

Claiming Our Portion of the Sun and Wind

A Reflection on Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*

Amy Aliz Simpson

Texas Christian University

"She felt angry because of what she could have been. She was angry for the years she had missed, for her lost portion of the sun and wind, for the walks she had not taken."¹

In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Azar Nafisi creates a sacred space in which to examine courageous ways of fighting oppression, from intimately personal violations to the violent annihilation of a people, society, or culture. Through Nafisi's university literature lectures and secret class discussions with a small group of female students in her home over tea and pastries, as shared in the pages of this memoir, she reveals to her readers that the answer to oppression is imagination, the answer to evil is empathy, the answer to dictatorship is self-reflection: "What gives Scheherazade the courage to risk her life and sets her apart? She fashions her universe through imagination and reflection" (19).

While Iran's totalitarian regime is the obvious villain in the memoir, Nafisi clearly draws parallels to other forms



¹ Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2008), 326. Hereafter, all citations are made parenthetically in the text.

of tyranny that anyone, anywhere in the world, can face. Drawing on the works of Nabokov, James, Fitzgerald, Austen, and others, Nafisi provides damning evidence of what makes a villain and the subtle ways that tyrants of all shapes and sizes can rule unimpeded and even unnoticed. People expect that a villain will be an obvious character, an outsized violent evil-doer like the ones we see on the big screen in the theater or in the media. But Nafisi reminds us that sometimes oppression is more subtle: “What Nabokov creates for us...is not the actual physical pain and torture of a totalitarian regime but the nightmarish quality of living in an atmosphere of perpetual dread” (23).

Psychologists note that emotionally and verbally abused victims often express a wish that their abuse had been physical instead, because psychological damage often appears to be unseen and therefore harmless or less detrimental. But the trauma caused by emotional and verbal abuse—including living in constant dread, being powerless, existing in daily fear of reprisal or punishment, or having no agency over one’s life and choices—is as real as that caused by physical violence. Nafisi refers to being made to feel “irrelevant” as one of the subtle yet powerful psychological weapons of the oppressor. The canceling of another’s voice, agency, and role is a profound and psychologically violent act of dismissal.

Going more deeply into the pathological profile of the oppressor, Nafisi explains that a villain “lacks curiosity about other people and their lives.... most dictators [are] interested only in [their] own vision of other people” (48–49). She expounds that the villain is “a creature without compassion, without empathy...[and] lack of empathy was to [her] mind the central sin...from which all others flowed” (224).

Indeed, villains can hide in plain sight, parading as regular people in regular relationships, families, jobs, lives: “Did you, like my girls, feel that the evil implied in Humbert’s actions and emotions is all the more terrifying because he parades as a normal husband, normal stepfather, normal human being?” (36).

Nafisi explains that an overarching characteristic of the oppressor is the “black-and-white” ideology, in which there is a strict categorization and judgment of another individual and his or her choices, decisions, and actions. Nafisi emphasizes the importance of literature and its invitation to the reader to learn how to put oneself in another’s position, to provide an outside perspective:

Those who judge must take all aspects of an individual's personality into account...put oneself in someone else's shoes and understand the other's different and contradictory sides. ... A person shouldn't be judged on one aspect, there are different dimensions to an individual. (118)

The "essence of a dictatorial mind," according to Nafisi, is a close-minded one in which there is a rigidity of thought (the opposite of a growth mindset), one that imposes their beliefs on everyone else. A dictator/villain "has worked the whole thing out in advance, and worked it out for [everyone else] as well...there's no room left; no margin...for any alteration" (249).

Dictators have no capacity to change their minds, form a different opinion, or see another side. Their voices are often the loudest in the room, and their messages are the ones that are written, disseminated, and idealized. Further, the dictatorial mind is unable to conduct an exchange of ideas with others: "They rant. They lecture. They scold. This incapacity for true dialogue implies an incapacity for tolerance, self-reflection, and empathy" (268).

So, what do we do when the villain, the dictator, the oppressor "[empties] their garbage of thought all over you?" (322). How do we survive? Nafisi answers: "Once evil is individualized, becoming part of everyday life, the way of resisting it also becomes individual. How does the soul survive? is the essential question. And the response is: through love and imagination" (315). Simply but powerfully, the survivors are those with imagination, empathy, and honest self-reflection.

Nafisi explains how oppressed people attempt to maintain a semblance of control and normalcy in their lives, first through establishing daily routines that "create the illusion of stability" (167), then pretending to be invisible (168), deploying the "destructive defense mechanism" of refusing to connect intimately (321), or various other "survival games" (167). Eventually, Nafisi and her students realize that they are creating a "parallel fantasy...to escape into" (281), echoing what Henry James calls the "counter-realities" that people create when faced with atrocity (216).

Ultimately, they embrace the magician's counsel: "The first lesson in fighting tyranny is to do your own thing and satisfy your own conscience" (282). So, they come to the secret study group and they imagine, they empathize, and they reflect on who they are and who they want to be. Resistance, these women show us, is the refusal

to comply. They create a safe space for themselves and each other, and within those sacred walls they “defy the repressive reality outside the room...to avenge ourselves on those who controlled our lives.... We articulated all that happened to us in our own words and saw ourselves, for once, in our own image” (57).

They debate which subversive activities are the most courageous—marching? refusing to wear the veil? violent rebellion? But through studying and discussing literature, the women learn that “the most courageous characters...are those with imagination, those who, through their imaginative faculty, can empathize with others” (249). One of the most compelling illustrations of this development is the combination of each woman’s internal individual struggle alongside the larger group’s arguments over remaining in Iran. Whereas some of the women want to leave Iran, others want to stay and continue the fight. Who is right, and who is wrong? They are able to see that there does not have to be one right answer—there is courage in going, and courage in staying. Ultimately, in solidarity—and empathy—they want Nassrin’s escape to London to succeed, “not only for herself but also for the rest of us” (285), and they shop with Nafisi as she prepares to leave Iran, even though in so doing, she is leaving them behind. We all have to make our choices in a way that satisfies our own consciences, and we must meet others where they are in their own journeys; as Nafisi encourages us, we need to “tailor our empathy to the shape of their grief” (231).

Nafisi reveals to us that perhaps the most important characteristic of the survivor is self-reflection, because only through seeing ourselves honestly can we have true empathy with another and ensure that we ourselves do not become an oppressor: Self-reflection—seeing ourselves honestly—allows us to overcome the

blindness [that] can exist in the best of us...as well as the worst. We are all capable of becoming the blind censor, of imposing our visions and desires on others.... She is sympathetic because she is self-critical, she sees that she has been blind, and she has suffered for it. (315, 358)

Truly, as Nafisi’s magician tells us, “none of us can avoid being contaminated by the world’s evils; it’s all a matter of what attitude you take towards them” (330). Nafisi shows us that despite whatever oppression we find ourselves under, it is up to us to respond according to our own conscience, to take our anger and

turn it into hope, to find the courage not to comply, to see the multi-dimensional aspects of our fellow human beings, and to create our own way of living in the world with imagination, empathy, and honest self-reflection.

In this way we not only survive, but we also resist becoming a monster ourselves.