In his article, "Why Americans Love Azar Nafisi's Reading *Lolita* in Tehran", Nafisi is so explicitly identified with Humbert, Nobokov's narrator in *Lolita*. Donadey is subtly warning her readers "in order to be seduced only at the level of literary value not at the ideological level, readers need to have enough information to navigate between the Iranian and U.S. contents" (643).

Nafisi as she has professionally stated in the "Author's Note" section of her memoir, claims that "the facts in [her memoir] are true in so far as any memory [can be] ever truthful" (5).

Here, she is trying to justify her authenticity about the facts she has supplied and representation she has made about the lives of Iranian women. However, Manijeh Mannani in her article “Reading beyond Jasmine and Stars: Reading More than Lolita in Tehran” easily questions about her transcultural status, “When Nafisi looks back at her life, she does so more as a Westernized Iranian, if not a Westernizer. She does so, because she is immersed in Western culture and literature as a result of her upbringing and her education, which started at an early age in the West” (323). It means she condemns the partial and exaggerated portrayal of Iran in general and of Muslim women in particular.

All the reviewers’ views can be concluded that even though Nafisi has presented her narrative as an alternative space created by the discussion of Western literature to at least her seven students but Nafisi’s representation of women as victims of state violence in Iran becomes a problematic thing in this memoir. It is because she wants to prove that American freedom and culture are better than Iranian oppression and backwardness. Moreover, she extends a more therapeutic solace that Great literature is there to make you feel better, regardless of how oppressive the political world can be. And very importantly, it leaves enough space to think about the misrepresentation of Iranian women; violation of Iranian women’s rights; and distortions of facts so as to present Iranian women who are suppressed under Islamic rule in Iran.

The research has been divided into four chapters. The first chapter elaborates the research problem, analyses the views of the critics about the narrative of Nafisi and states the hypothesis along with the point of departure taken in this work. In addition it describes the term like ‘transcultural status’, ‘authenticity’, ‘global sisterhood’ with the due focus to their in the research work. The second chapter analyses that how Muslim feminists are rethinking on gender by subverting the reactive gender conservatism under Islamic rule and thus advocate for gender

equality, women's rights and social justice. In addition, it analyses the factors that subalternize the woman, especially Muslim women, and misrepresent them with Fereshteh Ahmadi, Roksana Bahramitash, Partha Chatterjee, Gayatri Spivak, Depesh Chakrabarty, and Ranjit Guha with special reference. Third chapter analyses the narrative of Azar Nafisi's memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran* with the help of the theoretical base established in the second chapter. It shows how her popularity is linked to the ways in which she indirectly reinforces popular stereotypes of Muslims as backward and primitive and helped to create and to maintain a widespread notion that Muslim women are victims of an inherent misogyny in Islamic tradition. And it also analyzes how Nafisi in the name of giving voice to her students and advocating for Muslim women's right in Iran happens to distort the facts thus violates their right to be properly represented; while the final chapter summarizes the findings of the entire re

## **II. Critique of Human Rights in General and Women's Right in Particular**

Morton Winston defines Human rights norms "as reactions to the historical experiences of oppression—stories of atrocities, tortures, humiliations, brutalities, discriminations, exploitations, repressions, deprivations, marginalizations, cruelties, betrayals, abandonments, denials, neglects, crimes, abuses, and murders (286)". However, critics of human rights are increasingly saying that Western governments are hypocritical about their own commitment to human rights and apply human rights standards selectively and in a political manner in order to justify policies that advance their own national interests. The language of human rights discourse is being used to justify their violation. For instance that the arguments to invade Afghanistan after the World Trade terrorist and the Bush administration's *National Security Strategy (2002)*, normalize an improbable rhetorical figure that legitimizes the human rights abuses of the West under the name of bringing human rights to Muslims. Different societies formulate their

conception of human rights in diverse cultural idioms which can be different from the liberal democracies of the Western world, but they want to impose their version of human rights so as to prove orient as undemocratic and backward. In the aftermath of 11 September, military action gather support on the basis of a 'feminist' cause –defending the rights of oppressed Muslim women. Taking the same line Feminist Orientalists initially create hierarchy between Occident and Orient where Occident is presented as the center of civilization and Orient as uncivilized and backward. On the other hand, they present Orient women only as victim who needs savior or agents of social transformation. But Muslim feminists have strong contempt over such criticism of the position of Muslim women for the purpose of war propaganda that is worrisome and needs to be examined.

Human rights in the twentieth first century can not be circumscribed by the standards of any single culture, or be dictated by the aspirations of any single people. But human rights must be multiple in order to provide an effective safeguard against systematic or institutionalized oppression, for if they are not, then oppression will be sustained by other means. The contemporary canon of human rights law is a socially constructed bulwark against just such forms of historically experienced oppression. Taking the same line one of the critics of human rights, Morton Winston unravels the politics of human rights as:

The current conception of human rights norms and standards is Eurocentric in its origin and emphases, and that because of this; the currently dominant conception of human rights can not be readily exported to or imposed upon some non-Western societies. Rather than rejecting the human rights framework, critics are saying that it must be reformed in order to make it more sensitive to differences among cultural traditions, more focused on concerns that have therefore been

largely ignored by the individualistic liberal conception of human rights, and more amenable to actually being implemented within diverse cultures. (281)

Thus, Winston claim here is that universality of human rights norms and standards in the face of the diversity of human cultures is value laden thus imposing the culture of one dominant group amid the cultural diversities.

The first challenge to the contemporary idea of human rights come from within the Western, liberal intellectual community itself. Postmodernist human right scholars have questioned the traditional bases in the Western liberal tradition for believing that human rights are objective, transcultural, and transhistorical moral truths. Where as Western liberal intellectuals philosophically interpret and justify the universality of human rights.

If we go back to the historical documents about human rights discourse *Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action*, it very comfortably qualifies the universality of human rights as:

All human rights are universal, indivisible and interdependent and inter related. The international community must treat human rights globally in a fair and equal manner, on the same footing, and with the same emphasis. While the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds must be borne in mind, it is the duty of states, regardless of their political, economic and cultural systems, to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms. (Vienna Declaration, Part II, paragraph 3)

This ringing declaratory affirmation added fuel on the debate concerning the question of the authority and universality of human rights norms and standards in the face of the diversity of human culture.

Cultural relativists see the Universal Declaration on Human Rights as enumerating rights and freedoms which are culturally, ideologically, and politically non-universal. They argue that current human right norms possess a distinctively “Western” or “Judeo-Christian” bias, and hence, are an “ethno-centric” construct with limited applicability. S. Preis opposes the universalists claim by cultural relativism as:

...the most fundamental and pertinent reason for anthropologists’ restricted involvement with human rights issues can be traced directly to the theory of “cultural relativism”. This is exemplified by the AAA statement’s rejection of the notion of universal human rights, its emphasis on different peoples’ different rights concepts, and its criticism of a universal international legal framework as ethnocentrically Western”. (Ann-Belinda S. Preis 288)

Conversely, universalists assert that human rights are special entitlements of all persons. They are grounded in human nature and as such, are inalienable. “To have human rights one does not have to be anything other than a human being. Neither must one do anything other than be born a human being,” as a common phrase goes.

He further says, “These theoretical shifts [hybridity, cultural complexity] are not without significance for contemporary debates on the universality or cultural relativity of human rights...culture is implicitly or explicitly conceptualized as a static, homogeneous, and bounded entity, defined by its specific “traits”. The debate, therefore, remain caught in various outdated

approaches to “culture contact”, within which a rigid “us” and “them” dichotomy is constantly reproduced, and from which there seems to be no apparent escape. (289) so western human right discourse creates the binary between us verses them where us is presented as civilized and progressive and them as uncivilized and backward who needs the intervention of West.

Spivak brings the social theory to complain about the Euro-centricism of Human Rights. For him Human rights is not only about having or claiming a right or a set of rights; it is also about righting the wrongs, about being the dispenser of these rights. According to him, “The idea of human rights may carry within itself the agenda of a kind of social Darwinism, of course. Just as ‘the white man’s burden’ undertaking to civilize and develop, was only a kind of oppression” (132). The kind of oppression may take the form of economic, military, and political intervention.

In the twentieth century, human rights have provided a preferred language for statements about morality and immorality, claims about justice and injustice. If the idea and language of human rights first emerged in efforts to resist abuses of power and to redress social inequities, Joseph R. Slaughter in his article “Introducing Human Rights and Literary Forms; Or, The Vehicles And Vocabularies of Human Rights” dubs over its use of language as “human rights have also often provided the moral vocabulary for rationalizing abuses of state power and the exclusion of some people from the human community” (1). As a result of it, the language of human rights has become an object of struggles between human rights advocates and the spokespeople of hegemonic state governments. So, if the language of human rights discourse is always, already at risk of contamination by dominant power, then we must also guard against the possibility of further emptying out the power and language of human rights.

Human rights in present form are under threat everywhere, especially when the language of human rights is used to justify their violation. It should be remembered for instance that the arguments to invade Afghanistan after the World Trade terrorist attacks were framed from the start by a dual rhetoric of retaliatory pay back and generous humanitarianism: kill the evil men and save the innocent women and children was the brief. So, the lawyer-defender of human rights was feminized as a traitor, while the soldier-prosecutor of human rights was masculinized. The shift in the discourse of human rights is by Slaughter as “New world order is characterized by a shift from law to rights, in which humanitarian intervention like NATO’s 1999 bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in defense of Kosovo, may be illegal but legitimate” (3). Similarly, the Bush administration’s *National Security Strategy (2002)* normalize an improbable rhetorical figure that legitimizes the human rights abuses of the West under the name of bringing human rights to Muslims.

Despite the current catastrophes caused by the violation of human rights to continue Western hegemony, it has long history. Moreover, the current misuse of the language of human rights and humanitarianism to cloak Western imperialist aggression has a precedent in the rhetorical cover of civilizing mission and the abolition of the slave trade that Europe used to justify the colonization of Africa. Spivak in her article “Use and Abuse of Human Rights” discourse of colonialism in the name of educating the uncivilized as:

Colonialism was committed to the education of a certain class. It was interested in the seemingly permanent operation of an altered normality. Paradoxically, human rights and development work today cannot claim this self-empowerment that high colonialism could. Yet, it is some of the best products of high colonialism,



descendants of the colonial middle class, who become human rights advocates in the countries of the South

In the same vein, Joseph R. Slaughter has convincingly demonstrated the “bloodthirsty aggressiveness of European imperialism in Africa was bound up with the international legal codification of the humanitarian impulse in the nineteenth century” (3). This means that there is always a gap between the imagination of human rights and the state of their practice.

Critique of Human rights sees it as a Western Construct with limited applicability and finds cultural and ideological ethnocentrism in the area of human rights and human dignity. Belinda S. Preis further opines “because of the pervasiveness of the notion of the group rather than the individual in many cultures, it can be concluded that the Western conception of human rights is not only inapplicable and of limited validity but even meaningless to third world countries” (291). It means when the debate on the universalism or relativism of human rights is so radically removed from the cultural realities it hardly creates anything but its own impasse. They define culture implicitly as a homogenous, bounded unit, almost as if it were a thing. So, different societies formulate their conception of human rights in diverse cultural idioms and that in the liberal democracies of the Western world wants to impose their version of human rights so as to prove orient as undemocratic and backward.

Most of the assumptions and implications of Western human rights are simply considered as universal dismissing the idea of transcultural values. So, human right scholars must raise the issue about how assumptions and implications of human rights vary not only from one culture to another but also from one class or social group of another. These scholars should reject the western led human rights proving these rights’ ethnocentric origin in Western thought.

These critics of universal human rights discourse should “make a step towards the formalization of a cross-cultural approach to human rights” (S. Preis 294). This approach in her opinion enhance the credibility of national and international human rights standards by developing more effective approaches to promoting and implementing those rights. So, more attention should be paid to the underlying conceptualization of culture in the human rights debates. Then, cultural relativism as applied to human rights fails to grasp the nature of culture and correctly criticize the prevailing assumption that culture is a unitary and unique whole. So, discourse of universality of human right discourse tries to erase the cultural difference.

Many Western defenders of universal human rights base their justification of human rights on a form of legal positivism. Such reaffirmation of the universality of contemporary human rights standards has been mooted to some extent by the development of international law, customary law, or by convention. Legal claims are generally justified by reference to the relevant statutes or court decisions. So, legal positivists can claim the justification for human rights norms are no different in principle from the justification other kinds of legal claims where as relativist argument has been overtaken by the fact that human rights human rights have become hegemonic and therefore universal by fiat.

On the other hand, those defenders employ “top-down” approach to justify their claim of universality of human rights. Winston defines the top-down approach as:

Justifying new human rights claims involves showing how they can be linked to other rights that are already regarded as justified. This process of linking rights to one another has fueled the expansion of the human rights canon in the later half of the twentieth century as more and more claims regarding what should count as

human right came to be seen as justified showing how they could be derived from or linked to already recognized human rights. (282)

Thus, the strategy of top-down approach has been established by claiming that at least there is one thing that is unquestionably a human right, for instance, a natural right to liberty, or generic rights to freedom and well-being, and then, having established that there is at least one universal human right they argue that other rights derive from or are entailed by this fundamental right.

In opposition to the legal positivists approach to human rights, Winston sees the need of pragmatic, humanistic moral constructivist approach which believes on “bottom up” approach. The approach defines the human rights in nonabsolute and nondogmatic manner which dubs the contemporary human rights standards as inappropriate or incorrect at the same time inadequate and incomplete in various aspects and in need of revision. Winston further claims “serious patterns of human rights abuse have taken place since the Universal Declaration was proclaimed, and all of the rights in it have been violated grievously, repeatedly and with impunity while the international community has stood passively on the sidelines and watched. (285). Hence it can be concluded that provisions of human rights have been constructed by the nations which are hegemonic with their dominant power and they want to intervene over the powerless countries in the name of improving human rights condition.

Human rights norms are thought to be universal and given philosophical justification. But a pragmatic, as opposed to philosophical explanation, justification for human rights always wants to respect for the diversity of religious, cultural, and political opinion. They also want to know why Westerners feel that they have the right to impose “their values” on other people in the name of human rights. Thus, human rights have multiple anchors as well as multiple

interdependencies, and this is why they can stand on their own without the need for a philosophical foundation. On the other hand in the post 9/11 context, west is intervening in East especially in Muslim countries showing the female cause.

### **Feminist Orientalism and Women's Right**

Borrowing from Edward Said's Orientalism, Parvin Paider has given a sophisticated understanding of feminist orientalism. In her study of the role of Iranian women in public spaces, "Women and the Political Process in Twentieth Century Iran", she analyzes three characteristic of feminist Orientalism:

First, it assumes a binary opposition between the west and the Orient: the Occident is progressive and the best place for women, while the Muslim Orient is backward, uncivilized, and the worst place for women. The Second characteristic of feminist orientalism is that it regards Oriental women only as victims and not as agents of social transformation; thus it is blind to the ways in which women in the East resist and empower themselves. Therefore, Muslim women need saviors, i.e., their Western sisters, who always being covered, are seen as unable to become agents of their own liberation. Even President Bush, not a man known for advocacy feminist causes, has spoken about the need to save Afgan women. The third aspect of feminist Orientalism assumes that all societies in the Orient are the same and all Muslim women there live under the same conditions. (37)

All the above lines characterize the Orientalist feminist and their definition of Eastern societies. In doing so, they initially create hierarchy between Occident and Orient where Occident is presented as the center of civilization and Orient as uncivilized and backward. On the other hand, they present Orient women only as victim who needs savior or agents of social transformation.

Discursive regime of “global sisterhood” posits a sense of solidarity between women based on assumptions about shared gender, without posing questions about race, class, imperialism, and power. However, much of Western feminist scholarship “predicated upon assumptions about Western women as secular, liberated and having control over their own lives” (Burwell, Davis and Taylor 67), discursively produces the “Third World woman as a singular, monolithic subject, without agency and in need of rescue” (67). Many literature especially memoirs published in between 2003 and 2005 by Iranian or Iranian American women “coincides with the an increased U.S. focus on Iran as part of the military actions-dubbed “axis of evil”-in Muslim countries, which have been justified by some as humanitarian acts of liberating those living under Islamic or authoritarian regimes” (Rastegar 108). Where as “since the 11 September 2001, events and US initiation of its war on terror, a main focus is in the debate over Islam concerns the situation of women in Islam countries” (Bahramitash 221). It means, in the aftermath of 11 September, military action gather support on the basis of a ‘feminist’ cause – defending the rights of oppressed Muslim women. But Muslim feminists have strong contempt over such criticism of the position of Muslim women for the purpose of war propaganda that is worrisome and needs to be examined.

Muslim women are increasingly calling for equality and participating in the politics of the Muslim world. Everywhere in Muslim countries, Muslim and secular feminists, as well as those in political power, look for Islamic solutions for a very modern problem that is the result of the changed status of women. Many have gone even further in their demands for recognition as full citizens. What is interesting in this regard is not only the courage of thousands of women who put their careers, their families, and their lives in danger fighting for their human rights but

also that this struggle, seemingly, has led to the development of a new discourse on feminism and Islam.

Secular women in and outside the country have fought to obtain Iranian women's social and political rights as well as to draw the world's attention to women's situation in Iran. As Fereshteh Ahmadi in her article "Islamic Feminism in Iran: Feminism in a New Islamic Context" opines "their struggle has enormously contributed to the contest against the clergy's everyday attempts to marginalize women from social life, impose the veil as a barrier separating women physically from men, and deprive women of their rights as citizens, mothers, and wives" (34). The secular women's struggle was important, adequate and widespread enough to change the strong religious structure of social and political life of today's Iran.

Muslim women in Iran have tried to reconstruct gender and Islamic discourses. In many cases, they have challenged the clergy's monolithic power, starting a new trend in Islamic feminism in Iran that differs from other traditional Muslim women's endeavors to reinterpret traditional Islamic theological and legal sources. Traditional interpretation of these sources always took the side of man and helped to suppress the women's rights in those societies.

History of Islamic Feminism shortly goes back to the 1980s, when Iran-Iraq war led to heightened gender consciousness. The large number of men participating and dying in the war left many women widowed-as single mothers and as older women bereft of adult sons to take care of them. This resulted in more women being allowed to work and also to fight for rights to economic subsistence, such as inheritance rights to their husbands' properties. Two Iranian writers Anne Donadey and Huma Ahmed-Gosh in their article "Why Americans Love Azar Nafisi's Reading Lolita in Tehran" talked about the emergence of Muslim Feminism as, "Islamic women, especially war widows, began to demand rights within the framework of Islam. It

became highly visible in both post-revolutionary Iran and globally, with the emergence of fundamentalist states, and has been strengthened after September 11, 2001” (627). It is because West was struggling to reconstruct gendered Islamic discourse of Islamophobia, which began with the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in political power after the 1979 Revolution in Iran and reached its climax after September 11, 2001 (9/11).

Donadey and Gosh further traces the history of Muslim Feminism saying, by the 1990s the challenge to oppressive family laws in the Islamic constitution was organized by both Islamic and secular feminists. Despite the fundamental differences in their worldviews, these two groups were able to come together to fight for women’s rights based on specific issues. Iran offers a good example of how women’s groups, students, secularists, and even Islamic leaders can resist the current theocracy by challenging the repressive system. According to Homa Hoodfar, activists have used in media and various venues to protest executive and legislative decisions. Some of these protests have been heard, and certain laws have been changed. Women elected to the Majlis(Assembly), such as Azam Teleqani, Maryam Behruzi, and Zahra Rahnavard, have sought over the years to pass laws more favorable to women.

However, while Hoodfar points to changes in the family law and the restatement of women lawyers as positive steps emerging from such protests, in practice the new laws’ implementation and adaptation by the general public are almost non-existent. Donadey and Gosh further opined as:

Such protests and changes do reveal the open spaces where women in Iran can influence the clergy system by basing their demands on the Quran. This has led to outcomes as varied as the creation of the Bureau of Women’s Affairs, women’s active participation in elections, the 1996 landslide election of Islamic feminist

Faezeh Hashemi Rafsanjani (the ex-president's daughter) to the Majlis, and a greater number of women in military. (628)

Muslim Feminism never sought to believe on women's rights within a universalized human rights discourse which emphasizes on equality with their male counterparts rather reforms, they believe, within the national framework may well be the appropriate strategy. This is a process and not the solution, and Iranian woman's groups have successfully kept "the woman question" alive through their demands for better laws and rights.

All the above evidences show that a feminist approach to gender in Islamic law and sacred texts is possible. Ziba Mir-Hosseini has mentioned, "the doors opened for new interpretations of the Qur'an and other sacred texts on a scale that is unique in the history of Islamic law"(55). Twenty-five years after the Islamic Revolution in Iran, we are now witnessing the flourishing of feminist rereading of the sacred texts, a shift some scholars declare to be so radical that it has no counterpart in the rest of the Muslim world.

Iranian feminism represents a new direction in rethinking gender in Islam in more radical ways, such as through reinterpretation. As John Esposito points out:

The early years of Islamic women's activism [in Iran] generated the drive to rethink gender in Islam in new and sometimes radical ways. Iran offers a good case study of reinterpretation (ijtihad) not simply of traditional Islamic theological and legal sources, but rather an effort that went directly to interpreting sacred texts. (34-35)

Thus in Iran, male reformists first argued for reinterpretation of the Qur'an and other sacred texts regarding gender issues, but now women are claiming their right to interpret Islamic sources and to leave behind or go beyond classical formulations to develop new paradigms and reformulate



Islamic concepts and law from a "feminist" perspective. The result is lively debate over competing visions of male-female relations, and the status and roles of women in Islam and Muslim societies, yielding new understanding of spiritual, professional, and social equality.

Some Iranian Islamist feminists agree that there are verses in the Qur'an that are inappropriate to employ in the modern era. Abdol Karim Soroush who is without any doubt one of the most influential figures among Islamic feminists, radically discusses on what is essential in Islam and what is accidental has had great impact on some Muslim women. Soroush's main thesis has been that there are essentials (*zati*) in Islam that cannot be changed. Essentials of Islam are elements without which Islam is not Islam. There are yet others, which he calls "accidentals" (*arazi*), that are the results of the special time and place when Mohammed, the prophet of Islam, was born and socialized.

According to Soroush, "it was an accidental of history that the prophet was born in Arabia and therefore the language of Islam is Arabic, something that according to Soroush significantly shaped the conceptual framework of the Qur'an" (39-40). Soroush advocated the doctrine of the "expansion of Prophetic experience," stressing that the prophet is a human being and his experience is human, so are his disciples. His point is that since Mohammed was Arabian, his way of thinking, and especially his usage of words and statements in passing the words of God to people, was confined to Arabic culture and language. So, if Mohammed had been born, for instance, in Greece or Iran, his way of thinking and language would not be influenced by Arabic culture but Greek or Persian culture. Accordingly, if Mohammed was not born in Arabia, Qur'anic rules on social issues might be different and the Qur'an would hence be a different book, at least when it concerns the parts that are not essentials but accidentals. In this light, Soroush considers the existing text of the Qur'an as the product of a certain time.

The immediate result of Soroush's arguments on "accidentals of history" and "expansion of Prophetic experience" is that Soroush classifies many laws considered fundamental in Islam as accidental instead. Examples of such are the law allowing Muslim men to marry four women and laws that give automatic rights of divorce and custody of children to men. In a June 1996 interview published in *The Guardian*, Soroush, referring to the concept of interpretive reasoning in Islam, stressed that rules on women's issues "are accidentals, which can be subjects of discussion [*ijtihad*]."

Women who try to defend their rights in Muslim contexts often are accused of importing a foreign ideology whenever they ask for social justice. So, many Islamic feminists first try to demonstrate that they are truly and genuinely rooted in their culture, expending considerable energy to distinguish themselves from "Western feminists," as, for instance, "Third World feminists." This is understandable if we take into consideration nationalist and anti-colonialist struggles in the history of the Arab world. To the contrary, in the words of Fereshteh Ahmadi:

Iranian Islamic feminism has openly, for instance in *Zanan*, [the women's magazine with an Islamic feminist perspective] claimed its affiliation with Western feminism. *Zanan* translates articles from Western feminist journals and presents readers with divergent theories from different feminist schools, for example, works of such Western feminist scholars as Simone de Beauvoir, Nadine Gordimer, Mary Wollstonecraft, Nancy Friday, Deborah Tannen, Virginia Woolf, and Susan Faludi. (44)

By focusing on the similarities of the women's movement in the religious settings of different countries, journals such as *Zanan* have helped overcome long-term hatred toward Western feminism in Muslim countries. Breaking with reactionary gender conservatism and West phobia,

these journals have embarked on connecting themselves with Western feminism and weaving new connections between Muslim women and Western feminism.

Historically speaking Islamic world was structured with the categories of the West and the East; modernism and Islam; and feminism and cultural authenticity as necessarily exclusive, forcing Muslim women to choose between claims to a cultural self and a feminist self. However, as well-known scholar of gender and Islam Margot Badran has noted that "the new trend emerging among Islamic feminists in Iran is a radical break from this pattern. Iranian Islamic feminists now use theories and methodologies of both Islamic and secular schools. Islamic feminist discourse in Iran draws upon secular discourses and methodologies to strengthen and extend its claims" (22). Iranian Islamic feminists have opened up the domain of interpretation to nonbelievers and non-Muslims, insisted on equality of women and men in all domains, and disconnected "natural/ created differences" between women and men from cultural and social constructions of womanhood and manhood.

In doing this, as Afsaneh Najmabadi points out, "the Islamic feminist journals in Iran have opened up a new space for dialogue between Islamic women activists and reformers and secular feminism, which begins to reverse a sixty-year-old rift during which they treated each other with mutual antagonism and constructed the two categories as mutually exclusive" (72). By publishing articles written by secular feminists, *Zanan* has made possible dialogue among religious and secular voices on women's issues. The aim is to build a united front against the oppression of women in Iran.

Emergence of different feminist journals (secular as well as Islamic) like *Zanan*, *Payame Zan* (Woman's messenger) has opened possibilities for Islamic feminists to dialogue with clerics concerning Islamic jurisprudence and interpretation of Qur'anic verses pertaining to women's

issues. Challenges of the increasingly globalized modern realities have not only caused problems for Shi'i clerics. These challenges, together with the many changes Iranian society has undergone in the past three decades, have forced many secular and religious Iranian women to rethink and redefine the relationship between Islam and feminism. Tohidi mentions that this has opened “a new phase in the politics of gender and the politics of feminist theorization in Muslim societies” (74).

Besides reformulating Islamic concepts and law from a feminist perspective, and opening the doors of interpretation of sacred texts and debates on women's issues to groups other than Muslims, another footprint that signifies the rethinking of gender in Islam among Islamic feminists in Iran is their inclination to adopt postmodern ideas in their discussions of women's issues. Although in the world of politics it is supposed that Islamist movements signify a trend that ushers in a return to the mediaeval Islamic period, according to scholars, Islamist movements are a modern phenomenon.

Iranian Islamic feminists employ in their analyses some of postmodernism's conceptual tools. Talking on the same direction Fereshteh Ahmadi further elaborates:

They appreciate the spirit of tolerance, optimism, and the drive for self-knowledge in postmodernism and stress a postmodern feminist principle of diversity. Multiple truths, multiple roles, and multiple realities are part of postmodern feminists' focus. Iranian Islamic feminists favor postmodernists' rejection of an essential nature of women. That postmodern feminism offers a useful philosophy for diversity in feminism because of its acceptance of multiple truths and rejection of essentialism is just what Islamic feminism needs for legitimizing itself in the feminist discourse. (44)

This has opened up the discussion that male theologians' gender-biased interpretation of God results in a masculinized representation of God, which has made the institutionalized oppression of women seem right and natural.

Besides the postmodern acceptance of diversity, Iranian Islamic feminists also adhere to a postmodernist view of language as functioning as a mechanism of institutional control. Feminists have long indicted the language of traditional monotheistic religions as being gender biased in favor of men. Islamic feminists in Iran have employed postmodern feminist critiques, especially their emphasis on language as being implicitly value laden which is facilitating to the oppression of women.

Iranian Islamic feminists have tried to hinder the clergy's efforts to prevent women from active participation in political life by reinterpreting the sacred texts in the context of a specific language (Arabic). By emphasizing women's rights as citizens to interpret Qur'anic sources freely, Islamic feminists support and encourage women's participation in politics. In doing this, they use different arguments presented in both religious and secular sources. There is no doubt that Islamic feminists base their ideas and claims primarily on Islam and legitimize their activities with the help of the Islamic tradition. Yet, Islamic thought is not the only basis of Iranian Islamic feminists' ideas and demands. So, what we are witnessing in Iran is not an Islamic feminism that only works from within the frame of Islam to reinterpret sacred texts and bring them in line with Muslim women's new demands in our time, but it is, as some studies show, a movement that attempts to constitute a new discourse of women, albeit on religious grounds, by working from both inside and outside the Islamic legal and theological discourses.

The argument which tries to justify the resistance of Islamic societies to changing women's familial status is a cultural reaction to colonialism. The over emphasis on the role of

colonialism is as inconclusive and debatable as the totalizing and universalizing approach which looks only to Quranic injunctions and Shari'a laws to explain the surveillance of women in Islamic societies, disregarding the basic fact that Islam, like other religion or ideology, has a contingent nature and is the product of its articulation with indigenous cultures and societies.

To sum up, most of the assumptions and implications of Western human rights are simply considered as universal dismissing the idea of transcultural values. It can be concluded that provisions of human rights have been constructed by the nations which are hegemonic with their dominant power and they want to intervene over the powerless countries in the name of improving human rights condition. Rather than rejecting the human rights framework, critics are saying that it must be reformed in order to make it more sensitive to differences among cultural traditions, more focused on concerns that have therefore been largely ignored by the individualistic liberal conception of human rights. Furthermore, taking the definition of Pravin Paider about feminist orientalism, it proves Nafisi as feminist orientalist. And Muslim feminism tries to do justice by raising the issue of the Muslim women in Islamic societies.

### **III. Transcultural Status of Nafisi, and Question of Representation and Women's Right**

Azar Nafisi- a Western educated elite woman-whose trans-cultural positionality poses a challenge over her representation of Iranian women as victims of an inherent misogynism in Islamic tradition. She cannot be said to speak as the average Iranian woman in her memoir, she is invested in describing the lives of various women under the Islamic Republic through their stories. Rastegar on the same line argues "Authenticity emerges here as a paradox, as it is Nafisi's transcultural status that both puts into question her authenticity and makes her able to tell the authentic-sounding story" (124). Her status is pretended to have access to the

authenticating realm of Iranian women's lives. For example, "[T]he chador [in Nafisi's memoir] functions symbolically to illustrate the oppressive and traumatic intrusion of the Islamic Republic into the women's intimate lives and onto their bodies" (Kulbaga 516), can't be taken as the stereotypical western equation between the veil and universal symbol of women's oppression since it is not problematic in all contexts. That is why, Spivak in her book *Can Subaltern Speak* argues that "It is necessary to distinguish between speaking of and speaking for when considering representations of the oppressed Other. When the two are not disentangled, a representation, or portrayal, can become an act of speaking for others in the political sense, of presuming to present their desires and interests" (15). Indeed, like *Lolita*, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is overdetermined by a concern with women's sexuality. It is no accident that the narrator's girls share Lolita's "utter helplessness" (43) as Nafisi writes, "this child, had she lived in the Islamic Republic, would have been long ripe for marriage to men older than Humbert" (43). Such misrepresentation leads to question over her claim of advocating women human rights by giving voice to them through teaching Western literature.

Nafisi through out her narrative never distinguishes between women who wore the veil voluntarily and those who were forced to veil. Moreover, women's liberation, Nafisi thinks, is connected to their ability to unveil and wear bright clothing. So, when her students are unveiled, a glimmer of hope is attached to the way bright clothing emerges in a private room. On the other hand, the *veil or hijab* could be seen as one of the key topics (along with family laws) in the discourse on Muslim women's gender consciousness. Donadey and Ahmed Ghosh mentions "women may choose to wear the veil for a variety of reasons, in which case that choice may or may not have anything to do with oppression" (634).

The cover illustration – of two women wearing head scarves, heads lowered together, gazing at object hidden from view- adds to the slick and predictable marketing package by catering to a western audience’s expectation of women’s suppression in Islam. Nafisi’s beginning of her memoir portrays her as an orientalist feminist which opens with a powerful image of the head scarf as a symbol of women’s oppression:

I have [. . .] two photographs in front of me now. In the first there are seven women [. . .]. They are, according to the law of land, dressed in black robes and head scarves, covered except for the oval of their faces and their hands. In the second photograph [. . .] they have taken off their coverings... Each has become distinct through the color and style of her clothes, the color and the length of her hair; not even the two who are still wearing their head scarves look the same [. . .]. 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 4-6)

These lines very clearly show that Nafisi establishes a clear binary opposition between the enforced robe and head scarf as homogenizing symbols of women’s oppression and the glorious individuality symbolized by diverse clothing and hairstyles. There is a sense that the head scarf prevents women from expressing themselves as individuals, and the phrase ‘not even’ indicates some surprise on Nafisi’s part that the two women who have chosen to keep their head scarves also retain some individuality.

Nafisi’s role as a guide to her western audience is highlighted in her manner of introducing her study group students through a ritual of “unveiling”. In the first chapter, Nafisi describes these women through two photographs: “in the first, the women are wearing the



government-mandated *hijab*, and in the second most have taken off these scarves and overcoats. It is only in the second photograph, Nafisi writes that “each has become distinct” (4). It means these women are described with their individuality only when they are unveiled meeting the expectations of Western audience because activities like these are the real parameters of western led modernization.

Moreover, in the memoir, Nafisi says, “they took off more than their scarves and robes gradually, each one gained an outline and a shape, becoming her own inimitable self” (6). Here, unveiling is described as a process whereby the women “emerge as individuals” (6), revealing vivid personalities and shedding their inhibitions, speaking openly. The veil is read as robbing women of their individuality and humanity; it becomes associated with uniformity and lack of enlightenment. Only when the women are unveiled they are seen as able to express their true and unique selves, becoming knowable to both themselves and to a Western audience.

Two writers Anne Donadey and Huma Ahmed-Ghosh jointly comment about the symbol of veil in Nafisi’s description as “this is a response to a situation in which women’s coverings were imposed on them, which was very traumatic for most for most women in Iran (633). Yet it takes on somewhat different meaning in western context, in which the veil has long served as an emblem of women’s oppression in under Islam.

Donadey and Ghosh further contradicts with the perception of veil as “the veil in itself is not viewed by all Muslim or secular feminists as a primary impediment to women’s struggle for rights and, in fact, has been perceived as a facilitator of education and mobility for women in the poorer and rural regions of Iran” (633). Hijab could be taken as one of the topics in the discourse on Muslim women’s gender consciousness. Muslim feminists have been trying to undo the western assumption that wearing the veil automatically equals women’s oppression.

Reviewing *Reading Lolita*, Peter Kramer reiterates the stereotypical western equation between the veil and women's oppression: "A glimmer of hope attaches to the way bright clothing emerges in a private room, once the prescribed robes and scarves are removed. The regime maintains its hegemony first through the repression of women" (2052). If women's liberation is connected to their ability to wear bright clothing, capitalist consumerism wouldn't have been a disturbing component of feminism and the notion that dominant consumerist ideology that often targets women would have been false.

On the other hand, women may choose to wear the veil for a variety of reasons, in which case that choice may or may not have anything at all to do with oppression. Even those who voluntarily wear the *hijab* are said to regard mandatory veiling as degrading to their beliefs. One might wonder if these students had other, greater concerns that are never raised and whether they give as much weight to veiling as Nafisi does. So, many meanings can be attached to wearing the robe and head scarf. The unveiling of women mandated by Reza Shah in 1936 had been a controversial symbol of modernization in the sense that the true issue of women's rights weren't addressed at all and the lower and lower middle class women were neglected by the rapid modernization project of the Pahlvi monarchy and felt alienated from it. On the other hand, re-veiling of women mandated by the Islamic regime became a symbol of a return to Islam. In both cases-enforced nature of the unveiling and re-veiling- have their different meanings in different contexts thus a single meaning of women's suppression turns invalid.

Moreover, scholars argue that Iranian women experienced the revolution differently depending on their social class as well. For example, while the imposition of *hijab* restricted upper middle class women- clearly the experience of Nafisi- and to the majority of Iranian rural and urban women of low income, *hijab* provided them the opportunity to enter the very public

space from which they had been excluded before the Revolution because they had worn chador (hijab).

In seeking to account women's oppressive conditions, Nafisi focuses primarily on restrictions on dress, makeup, and accessories, without wondering whether all Iranian women find these equally oppressive or important. She also discusses the regulation of women's behavior in public, state violence against women. Nafisi through out her narrative never distinguishes between women who wore the veil voluntarily and those who were forced to veil. She in a very biased way presents the pathetic condition of Iranian women which is very unreal.

That Islamist restrictions boosted some women's independence is not a scenario explored in *Reading Lolita*. According to critics, Nafisi instead depicts Iranian women as helpless and requiring rescue from outside forces. Nafisi in a sense oversimplified women's responses to Islamic dress regulations or in some way paid scant attention to the concerns of religious women. There were women including her grand mother and some of the more religious students in her book club who wore the veil voluntarily before it was state mandated. For example, Razieh who was deeply religious active member of the Mujahideen and her religious belief that attracted her to the Mujahideen, and she felt contempt for the Islamists who had usurped power. This is how Nafisi through out her narrative never distinguishes between women who wore the veil voluntarily and those who were forced to veil. She in a very biased way presents the pathetic condition of Iranian women which is very unreal. So, What happens when a woman is presented with a third person narrative perspective? Visweswaram sees the loss of agency in the representation made in such narrative.

Spivak's critique of those who claim to represent subaltern women is relevant here. For example, while Nafisi writes extensively about herself and her eight students, who like her are of

middle-class background, she writes only a few lines about her nanny. The Nanny, her immediate subordinate and presumably the person entrusted with the important job of helping to raise her children, is mentioned only briefly, when the revolutionaries use Nafisi's house to capture an armed drug dealer. Nafisi uses the Nanny to deal with the revolutionaries because she knew their language better. This is only the time we hear the voice of the Nanny is a good example of Spivak's argument about the way Third World women are represented. Nafisi clearly demonstrates how the claim of Third World women academics to represent all women of their countries is highly biased toward their own positions as member of the elite. If she had included her nanny in her narrative, i.e., treated her as a woman whose views were valid and worthy of representation, the reader would have received a more nuanced picture of Iranian woman's experience, one that may be parallel or in contrast to that of Nafisi and her immediate circle of privileged women.

Nafisi's exclusion of subaltern women is not limited to ignoring her nanny. She taught briefly at Al-Zahara, Iran's only all-women university, but an institution whose students come from the most underprivileged strata of society. Even though Al-Zahra's many graduate degree-granting programs include an engineering school that is considered one of the best in the whole country, Nafisi found her experience teaching the 'girls' at this 'college' could not understand the heroines in nineteenth century British literature like the 'women' at the 'university' (of Tehran) because they never knew any family members who had been raised abroad and/or were bilingual in English and Persian. Nafisi admits to having no 'patience' for these girls whom she boasts of leaving in 'darkness', promising herself never go back to 'that college.' Unable or unwilling to hear their voice, she misses completely the significance of 'these girls' actually being the first women in their families to go to university, and in most cases even to high school. Thus, they did

not look upon an English course as a chance to discuss the lives of nineteenth-century British women but as an opportunity to acquire the linguistic skills necessary to achieve their dreams of a university degree and professional job.

In dismissing the voices of these 'girls,' as well as that of her maid, Nafisi shows her own impatience to waste time learning anything about the lives of the less privileged. Her class position overshadows her ability to learn about, let alone give voice to, subaltern women, who comprise the majority of Iranian women. Instead, she represents a monolithic image of Iranian woman, one that is in line with that of her own views. This exclusion on the basis of class position is not unique to Nafisi. As Iranian feminist scholars such as Homa Hoodfar, Azadeh Kian, and Maryam Poya have demonstrated, the experience of Iranian women is tied closely to their class position.

Spivak's path breaking work is relevant here because the representation of subaltern women as homogeneous group is highly problematic and often ends up with seven women, Nafisi writes, represent a homogeneous category of Iranian women who are victims of misogynist state policies. And their experiences coming from different socio-economic cultural background is also homogenized.

There is considerable evidence that one may cite to argue that Nafisi's experience hardly explains the experience of all Iranian women. For example, during the three years that university was closed (1980-83) and Nafisi was wondering in sorrow, many middle-class urban women, including many feminists, found an opportunity to join programs that empowered women, such as the mass-based literacy program. Nafisi is clearly unable to see that millions of Iranian women remained active and pressed for changes; no one could make them irrelevant or victims, such as Nafisi feels she had become. In Margaret's interpretation of Gramsci:

Women may appear as passive victims, unable to muster any opposition to the forces allied against them; or consenting partners, acquiescent and apparently satisfied with their deferent role; or even as active participants, supporting and sustaining their own inequality; yet women also, when the times are ripe seize the opportunity to participate in an ongoing series of negotiations, manipulations, and strategies directed toward gaining control and opportunity. Whenever changing circumstances open a political space for the possible negotiation of existing relations, this contradictory process of hegemonic politics is at work. (95)

One needs to read Nafisi's description of Iran with a great deal of skepticism. There are numerous hints throughout the book of her lack of understanding of or empathy for the overwhelming majority of her fellow citizens. For example, she says of Tehran: "When I walked down the streets, I asked myself, Are these my people, is this my hometown, who I am?"(74). Perhaps having spent so much of her childhood outside Iran, she genuinely feels that she does not belong in Iran. Even an Iranian man- one of the few for whom admits having respect- says that Nafisi 'is very American version in Wonderland' (175). And she acknowledges as much about herself: "I miss speaking English preferably with a New York accent, someone who was intelligent and appreciated Gatsby and Hagen-Dazs and knew about Mike Gold's Lower East Side" (107). Clues such as these can forewarn the reader that the author is looking at Iran from an outsider's point of view. In fact, she eyes herself as an outsider, as she reveals in her description of attending a concert in Tehran: "I pretended to be an outside observer who had come not to have fun but to report on a night out in the Islamic Republic of Iran" (180). Perhaps in her words we can begin to understand why Nafisi is successful: "So many people have made

their name through their opposition to the regime” (181). It happens to cater the taste of the people who wants to export progress and democracy from their country to Iran.

Suspecting over the Nafisi’s representation, Mitra Rastegar in her article “Reading Nafisi in the West: Authenticity, Orientalism, and “Liberating” Iranian Women” writes “while Nafisi does ascribe certain perspective to many of the women she describes, she never erases herself or her authoritative voice from the depictions, putting into question a reading of her as speaking for anyone but herself” (112) and “This speaking of, however, never quite becomes speaking for, as Nafisi’s own voice is always overwhelmingly present in the memoir” (123). It means her position as a transcultural guide is very clear about seeking to portray the lives of Iranian women.

Nafisi characterizes the study group as an attempt “to prevent ourselves from falling victim to the crime of having women’s stories taken from them” (41). This is also her attempt to emphasize the importance of telling their own story, not letting others to tell it. To work in this direction she portrays many aspects of her students’ lives, preserving and articulating many of their stories. But quite surprisingly, she even imagines her students in other aspects of their lives. According to Rastegar, “Nafisi never claims to be holding strictly to the facts, but her fictions are intended to reveal truths” (113). This is how, she is playing tricks on women’s right by under-representing them. Or, she deprives the Iranian women from being represented as what they are in reality by imagining their lives in Islamic rule.

For example, Nafisi imagines one student, Sanaz, leaving her home and walking outside: “She doesn’t walk upright, but bends her head toward the ground and doesn’t look at passerby. She walks quickly and with a sense of determination” (26). In focusing on the bodily experience of walking down the street and ascribing certain “probable” responses to that experience, Nafisi

constructs an apparent common denominator for all Iranian women. Her presumption of the universality of the experience of being a woman in a woman's body erases the difference between her own experience and Sanaz's, and allows for the extension of her perspective onto Iranian women as a whole.

Commenting on the authenticity of giving voice for subaltern people Rastegar further questions "Nafisi's persistent presence in these accounts, as the one who reveals, guides, and ascribes, gives the feeling that Nafisi herself is speaking through the women around her, undercutting the authenticity of these accounts" (114). Nafisi also seems to lend authenticity to her account of her students by confidently claiming to have access to their personal feelings and desires. She says of her living room that it had a "fairy-tale atmosphere" in which she and the other women were "free to discuss our pains and joys, our personal hangs ups and weaknesses" (57), and she repeatedly states that her students share their secrets with her. However, in her memoir there are numerous clues to question to the authenticity of her account. Restager keeps her suspicious eye on Nafisi's authenticity as "In her memoir there is also acknowledgement of Nafisi's distinction and distance from her students and there are gaps that highlight the limit of these representations" (114). But Nafisi very confidently stresses that they share their personal and social experiences which can't be believed easily.

Nafisi is "Dr Nafisi" in contrast to her students, whom she calls "my girls" (although many of them are in their thirties, some are married, and some are parents). Also, disagreements between her religiously observant students and her most flamboyant students are marked more by meaningful silences and disapproving glances than by full airing of differences. But Nafisi refers to herself as her student's confidante, these silences point to what cannot be known about the students through Nafisi as narrator. So, we can't be fully assured to believe whether Nafisi's



students felt free to disagree with her or to what degree the full range of these students' views and experiences are being represented. It means she erases many of the repressive and corruptive aspects of the secular Pahlavi government and politicized religion becomes constructed as the source of all the current government's repressive policies.

It was evident that the government assertion of control also extends to some aspects of men's lives like they were also arrested and punished for violating certain types of laws and executions and imprisonments carried out against both men and women. But "power struggles within the memoir are generally portrayed as men's acting in opposition to women" (117). In other words, executions, imprisonment, and cultural prohibitions that are experienced by both men and women are referenced much less than are policies, such as mandatory veiling, that apply only to women. She also in a very cunning way constructs Iran as a static place where the state successfully and consistently asserts total control over women's lives. This is how, she is creating the pretext for teaching the value of democracy and women's right which is made possible by teaching of western literature. But Nafisi is violating these values by misrepresenting them.

But the very claim made by Nafisi about the miserable life of women in Iran caused by the Islamic Republic is quite disputable. Several questions can be raised regarding such misrepresentation of women like whether Nafisi's depictions of life before and after the revolution are accurate or complete; whether Nafisi's depictions exploit Iranian women's hardship in order to justify external military intervention.

Such a characterization of pre-revolutionary women's lives is questioned by NESTA Ramazani in her book review of *Reading Lolita*:

[Nafisi] tends to overstate the pre-revolutionary status of women...In fact, family law under the rule of the Shah remained governed by Shari'a (Islamic law), with only slight modification brought about by the Family Protection Act. Laws governing divorce, alimony, child custody, payment of "blood money" testimony in a court of law, and other issues were all governed by Shari's then as they are now, although under the Islamic Republic they have been admittedly carried out in more draconian. (280)

She explains more pathetic situation than the reality where she uses her personal knowledge about the lives of Iranian women. While doing this, Islamic laws are shown as main culprit to bring the exploitation of Iranian women. Moreover, Ramazani adds that the women who benefited from the Shah's reforms were small in number, while revolutionary reforms have benefited Iranian women on a large scale, citing Iran's majority-female university population, successful family planning programs and upper-echelon political appointments.

Another critic Bahramitash Roksana argues a similar point, citing Iran's reduction of infant mortality and female illiteracy alongside higher life expectancy for women. She cites Nafisi's failure to acknowledge Iranian women's progress since the revolution as well as their emergence as a political force for democratic reform inside Iran, led in part by human rights activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi as:

Infant mortality dropped from 131.20 in 1975 to 25.50 in 1999; life expectancy at birth increased from 49 for men and women in 1960 to 70 for men and 72 for women by 1999; and the illiteracy rate for young women declined considerably, from over 55 percent in 1970 to 8.70 percent by 1999. More recent data indicate

that Iran has lowered its infant mortality by 50 percent. A more remarkable change is the drop in the fertility rate from 7.24 in 1960 to 2.66 in 1999. (233)

Additionally, Bahramitash and others make the point that however uncomfortable some Iranian women felt about the revolutionary dress code, many devout women welcomed it and, inadvertently, were liberated by it. In *Lipstick Jihad*, Azadeh Moaveni describes a young Iranian woman, Fetimeh, who worked as a journalist clad in a black chador. Coming from a traditional, pious family, Moaveni writes, “Fatimeh never would have been allowed out of the house, much less in a profession before 1979. The revolution rolled back the legal rights of Iranian women, but it transformed the lives and horizons of women like Fetimeh...The revolution...made it possible for young women like Fetimeh to venture out of the home sphere” (181). Once outside the home, Moaveni notes, Fetimeh and others like her grew more empowered, in some cases challenging restrictions that are designed to protect them.

On the other hand, Nafisi’s male university students are outspoken defenders of a simplistic prerevolutionary position. They have “discovered an absolutist refuge called Islam (103); they are irrational and unreasoned, given to “strident objections” (194) and “childish outbursts” (240) and they obstinately oppose Western cultural products as immoral and part of Western assault on Islam (126). These prerevolutionary religious men are hardly described in her narrative and they are not said to be enlightened through Western literature.

In contrast, they were two non-political female students who most vocally defend their reading of Western literature and are said to represent the silent majority of the class. Since such silences are never investigated but are used to facilitate her project of projecting western cultural teaching. And views of female students who actively supported the revolution are never

described. Moreover, a “radical” female student who initially appears unsupportive of Nafisi later informs her how much she enjoyed *The Great Gatsby*.

Furthermore, gender divide in Iran under Islamic rule is established in the memoir with the abundance of stories of women being reprimanded or arrested for their dress, acting “inappropriately” in public, socializing with people of the opposite sex, or being involved in political activities. Nafisi expresses her contempt as “living in the Islamic Republic is like having sex with a man you loathe ... you make your mind blank - you pretend to be somewhere else, you tend to forget your body, you hate your body” (329). Here, she presents the extreme condition of a woman’s life under Islamic rule in Iran. In other words, this powerful image of Iranian woman as wholly victimized and dominated by the state, without possibility of resistance (except by making “your mind blank”). This is how women in her narrative are presented as passive victims, who could not raise voice demanding their rights.

Azar Nafisi’s book *Reading Lolita in Tehran* has earned considerable academic and media attention because she is perceived as ‘feminist’ who was involved in a Muslim project of educating seven female students from different social background. Taking the same line Kulbaga argues “Reading Lolita seeks to clarify the larger challenges of human rights, Islamic fundamentalism, and especially the status of women in a theocracy by connecting these critical issues to important literary themes” (509). Nafisi encourages readers to approach the memoir as a way to learn about women’s rights in Iran. But her popularity is linked to the ways in which she indirectly reinforces popular stereotypes of Muslims as backward and primitive by distorting the facts regarding the improvements in the status of women. Furthermore, the book has helped to create and to maintain a widespread notion that Muslim women are victims of an inherent misogyny in Islamic tradition which needs teaching of Western literature as a true source of

democracy, human rights and freedom. Indeed, like *Lolita*, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is overdetermined by a concern with women's sexuality. In that sense, Nafisi like a typical feminist orientalist that support to defend women's rights but are steeped in classic Orientalist stereotypes bolstering the Western intervention to rescue Muslim women from the repression of Islamic regime.

As we read classic novels alongside the narrator and her charming students "my girls", we are alternatively asked to identify with the girls as they encounter the West through its literature and with the benevolent professor-narrator who cultivates the developing self- image. In the narrator's textual analysis, literature is presented as a refuge from politics and a series of lessons in the power of individual imagination, free will, and choice.

In the memoir's opening pages, the narrator appeals to the reader, over and over, to "imagine us" (6). As the reader enters into the world constructed by the didactic narrator, she is invited to picture these Iranian distinct from history and ideology: "against the tyranny of time and politics, imagine us the way we sometimes didn't dare to imagine ourselves: in our most private and secret moments, in the most extraordinarily instances of life, listening music, falling in love, walking down the shady streets or reading *Lolita* in Tehran" (6). As the reader's imagination overtakes and replaces that of the women, the narrator describes the ways in which she and her girls found refuge from the Islamic Republic as well as personal empowerment in their secret group.

The narrator describes her private class as "withdrawal into a dream" (11) and the living room itself as a "wonderland" (8). "We were in that room to protect ourselves from the reality outside" (59), Nafisi states. In this wonderland, literature becomes both distinct from reality and its most powerful challenge: "The novels were an escape from reality" (38); they "allowed us to

defy the repressive reality outside the room-not only that, but to avenge ourselves on those who controlled our lives” (57). “Every great book we read,” she rounds up, “became a challenge to ruling ideology” (289). Novels pose this challenge not through an “outright call for plurality” (268) but instead through heteroglossia, the novel’s ability to incorporate multiple voices and views. This is how, she suggests, great books produce empathy and resist evil: “Evil [...] in most great fiction, lies in the inability to ‘see’ others, hence to empathize with them” (315).

The narrator chooses the novels herself, based on their “authors’ faith in the critical and almost magical power of literature” (18). The novels are also meant to offer the girls positive role models; the narrator observes from their notebooks that they “have no clear image of themselves; they can only see and shape themselves through other people’s eyes-ironically, the very people they demise. I have underlined *love yourself, self confidence*” (38). She invites her girls to develop their self-esteem and self-confidence by asking them to consider “how these great works of imagination could help us in our present trapped situation of women” (19). Significantly, the novels help the narrator and her girls by reminding them of their shared humanity and helping them find their authentic selves: their “escape” into fiction allows them to “see ourselves, for once, in our own image” (57). Thus, as Nafisi claims those narratives of the Western classics provide alternative narrative to imagine their image which is free of the repressive political government.

Nafisi encourages readers to approach the memoir as a way to learn about women human rights in Iran in a theocracy by connecting it to important literary themes. So, Nafisi as a teacher emphasizes fictional heroes who defy circumstances in order to live their best lives- a laudable, inspirational lesson that nonetheless obscures and mystifies systematic social, historical, and political constraints in favor of individualism and free choice.

In the final section 'Austin', Nafisi reads *Pride and Prejudice* with diminishing women's right in mind. Her students discuss over love, sex, courtship and the lives of women in the turmoil that follows the long and debilitating Iran-Iraq war. It is also suffused with longing and regret for all the pleasures, sensual, social, or simple, that her students have been denied. That is why while discussing Jane Austin, her students symbolically refers the discussion club "Dear Jane Society" where "We would meet and dance and eat puffs, and we would share the news" (24). In the lively discussion that ensues, love and marriage become the focus, in particular the ability freely to choose a spouse by listening to heart. The beautiful Azin, who we learn is struggling in an abusive marriage, adds that "The Islamic Republic has taken us back to Jane Austin's times. God bless the arranged marriage!" (258). The more subdued Manna agrees that "most women don't have a choice [...] and I think we are way behind Jane Austin's times" (259). In contrast to Lolita's "utter helplessness" (43), Austin's heroines "risk ostracism and poverty to gain love and companionship, and to embrace that elusive goal at the heart of democracy: the right to choose" (307). As her students struggle to pursue happiness, they read about Western heroines who defy society and find happiness by following their hearts.

Moreover, during the nightly bombing campaign of Iran-Iraq War, Nafisi and her students find themselves drawn to Henry James, moved in part by the courage of his heroine, Daisy Miller, among the other personages of Western fiction. In spite of, or perhaps because of, those turbulent, siren-filled nights, Nafisi formulates her ideas about the novel:

Over the next decade and a half, more than anything else, I thought, wrote about and taught fiction. These readings made me curious about the origins of the novel and what I came to understand as its basically democratic structure. And I become

curious as to why the realistic novel was never truly successful in our country.

(187)

By linking novels to democratic values and focusing uncritically on the work of James, it celebrates western literature and civilization posing the Western literary canon as the savior of Iranian women.

The second section “Gatsby,” Nafisi describes Gatsby, a character who ends up destroying himself by trying to re-imagine his past, is an apt metaphor of the Islamic Regime- a cabal of Ayatollahs that sacrificed the present by enforcing their own dream of a collective past on Iran. Nafisi comments about the book in her memoir as “Gatsby as a paean to dreams and optimism” (111). She underplays the fact that it’s a peculiarly American optimism, but shrewdly points out “we in ancient countries [such as Iran] have our past-we obsess over past or dream of past glories, while Americans are nostalgic for some idealized future” (109). So such things of valuing our future dream are expected to learn from Western literary work.

When her students suggest that *The Great Gatsby* might reveal a devastating picture of American consumer culture, she dismisses the idea:

A novel is not an allegory, I said. [...] It is the sensual experiences of another world. If you don’t enter that world, hold your breath with the characters and become involved in their destiny, you won’t be able to empathize, and empathy is at the heart of the novel. This is how you read a novel: you inhale the experience.

So start breathing. (111)

She also writes that the attraction of Gatsby’s dream is greatest when unfilled, just as she suggests that the attraction of Gatsby’s dream is greatest when it exists in the minds of oppressed Iranians. Ultimately Nafisi concludes that *Gatsby* and other classics of western literature offer



her students not exactly chocolate or the Declaration of Independence but the chance to replace their own grim reality with counter-realities dreamed up by Iranians.

In the first section “Lolita,” Nafisi draws the parallel situation between Lolita’s plight and the suffering of Iranian women. Islamic Republic was like Humbert Humbert and Iranian women were controlled by an authority, who confiscates their individual identities and replaces them with a cipher of his own imagination. She explains to the reader and her students that *Lolita* goes “against the grain of all totalitarian perspectives” (35) by showing how dictators (Humbert) lack empathy and fail to imagine others (Lolita) as unique, independent human beings. And yet, Nabokov’s ability to humanize his monstrous characters, including the infamous Humbert, who rapes the twelve-year-old Lolita over and over again, is described as “the first lesson in democracy: all individuals, no matter how contemptible, have a right, liberty, and pursuit of happiness” (42). Throughout *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Western novels provide pat, pleasurable lessons in democracy and freedom that draw on U.S. nationalist and neoliberal rhetorics of freedom and choice and that constructs a neat opposition between democracy and totalitarianism.

The narrator does not show little awareness of the constructedness and complicity of all identity or how democratic subjects, like her students, “[see] themselves in the context of an outside reality that prevent[s] them from defining themselves clearly and separately” (75-76). Moreover, she does not seem to find problematic the idea that her girls find their authentic selves only in Western literature. As Fatemeh Keshevarz notes, “Persian and contemporary Iranian art, literature, and culture are summarily dismissed as antidemocratic” (123-138). The explanation is simple and, according to Keshevarz and others, dreadfully inaccurate: “We lived in a culture that denied any merit to literary works” (25), and one that “censored any form of interiority in

fiction” (277). Here, Iranian historical and cultural realities are mystified by a humanist reification of the individual and Western fiction.

Many reviewers have suggested that Reading *Lolita in Tehran* is to be read via empathetic identification, where the reader stands in the shoes of the protagonist and feels what she is feeling- in the case of Nafisi, her students, and the other Iranian women she discusses. So, the exercise and cultivation of empathetic imagination is defended by Nafisi herself throughout the memoir as one of the justification for teaching and reading those western literatures. But Burwell and others in their article “Reading Nafisi in the West: Feminist Reading Practices and Ethical Concerns” shows the dialects of ‘empathetic identification’ as:

It implicitly perceives the Other through assumed similarities with the Self, erasing difference while promising to honour it. We may think that when we empathize we see and feel through the eyes of another, but in fact what we doing is reducing their Otherness to what is familiar and “known” about ourselves. (69)

Thus, even if well-intended, empathetic identification is actually unethical; it is a one-sided venture which gives the false impression that we “know” and “understand” the Other overlooking the differences and only sees the sameness and commonalities.

According to Nafisi, it is only through imagining the experiences of others that individuals truly cultivate a moral stance towards individuals and the world around them. Ideally, according to Nafisi, “reading fiction estranges us from ourselves and the complacency of our day-to-day existence, transporting us into the world and lives of Others in order to see the “Truth” of their situations (224). So, at the beginning of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Nafisi proclaims the necessity of the reader’s imaginative empathy, writing:

I need you, the reader, to imagine us, for we won't really exist if you don't.

Against the tyranny of time and politics, imagine us the way we sometimes didn't dare to imagine ourselves : in our most private and secret moments, in the most extraordinarily ordinary instances of life, listening to music, falling in love, walking down the shady streets or reading *Lolita* in Tehran. And then imagine us again with all this confiscated, driven underground, taken away from us. (6)

This quote is an explicit plea for the reader to identify with Nafisi and her female students on the basis of their sameness and an appeal to "universal" human activities. Thus, Nafisi's urge for empathetic identification both reduce and misrepresent the Other-Iranian women because it always looks for the commonalities erasing the differences between and among her seven Muslim students.

*Reading Lolita in Tehran* book written by Azar Nafisi, a western educated women, essentializes Islam as a religion and portray Muslim women only as victims. Simultaneously, such books make it difficult for Muslim women, both in North America and Muslim countries, to defend their rights as citizens as well as their gender rights.

Feminist Orientalist who used women's rights as an excuse to legitimate their colonial presence and their modern version such as the current neo-conservatives who raise support for war in defense of women's rights. In this post colonial era, in the opinion of Bahramitash, "Feminist orientalist has inspired a genre of books that support to defend women's rights but are steeped in classic Orientalist stereotypes" (221) . Azar Nafisi's who was widely taught in West, book *Reading Lolita in Tehran* also falls in the same category which just seems to advocate for Iranian women's right but cant represent real experiences of Iranian women in fundamentalist Islamic regime.

As Parvin Paider has given a sophisticated understanding of feminist orientalism in three steps, first, it assumes a binary opposition between the west and the Orient: the Occident is progressive and the best place for women, while the Muslim Orient is backward, uncivilized, and the worst place for women. The Second characteristic of feminist orientalism is that it regards Oriental women only as victims and not as agents of social transformation; thus it is blind to the ways in which women in the East resist and empower themselves. Therefore, Muslim women need saviors, i.e., their Western sisters, who always being covered, are seen as unable to become agents of their own liberation. Even President Bush, not a man known for advocacy feminist causes, has spoken about the need to save Afgan women. The third aspect of feminist Orientalism assumes that all societies in the Orient are the same and all Muslim women there live under the same conditions. It means they homogenize all Muslim women as passive victim of authoritative societal rules.

Following the same line Laura Nadar, whose seminal 1989 article brought together Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony with Michael Foucault's notions of 'true discourse' and 'positional superiority'. The negative images of Islam and Muslims that are dominant in North America can best be understood through Gramsci's concept of hegemony. Gramsci argues "Gegemonic knowledge is a system of thought that is formed over the time and that is representative of the interests of the dominant class that manages to universalize its own beliefs and value systems of subordinate classes" (25). Such beliefs are formulated and reformulated by the intellectual elites, the 'organic' intellectuals of the dominant class, and result is controlling structures that are imposed through 'civil society' rather than through the state. Negative stereotypes of Muslims as part of the dominant ideology of North America are reinforced through institutions independent of the state such as the mainstream mass media.

Gramsci's analysis of hegemony can be complemented by Foucault's analysis of the way in which the 'truth' about Muslims and Islam is formulated according to the social structure of power relations. Foucault's notion of 'true discourse' refers to "a discourse that is restrictive and exclusive of alternative conceptions of reality. Such discourse excludes concepts that could bring understanding of how different forms of power can operate". Thus, negative stereotypes of Muslims have become part of the dominant discourse. Nadar, in bringing Gramscian-Foucauldian concerns together with those Said, argues that the hegemonic discourse dictates a realm that defines the relation between the East and the West in such a way that the West is located as a 'positional superior' to the East.

When looking at how this theoretical conceptualization operates with respect to feminism, the very same feminism that technically is critical of hegemony actually becomes a tool to reinforce hegemony. It is because Nafisi's memoir essentializes Islam as a religion, and portrays Muslim women only as victims. Nafisi while writing her memoir just imagines that she and the eight women about whom she writes represent a homogeneous category of Iranian women who are victims of misogynist state policies. Simultaneously, such books make it difficult for Muslim women, both in North America and Muslim countries, to defend their rights as citizens as well as their gender rights. So, we can easily come to the conclusion that Nafisi's experience hardly explains the experience of all Iranian women.

Nafisi's selective and partial view of Iran is not innocent but seems to have a particular agenda, namely to contribute to the Islamophobia that already exists in North America. Nafisi's contempt for Islam as a religion pervades *Reading Lolita*, as demonstrated by statements such as 'It is a truth universally acknowledged that a Muslim man, regardless of his fortune must be in

want of a nine-year-old virgin.’(257); similar unsubstantiated claims are found throughout the book.

Bahramitash in his article “The War on Terror, Feminist Orientalism and Orientalist Feminism” keeps his suspicious eye over the description of Muslim women as:

. . . her support of Islamophobia –in the name of feminist heroism is neither unusual nor surprising given the huge support in her adopted country, the United States, for white middle – class Western feminism in its Orientalist who have criticized this form of feminism...Nafisi’s own comparison of Iran to England in the nineteenth century reveals that she shares the liberal feminist view of the Third World as a place to export progress as defined and prescribed by the West.  
(233)

One needs to read Nafisi’s description of Iran with a great deal of skepticism. Nafisi seems to have supported Iranian Women’s right and involved in the project of educating them but she quite contradictorily describes Islam as a very backward where progress should be exported from the West.

Nafisi repeatedly positions America as a fantasy creation, a conceptual framework of personal freedoms, which draws its appeal as an alternative to the dreariness of the Iranian government: “America...had suddenly been turned into a never-ever land by the Islamic revolution...Even those who wished its death were obsessed by it...A shy curiosity about America had been kindled that in time would turn the hostage-takers into hostages” (106). Thus, the US presented in *Reading Lolita* is more of an imagined place of freedom, choice, feminist empowerment, and human rights than a real nation mired in the daily business of politics and governance.

There are other numerous hints throughout the book which show lack of understanding of or empathy for the overwhelming majority of her fellow citizens. For example, she says of Tehran: “When I walked down the streets, I asked myself, are these my people, is this my hometown, who I am?”(74). Perhaps having spent so much of her childhood outside Iran, she genuinely feels that she does not belong in Iran. Even an Iranian man- one of the few for whom admits having respect- says that Nafisi ‘is very American version in Wonderland’ (175). And she acknowledges as much about herself: “I miss speaking English preferably with a New York accent, someone who was intelligent and appreciated Gatsby and Hagen-Dazs and knew about Mike Gold’s Lower East Side” (107). Clues such as these can forewarn the reader that the author is looking at Iran from an outsider’s point of view. In fact, she does herself as an outsider, as she reveals in her description of attending a concert in Tehran: “I pretended to be an outside observer who had come not to have fun but to report on a night out in the Islamic Republic of Iran” (180). Perhaps in her words we can begin to understand why Nafisi is successful: “So many people have made their name through their opposition to the regime” (181). Nafisi is opposing the contemporary Iranian government which she finds is biased for the rights of Iranian women but in reality she is reporting all these happenings during the post-revolutionary Iran to justify the need of Western intervention to give women equal rights.

For those who genuinely care about the status of women, this book has hijacked the issue of women’s rights from them. It is because the book only purports to defend women’s rights but are steeped in classic Orientalist stereotypes. Nafisi’s representation of women as victims of state violence in Iran becomes a key component of asserting this binary, opposing a monolithic and barbaric Iranian state to the democratic ethos that she argues is implicit in the (Western) novel and appreciated by her female students.

Nafisi shows her students to be particularly vulnerable victims of the Islamic regime. In identifying the ways that women have suffered since 1979, Nafisi describes her students facing inspectors who enforce dress codes on the way to class, crackdowns of mixed-gender parties, bans on appearing in public with male friends or boyfriends, young women forced to undergo virginity checks by authorities, limited dating options, unfair divorce and custody laws, stoning of women (including Nafisi's former principal), and even rape and executions in jail.

By channeling her students' perspectives, Nafisi speculates about what one of the young members of her book club, Sanaz, is thinking as she walks the streets of Tehran, passing a poster of a woman wearing a chador captioned, "My sister, guard your veil, my brother, guard your eyes". Nafisi writes: "Is she[Sanaz] angry that the women of her mother's generation could walk the streets freely, enjoy the company of opposite sex, join the police force, become pilots, live under laws that were among the most progressive in the world regarding women" (27).

On the other hand, Nafisi has failed to understand the assaults on women's freedom of dress in Iran which began long before 1979. Amy DePaul in his article "Re-Reading Reading Lolita in Tehran" has traced such injustices against women in Iran as "In 1936, Reza Shah Pahlavi made Iran the first Muslim nation to forbid women the veil, unveiling by force women who defied his edict" (85). When some of the women willingly wanted to veil they were described as very backward and oppressed by the Islamic rule. It gives some weight to the criticism that she has portrayed the plight of Iranian women opportunistically while minimizing the historical injustices that led up to them. Thus, women's right and personal freedom suffered under coercion to westernize as well as to revolutionize.

Critics accuse Nafisi of showing disdain for all things Iranian, and indeed she writes dismissively of Islamic Feminism where she attempts to reconcile the concept of women's rights



with the tenets of Islam. A more relevant example comes at the beginning of the chapter on Austen, in which Nafisi and her students are sitting by the fire in Nafisi's home, ruminating on marriage and romance in revolutionary Iran:

It is truth universally acknowledged that a Muslim man, regardless of his fortune, must be in want of a nine-year-old virgin wife. So declared Yassi in that special tone of hers, deadpan and mildly ironic, which on rare occasions, and this was one of them, bordered on the burlesque. "Or is it a truth universally acknowledged," Manna shot back, "that a Muslim man must be in want not just of one but of many wives. (257)

Nafisi's focus on the arbitrary and irrational nature of the Islamic Republic is understood as a direct consequence of its religious identification. Rather than there being a focus on the undemocratic nature of both the Islamic Republic and the Shah regime, Islam becomes the source of the repressive policies in Iran.

The memoir is particularly poignant when it shows Iranian women working through the difficulties of their situation by providing allegorical interpretations of classics of western literature. In other words, when it shows Nafisi immersing herself in Henry James's *Daisy Miller* or T.S. Eliot as a diversion and solace while facing repeated bombings of Tehran by Iraq or the unexpected disappearance of her mentor whereas these other Iranian women feel very much suffocated by the revolutionary environment, who need western literature to outpour their suppressed feelings in parallel with the character of such literature. She undoubtedly sounds to be talking about the women's right and their freedom but her mode of talking on these women's issues makes her a problematic narrator. So, reviewers' readings of Nafisi construct her as

providing an authentic and representative portrayal of Iranian women's desires and interests and thereby seeming to provide an objective authentication of the Orientalist framework.

Feminist orientalism has a long history of being used to bolster western colonialist and imperialist agendas, and Nafisi's memoir has potential to convince some American feminists that U.S. military intervention in Iran would "liberate" Iranian women. Ironically, the memoir can appeal to liberal feminists focusing on women's rights and freedom of choice. Nafisi is also working in the same direction creating a discourse through teaching of western canonical literature in post revolutionary Iran which is understood to show how the universal values of these works allow Iranian women a space in which to experience moments of liberation, providing an alternative "liberation" narrative.

Nafisi creates for her students an apparently unique, protected space and gives them unavailable tools of subversive imagination as resistance. But Bahramitash argues in her article "The War on Terror, Feminist Orientalism and Orientalist Feminism: Case Studies of Two North American Bestsellers":

Feminist Orientalism regards oriental women only as victims and not as agents of social transformation; thus it is blind to the ways in which women in the East resist and empower themselves. Therefore, Muslim women need savior, i.e. their Western sisters, as in the case of Afghan women, who, always being covered, are seen as unable to become agents of their own liberation. Even president Bush, not a man known for advocacy of feminist causes, has spoken about the need to save Afghan women. (226)

Nafisi in her memoir becomes like the orientalist feminist who presents herself as the savior and rescuer of oppressed women. This understanding of Nafisi depends on her transcultural status, as

one who has access to western literature and feminist analysis, along with familiarity and access to Iranian women's intimate lives.

On the other hand, Nafisi in seeking to summarize women's oppressive condition primarily focuses on restrictions on dress, makeup, and accessories, without wondering whether all Iranian women find these equally oppressive or important. She also discusses the regulation of women's behavior in public and state violence against women. Mitra Rastager also noticed such partiality as "one may note the absence of the issue of poverty, food, housing, education, and the repercussions of the Iran-Iraq war" (116). It is typical of much Western human rights discourse on the Third World to focus on such practices of regulating women's bodies, especially those identified with Islamic law, while ignoring socioeconomic concerns. She erases many of the repressive and corruptive aspects of the secular Pahlavi government and politicized religion becomes constructed as the source of all the current government repressive policies.

Nafisi is favoring democracy and women's rights but she reaffirms that such values are originated from and accessed through western cultural sources. Taking the same line Mitra Rastager says, "Nafisi seeks to deterritorialize and, on one level, deessentialize the values of democracy and women's rights, to show that most Iranians esteem these as highly as the West presumably does" (116). To attain the purpose she teaches her women students in her class about the western literature which lends these oppressed women space to think freely.

No one can disagree with the fact that women's rights in pre-revolutionary society of Iran was in problematic condition but with the unexpected victory of Mohammad Khatami in the 1997 presidential elections and the birth of the reformist movement, Ziba Mir-Hosseini in his article pointed out "women and the scope of their rights in Islam became a hotly contended issue. Reformist efforts to reconcile Islam with democracy and human rights brought to the surface the

inherent contradictions between the construction of gender rights in sharva law and democratic ideals” ( 38). A new round of struggle began among the clerics over women's rights in Islam, and the battle lines were redrawn. Hosseini further quotes the Iranian history as:

The consensus between parliament (Majles) and clerics of opposing political tendencies, [to the end of twentieth century] had seen the enactment of a number of measures redressing some of the gender discriminations introduced soon after the Revolution. For in stance, restrictions on subjects that women could study were removed (1986); family planning and contraception became freely available (1988); divorce laws were amended so as to curtail men's right to divorce and to compensate women in the face of it (1992), and women were appointed as advisory judges (1992). Women members of the Majles had acted as a strong lobby in securing the cooperation of the seminaries and eminent clerics and pushing for such legislation. (38)

All this changed after Khatami took office, when the Conservatives lost their absolute control of government. Fearing that popular support for the new language of rights, as embodied in the slogans "civil society," "freedom of expression" and "rule of law" would further undermine their position, the Conservatives tried to reassert their authority, counting on institutions still under their control to block and frustrate every move of the Reformist government. But it was an impossible task since people were slowly growing conscious about their civil rights.

Although the situation has ranged and continues to range from challenging to abysmal for most Iranian women, Nafisi’s analysis of the Islamic state and its relationship to the women question throughout her memoir is silent about the advances women and women’s groups have made in Iran since the mid-1980s. While these attempts at change may seem marginal given the

transformation of society the women's revolution brought about, a lack of acknowledgement of such efforts feeds into western stereotypes of Iranian women as passive and helpless. Although the Shah was authoritarian, "women inclined to modernity prospered. A perception of the Pahlavi regime as more conducive to women's well-being misrepresents the situation of women (Hosseini 40)". Several reports say that since the revolution, circumstances for women have improved markedly in socioeconomic terms, despite some significant and contested setbacks in other realms.

There is not a phrase in *Reading Lolita* to indicate that "Nafisi has any awareness of the scholarly literature by Iranian feminists that is critical of the Western-type modernization/development program that the last Shah tried to implement in Iran during the 15 years that preceded the Revolution (233-34)" as stated by Roksana Bahramitash. Moreover, Nafisi doesn't mention the many creative works by Iranian authors or filmmakers active during this period, including many women like Simin Daneshvar, Shahnush Parsipur, and Moniru Derakhshandeh.

There is no recognition of the vast differences among Muslim countries in terms of social, political, economic, and cultural system in general and the great variety in the position of women in particular. The book overlooks millions of secular Muslim women, as well as non-Muslim women who live in Muslim countries. Consequently, for readers who are uninformed about the Muslim world, Nafisi's encounter with an unrepresentative sample of the devoutly religious becomes the entire story of women in Muslim countries.

It is worth noting that women's 'liberation' under both Ataturk and Reza Shah was very much in line with the project of imposing a European way of life that replicated the economic

and political interests of the West. Bahramitash further puts the suspicious eye over the project of Nafisi in Iran as:

While Western women were fighting for equal rights, these dictators and Westernizers adopted the Western model without question and imposed it on their women. In both cases, the idea of de-veiling and educating women was an aspect of the overall policy to modernize the country and it had little do with what women may or may not have wanted for themselves. Elite women initially, and after World War II middle-class women, adopted European models; for the masses of peasant and working-class women, however, such liberation was irrelevant, and their lives barely changed. (225)

It means Nafisi as a western educated elite is projecting her desire for so called 'liberation' rather than what women may or may not have wanted for themselves. That is why, Nafisi' views resemble with those of the Europeans particularly in reference to the position of women.

Moreover, Nafisi also didn't notice how by the 1990s the challenge to oppressive family laws in the Islamic constitution was organized by both Islamic and secular feminists. Despite fundamental differences in their worldviews, these two groups were able to come together to fight for women's rights based on specific issues. Iran offers a good example of how women's groups, students, secularists, and even Islamic leaders tried to resist the current theocracy by challenging the oppressive system.

As mentioned by Anne Donadey and Huma Ahmed-Ghosh there has been some significant improvement regarding the position of women in contemporary Iranian society but they were intentionally excluded from Nafisi's narrative. According to them:

There has been some improvement in the status of women in Iran, including steep declines in illiteracy, infant mortality, and birth rates, as well as a corresponding steep increase in life expectancy for women in the last thirty years or so. In addition, more women than men currently attend universities, and because there are gender segregated schools, more girls are going to school than did before the revolution, especially in rural areas. These changes have affected the lives of poor women positively but have had less of an impact on upper-middle-class women's lives, since the latter already had access to the education and health care. (626)

However, Nafisi never tries to talk about these positive changes and gender empowerment especially after the revolution of 1979.

There is considerable evidence that one may cite to argue that Nafisi's experience hardly explains the experience of all Iranian women. For example, during the three years that the university was closed(1980-83) and Nafisi was wallowing in sorrow, many middle-class urban women, including many feminists, found an opportunity to join programs that empowered women, such as the mass-based literacy program. Nafisi is clearly unable to see that millions of Iranian women remained active and pressed for changes; no one could make them irrelevant or victims, such as Nafisi feels she had become.

In fact, as the result of the mass based literary program, and thanks to the role of middle-class educated women who participated in it, as well as some other social program provided by the state, important changes occurred in the lives of women, changes that one cannot learn about in *Reading Lolita*. As Bahramitash cites few examples to talk about these positive changes from the *World Development Indicator* which shows:

. . . that infant mortality dropped from 131.20 in 1975 to 25.50 in 1999; life expectancy at birth increased from 49 for men and women in 1960 to 70 for men and 72 for women by 1999; and the illiteracy rate for young women declined considerably, from over 55 percent in 1970 to 8.70 percent by 1999. More recent data indicate that Iran has lowered its infant mortality by 50 percent. A more remarkable change is the drop in the fertility rate from 7.24 in 1960 to 2.66 in 1999. (233)

For anyone familiar with the literature on women and development, such changes in basic indicators cannot be dismissed easily. Nafisi's account of Iranian universities as bastions of male domination also needs to be evaluated against official enrollment data that show over 60 percent of Iranian students in higher education are women. But Nafisi could not see any of these changes because they would obscure or even contradict the monolithic image of oppressed Iranian women that she wanted to present. Women she told the Washington Post after her book was published, 'felt utterly helpless' in Iran. In view of the powerful presence of activist women in Iran since at least the early 1990s, it is obvious that not all Iranian women shared either her experiences or feelings.

In particular, Nafisi's critique of the hijab, her embrace of individual freedom in U.S. terms, rejection of socio-economic engagement, and her reclaiming of the Western canon not only represent subversive resistance to Iranian theocratic totalitarianism but also lend themselves to an interpretation that would support an anti-Muslim and imperialist U.S. ideology. Nafisi is favoring democracy and women's rights but she reaffirms that such values are originated from and accessed through western cultural sources. It means direct or indirect western intervention is needed to advocate for women's rights or gender equality in Islamic societies. she deprives the



Iranian women from being represented as what they are in reality by imagining their lives in Islamic rule. Thus, Nafisi is using women's right as an excuse to legitimate their colonial presence and their modern version such as the current neo-conservatives who raise support for war in defense of women's rights.

#### IV. Nafisi's Memoir as a Feminist Orientalist Text

The present research work questions the transcultural status of Nafisi as one who has access to Western literature and feminist analysis along with familiarity and access to Iranian women's intimate lives. Questioning the transcultural status leads to problematize her claim that the universal values like democracy, freedom of choice etc., of these works-*Lolita*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Daisy Miller* which she teaches to her seven students- allow Iranian women a space in which to experience moments of liberation at the backdrop of oppressive Islamic regime especially to women. Nafisi's book club which she forms out of her seven Iranian woman students, is supposed to give them subversive imagination as resistance where she presents herself as the savior and rescuer of oppressed women. But the research has found that Nafisi's project of humanizing these veiled students through the teaching of Western literature is an intentional one where she not only views into the lives of Iranian women's lives rather by showing them as most oppressed under the Islamic rule is bolstering the need of Western intervention to teach them about the value of women human rights, ethos of democracy and freedom. So, Nafisi's memoir can be viewed as a process which first misrepresents the Iranian women; creates the binary between Occident as progressive and the best place for women while Muslim orient as backward, uncivilized, and the worst place for women, and lastly creates the pretext that these women need the savior like Nafisi to teach Western literature which is supposed to be the origin of democratic ethos and freedom thus justifying the rationale of Western intervention to defend women's right in Orient.

First, Nafisi very comfortably misrepresents them as most oppressed under Islamic regime by focusing on practices of regulating women's bodies especially those identified with Islamic law. Furthermore, while seeking to portray the lives of Iranian women, she forgets the

fact that women may choose to wear the veil for a variety of reasons in which case that choice may or may not have anything to do with oppression. But Nafisi treats women's liberation in Iran is connected to their ability to unveil and wear bright clothing. So, unveiling is described as a process where the women emerge as individual. The veil is read as robbing women as their individuality and humanity, and becomes associated with uniformity and lack of enlightenment. To fulfill this objective she introduces her study group through the ritual of "unveiling" where they emerge as individuals.

Many meaning can be attached to wearing the robe and head scarf. First, to wear the *hijab* could have had a romantic or sheltering appeal because it gives shelter from scorching heat of the sun. Secondly, it also saves them from outer gaze as well. It means veil which is transparent, denies the access of others gaze but it doesn't disturb them to look at others and to know what is happening around them. Thus, it helps them to gather knowledge about how they are being marginalized so as to empower themselves. Thirdly, sometimes it has been perceived as a facilitator of education and mobility for women in the poorer and rural regions of Iran. But all these positive aspects of wearing *hijab* are overlooked by equating it with universal symbol of women's domination in Islam.

On the other hand, it is perceived differently in different political project. For instance, the unveiling of women mandated by Reza Shah in 1936 had been a controversial symbol of modernization and revealing of woman mediated by the Islamic regime become a symbol of a return to Islam. Moreover, veil has different impact depending on their class where women from upper middle class like Nafisi were restricted by it whereas for women from lower class with lower income provided opportunity to enter in the public place for which they had been denied before revolution. Thus, Nafisi oversimplified women's responses to Islamic dress regulations

and describes veil only as degrading to the belief of Iranian women or in some way paid scant attention to the concern of religious women because there were women including her grandmother and some of the more religious students in her book club who wore the veil voluntarily.

Nafisi repeatedly positions America as a fantasy creation, a conceptual framework of personal freedoms, which draws its appeal as an alternative to the dreariness of the Iranian government. Questioning the Nafisi's transcultural status leads to problematize the representation of Iranian women in her memoir. Nafisi is looking at Iran from an outsider's point of view as she reveals in her description of attending a concert in Tehran: "I pretended to be an outside observer who had come not to have fun but to report on a night out in the Islamic Republic of Iran" (180). Nafisi very cleverly erases the disagreements between her religiously observant students and her most flamboyant students which are marked more by meaningful silences and disapproving glances. But Nafisi refers to herself as her student's confidante, these silences point to what cannot be known about the students through Nafisi as narrator.

In the cover illustration she shows photo of two women wearing head scarves, heads lowered together, gazing at object hidden from view to show veil as homogenizing symbol of their oppression Her representation of women as victims of state violence is done with distortion and exclusion of some significant socio-economic changes. Spivak argues that it is necessary to distinguish between speaking of and speaking for while considering representation of the oppressed other. Spivak's critique of those who claim to represent subaltern women is relevant here. While Nafisi does ascribe certain perspective to many of the women she describes she never erases herself or her authoritative voice from these depictions. Nafisi extensively writes about herself and her seven students, who like her of middle class background, writes only few

lines her nanny. Moreover, Nafisi shows her own impatience to waste time learning about the lives of the less privileged women at Al-Zahara University whose students come from most underprivileged strata of society.

Nafisi claims her discussion club provides “fairy-tale atmosphere” in which she and the other women were free to discuss our pains and joys, our personal hangs ups and weaknesses. Nafisi claims they were in that room to protect ourselves from the reality outside and allowed them to defy the repressive reality outside the room-not only that, but to avenge themselves on those who controlled our lives. Nafisi claims those narratives of the Western classics provide alternative narrative to imagine their image which is free of the repressive political government. Nafisi’s students struggle to pursue happiness, they read about Western heroines who defy society and find happiness by following their hearts. In contrast to her students’ utter helplessness, Nafisi explains, Austin and Jame’s heroines at the heart of democracy risk ostracism and poverty to gain love and companionship in particular the ability freely to choose spouse by listening to heart.

Nafisi further explains *Gatsby* as peculiarly about American optimism where as people in ancient countries such as in Iran have their past-they obsess over past or dream of past glories, while Americans are nostalgic for some idealized future. So such things of valuing our future dream are expected to learn from Western literary work like from *Gatsby* dream. Nabokov’s ability to humanize his monstrous characters, including the infamous Humbert, who rapes the twelve-year-old Lolita over and over again, is described as the first lesson in democracy: all individuals, no matter how contemptible, have a right, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. Throughout *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Western novels provide pat, pleasurable lessons in

democracy and freedom that draw on U.S. nationalist and neoliberal rhetorics of freedom and choice and that constructs a neat opposition between democracy and totalitarianism.

On the other hand, Nafisi tends to overstate the pre-revolutionary status of women but quite contrarily the women who benefited from the Shah's reforms-interms of Western led modernization- were small in number, while revolutionary reforms have benefitted Iranian women's on a large scale citing Iran's majority –female university population, successful family planning programs and upper-echelon political appointments. Moreover, she has also failed to acknowledge Iranian women's progress such as reduction of infant mortality, increase in female literacy and fertility rate alongside higher life expectancy for women. On the other hand, Nafisi has no awareness of the scholarly literature by Iranian feminists like Simin Daneshrar, Shrnush Parsipur, Moniru Derakhshandeh who were critical of the Western-type modernization /development program that the Shah tried to implement in Iran during the 15 years that preceded the revolution.

Nafisi encourages readers to approach the memoir as a way to learn about women's rights in Iran. But her popularity is linked to the ways in which she indirectly reinforces popular stereotypes of Muslims as backward and primitive by distorting the facts regarding the improvements in the status of women. Women's right in pre-revolutionary society of Iran was in problematic condition but with the unexpected victory of Mohammad Khatami in 1997 more significant improvement can be observed like restrictions on subjects that women could study were removed (1986), family planning and contraceptive became freely available (1988), divorce laws were amended so as to curtail men's right to divorce and to compensate women in the face and women were appointed as advisory judges. It is typical of much Western human rights discourse on the third world to focus on such practices to regulating women's bodies, especially

to those identified with Islamic law, while ignoring such developments. So, Nafisi's lack of acknowledgement of such efforts feeds into Western stereotypes of Iranian women as passive and helpless.

Pravin Paider by borrowing from Edward Said's *Orientalism* has given a sophisticated understanding of feminist orientalist: first, it creates the binary opposition as Occident is progressive and the best place for women while Muslim orient is backward, uncivilized, and the worst place for women. Second, it describes oriental women only as passive victim who need Western sisters as saviors, who are unable to become agents of the own liberation. And very importantly, in the 9/11 context West (esp. U.S.) uses women's rights as an excuse to legitimate their war in East. Nafisi in her memoir as a typical feminist orientalist is following the same line, who first shows the oppressive condition of women by misrepresenting them and establishes herself as the saviors or rescuer from the totalitarian Iran. Nafisi's selective and partial view of Iran is not innocent but seems to have a particular agenda, namely to contribute to the Islamophobia that already exists in North America. Ironically, the memoir appeals to liberal feminists focusing on women's right and freedom of choice. To get this objective fulfilled, she creates the discourse through teaching of Western canonical literature in post-revolutionary Iran which is understood to show how the universal value of their works allow Iranian women a space in which to experience moments of liberation, providing an alternative 'liberation' narrative. Thus, the memoir only purports to defend women's rights but is steeped in classic orientalist stereotypes and advocates the need for Western sisters to rescue them.

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