

The Spaces in Between: A Postcolonial Study of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*

Mashael Al-Sudeary

Associate Prof., Dept. of English, College of Arts,
Princess Nora University, Saudi Arabia

The paper discusses the importance of those in-between spaces that hybrids, such as Azar Nafisi, find themselves in. A hybrid's function should be to bring cultures and nations together, closing the chasm between the self and its true home. However, in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* Nafisi accomplishes the opposite goal when she widens this chasm between the self and the traditions and culture it sprang from. By presenting the West as the privileged norm against which the East should measure itself, Nafisi alienates her students from their true home only to offer them a dream that is at best imaginary and fragmented.

By using Postcolonial theories of the exile put forward by Edward Said and Salman Rushdie, and theories of the subaltern by Homi Bhabha and Chandta Mohanty, the paper will explore the contention that in offering her students an escape from their presumed victimization in Iran, Nafisi exposes them to a more intense kind of abuse. Presenting them in her own image of the westernized Iranian, Nafisi victimized them so that their identities are lost and their exile is permanent.

1. Introduction

We do not read in order to turn great works of fiction into simplistic replicas of our own realities, we read for the pure, sensual and unadulterated pleasure of reading. And if we do so, our reward is the discovery of the many hidden layers (of culture) within these works that do not merely reflect reality but reveal spectrum of truths, thus intrinsically going against the grain of totalitarian mindsets. (Nafisi, *The Stuff Dreams are Made of* 7).

Edward Said in *The World, The Text and The Critic* defines “culture” as something “to which one belongs” and one “possesses.” He says that “along with that proprietary process, culture also designates a boundary by which concepts of what is extrinsic and intrinsic to culture come into forceful play” (89). As the postcolonial world we are living in today is fraught with power struggles between nations, religions, races and cultures, boundaries, the spaces “in-between” become prime locations for national struggle where power equations are negotiated and identities are confirmed or deconstructed (Bhabha 1).

These ‘in-between’ spaces are inhabited by exiles who have either been forced out or chosen to leave their countries, or those who still live under colonial suppression in their country of origin. Caught in between two worlds, these exiles experience a continuous struggle between two different identities, cultures and nations. In one of the introductory passages in *The Post-Colonial Reader*, exile is explained as being “a result of conscious moments of cultural suppression, as when the colonial power invades to consolidate political and economic control, or when settler invaders dispossess indigenous peoples and force them to ‘assimilate’ to new social patterns”(Ashcroft et al 137). Finding himself at the crossroads between two different ways of life, the exilic can either choose to negate all of his colonizer’s cultural values and become totally isolated in the process or he can assimilate some of his colonizer’s social patterns into his old system of values thereby becoming a hybrid. In the process of becoming hybridized, however, these exilics will often vacillate between a staunch nationalism for their countries of origin and a rash enthusiasm for their new identities. They will also find themselves caught in a crossfire between the promise of beginning a new life, and the guilt of having easily given up their old culture and traditions.

Salman Rushdie, an exile himself, explains that “Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools” (431). Rushdie’s words reveal that hybridity is not a static condition that can be measured and described in fixed

terms, but is an elusive, multi-dimensional state of being unique to every individual. This in-between place is such a vulnerable, yet powerful place to be in that many postcolonial essays have been devoted to the amplification of its strengths and weaknesses. While all critics agree that exile is an unpleasant situation to be in, many like Bhabha, Rushdie and Said agree that hybridity brings with it the unique privilege of being able to deconstruct or reconstruct identities simultaneously.

Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* says that “These in-between spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood - singular or communal - that initiate new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (1-2). As such, the choices that the hybrid has to make in this space have detrimental effects on himself and his community. He can either show proper respect and appreciation for his roots and culture, thereby using his position as an opportunity to confirm identities, or he can choose to denigrate his past for an uncertain future forfeiting all the chances of achieving any semblance of the self. The hybrid and his function in society have become such a controversial subject in postcolonial literature that a close analysis of texts is necessary before any appropriate judgment is passed.

In Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, the narrator, a hybrid herself, proposes to help her fellow countrymen and women escape their oppressive condition under Iranian Islamic law by exposing them to the freedom of imagination to be experienced when reading English Literature. She says “Every fairy tale offers the potential to surpass present limits... [it] offers you freedoms that reality denies” (47). In the course of teaching her students how to immerse themselves in the literature of a Western country, however, Nafisi induces them to live in temporarily manufactured dream worlds that prevent them from facing reality and finding viable ways to improve their condition. Promising to help them overcome their oppression, Nafisi exposes them instead to a different kind of deprivation where they run the danger of losing any identity they might have had, for an unknown and uncertain future of the self. Encouraging them to leave everything Eastern and backward behind, Nafisi has little to offer in return. Imaginary homelands are a poor substitute for real tangible homes and even when some part of that imaginary homeland seems to materialize, it turns out to be subject to oppressive colonial rules and regulations. Losing old identities and being deemed unworthy of new ones, 'exile' becomes a permanent condition of the migrant.

The main purpose of this paper will be to focus on the revelation that though Nafisi believes she can offer her students an escape from their victimization through literature, she exposes them to a different kind of

trauma, one where identities are lost and exile is permanent. Theories of exile by Edward Said and Salman Rushdie and theories of the subaltern by Homi Bhabha and Chandra Mohanty will be used as a basic framework in which this paper is developed.

In "The Mind of Winter" Edward Said defines "exile" as the "unbearable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between self and its true home" (439). As such, exile is shown to be a result of two things, a physical displacement from a familiar environment and/or a metaphysical alienation from culture, tradition or memories that manifests itself in a loss of self and identity. In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Nafisi is shown to be in a permanent state of exile. Whether she is studying in America, living in Iran or has later chosen to migrate to America, her psychosomatic state is always that of an outsider. Under the circumstances, she extends a therapeutic solace that good literature is there to make one feel better, regardless of the oppressive political world.

As an Iranian who has been educated abroad, Nafisi feels alienated when she returns to her country which has undergone changes after the 1979 revolution. Under the rule of the Islamic Republic of Iran, life changed for all Iranians, especially for women. Women were no longer allowed to walk in the streets uncovered; they always had to wear a veil. They were also closely supervised and regulated by a male family member in order to ensure proper moral behavior. In addition to these strict laws regulating conduct and appearance, Iranians were also exposed to the violence that was erupting between Marxist and Islamist sects.

Feeling threatened by laws which decreed that women be flogged and sent to prison, Nafisi depicts herself in a state of estrangement from the town she had grown up in pre-evolutionary Iran. As Nafisi tries to adjust to the new circumstances around her, she develops a tendency to associate Iranian traditions with negative stereotypical images of the Eastern as degenerate and backward, and western culture with positive images of civilization, progress and development (Said, *Orientalism* 205-206). Nafisi's obsession with the act of veiling in the story is a prime example of the fact that veiling is described from a purely Western point of view, since it is viewed only as something which limits and obstructs. Unlike other hybrid writers, like Khaled-Hosseini in *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, who often talks about the veil as something which can be comforting and a source of security, Nafisi continuously portrays the veil as an evil machination by Eastern men to suppress women and bring them under their control. Definitely, at this level of comparison, it is obvious that Nafisi is representing an intricately feminine point of view in contrast to Hosseini's. Moreover, her inability to break free from the

Western negative portrayal of the veil is palpable: Nafisi confirms what Edward Said calls the “positional superiority” of the West which “gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self” (*Orientalism* 3)

Writing in retrospect, Nafisi’s memoir adds a layer of partiality to her already subjective account of events. Salman Rushdie in “Imaginary Homelands” says that when an exilic writes about his past, he “will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that [he] will, in short, create fictions” (428). Even Nafisi herself at one point in the story says that “her own life became a web of fiction” (*RLT* 317). Whether the “shards of memory” acquire greater status or seemed more trivial than in the past, Rushdie’s point is that this remembering and reconstructing is a very subjective process that can deviate from reality. Rushdie elaborates saying, “my India” is actually only “one version of all the hundreds of millions of possible versions” (“Imaginary Homelands” 429). Hence, Nafisi’s memoir must be considered not only in light of the “partial nature” that memories leave behind, but also as one version of many others that may be recounted. Derrida also confirms the existence of many ‘truths’ to nature. Using ‘woman’ as a metaphor for a universal and essential search for ‘truth,’ he explains that as a non “determinable identity” woman is as “multifarious” and diverse as a “golden-embroidered veil of lovely potentialities” (*Spurs* 49, 51). Within Derrida’s perception of “truth” as a “plural” entity, Nafisi’s text becomes one of many other versions of ‘truth’ (*Spurs* 51).

Nafisi’s text also needs to be read within the framework of what Rushdie calls “imaginative truth” that is created by a “selective memory” that imposes its own set of truths and power discourses on the text (Dabashi). For instance, though there are plenty of Iranian texts that she can read with her students in her private class, she chooses only English narratives, with the exception of “The Arabian Nights,” as part of her endeavor to connect civilization, culture and progress solely with the western world. Her choice of “The Arabian Nights” also reconfirms her partiality for western perceptions of the eastern culture as one which is full of “sensuality, its tendency to despotism, its aberrant mentality” (Dabshi). In addition to failing to mention a whole tradition of Iranian literature, Nafisi’s ‘selective memory’ obliterates the existence of powerful women in Iranian history. In an attempt to present only those women who are oppressed and abused, Nafisi steers clear of mentioning any of the powerful women who played an important part in the progress and development of Iran. The one woman that she does mention, Mrs. Parsa, the Minister of Education, is disempowered and executed for “corruption on earth” (*RLT* 113). Nafisi’s insistence on the systemic distortion of Iranian literary and social

history in the narrative unquestionably reaffirms the hierarchal binary between East and West. Edward Said in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* comments on this aspect:

The entire history of the nineteenth-century European thought is filled with such discriminations as these, made between what is fitting for us and what is fitting for them, the former designated as inside, in place, common, belonging, in a word above, the latter, who are designated as outside, excluded, aberrant, inferior, in a word below. (13-14)

In Salman Rushdie's "Imaginary Homelands" an association between fragmented "shards of memory" and broken mirrors is made. He says that the combination of a "fallible memory compounded by quirks of character and of circumstance," cause a writer's vision to be as fragmentary as a "broken mirror" (429). In other words, despite a writer's effort to hold on to facts and reality as he is looking backward, putting the memories together will be as elusive as reassembling a broken mirror. Whether it is the "physical fact of discontinuity" or a temporal disjunction, in which the past seems far distant from the present, texts offer one of many "imaginative" and "provisional" truths about the past. In Nafisi's own words she claims that "memories have ways of becoming independent of the reality they evoke" (429).

Within Rushdie's frame of argument, Nafisi's memoir needs to be read as a set of subjective and partial discourses that frame the text. Though at different times in the story Nafisi criticizes other writers and patriarchs in dictating their reality and recreating the world in their own image, she is oblivious to her own ability to act in that same manner. At one point in the narrative, as she is reading *Lolita* by Nabokov, she comments that Humbert's crime was that he not only physically victimized Lolita, but more importantly he took away her life by not allowing her "to articulate" her own story (*RLT* 41). In a similar manner, Nafisi comments that Khomeini's mistake was that he tried to recreate the Iranian population into his own "image" (*RLT* 50). Ironically, Nafisi makes the same mistake of recreating her students and their stories in her own likeness as she imposes her own set of truths and paradigms on the text.

Nafisi's inclination to present the world in a distorted, fragmentary state is clearly present from the first few pages of the narrative. As she describes the "room" which was to become the inner sanctuary of her students, she explains that her "place was always in the chair with its back to the window" (*RLT* 8). Choosing to view the outside world through the oval mirror opposite the window rather than directly through the window on which she purposefully turns her back, Nafisi succeeds at obtaining an indirect, distorted view of the

world that corresponds to her own set of imaginary truths. She says “That censored view intensified my impression that the noise came not from the street below but from some far-off place, a place whose persistent hum was our only link to the world we refused, for those few hours, to acknowledge” (RLT 8). Nafisi’s choice to blot out the outside world and to live inside the imaginary realm found in English texts reaffirms her commitment to the western paradigm as a hegemonic structure of universal value. This “relationship between Occident and Orient” involves, as Said points out, “a relationship of power, of domination of varying degrees of a complex hegemony” (*Orientalism* 5).

Nafisi’s admiration for the West as the standard against which the East should be judged resurfaces in her representation of her students. From the moment that these students come into her room, they are described as taking off “more than their scarves and robes.” Her statement that “Gradually, each one gained an outline and a shape, becoming her own inimitable self” reveals her distaste and rejection for the customs of the Eastern world (RLT 6). Her exaggeration of the effects of dress (veil) on personality and behavior reiterates the Orientalist binary of the East as closed, inert, irrational and unenlightened. It is only when these students become westernized in their habits, as they take off their veil and show their colorful clothes and put on their makeup, that they are able to come up to Nafisi’s level of intelligence and be able to appreciate the literary world of the West. Though most of Nafisi’s students seem to have habituated themselves to the rules and regulations of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Nafisi’s presence in their lives turns them into individuals equally estranged from their conventional norms and juxtaposed to being obsessed with getting rid of their old traditions and values in an attempt to streamline themselves in the image of a westernized Nafisi. In fact, many of them become so westernized in their habits that in comparison to other Iranians they become, in their own right, the official spokesmen for the west. When the novel *The Great Gatsby* is put on trial in one of Nafisi’s classes, some students, such as Zarrin, associate themselves so much with Nafisi’s point of view that they turn on their classmates, telling them that by seeing “the world in black and white” and being “drunk on the righteousness of their own fictions” they have become even more immoral than the western characters (in *The Great Gatsby*) who lie and cheat (RLT 132).

As Nafisi encourages each one of her students to break free from restrictions and to live life uninhibited, she creates an ulterior parallel world that makes it difficult for them to be satisfied with anything other than western ideals and values. For instance, when Nassrin admits to having had the courage to have a relationship with a man for the past few months, her excuse

for not having told them before is that she was “afraid” they, particularly Nafisi, “might not like him” (*RLT* 296). Nassrin’s need for Nafisi’s approval has complicated Nassrin’s world by forcing her to live “in so many parallel worlds: the so-called real world of her family work and society; the secret world of our class and her young man; and the world she had created out of her lies” (*RLT* 297). Nafisi’s continuous advice to her students to experience life and ‘fall in love,’ like the characters in her Western novels do, instead of bringing them happiness, engenders more complications in their lives.

As Nafisi teaches her students to appreciate the imaginary world to be found in Western literature, she inadvertently places the West as “the primary referent in theory and praxis” (Mohanty 242). Whether it is Nabokov, Fitzgerald, James or Austen, Nafisi reconfirms the image of the western world as the origin of all knowledge, civilization and enlightenment. From Nabokov, Nafisi teaches her students that even within the darkest stories of violence and rape, therein lies a celebration of art for art’s sake. Using Fitzgerald, Nafisi introduces her students to the concept of empathy explaining to them that “morality” in literature should not be about “fixed formulas about good and evil,” but rather about the ability of literature to make us question the “absolutes we believe in” (*RLT* 129). Asking her students not to see the world in “black and white,” Nafisi encourages them to question everything that is happening around them (*RLT* 132). She, in fact, is so taken by Gatsby’s “belief in his own romantic delusion” that she pronounces him of “heroic” stature, also stating that “it was the values inherent in Gatsby that would triumph” (*RLT* 141). Admiring Gatsby for his inability to differentiate between reality and the imagination, Nafisi encourages her students not to face reality and deal with their problems, but to escape to imaginary worlds.

While reading Henry James’ *Daisy Miller*, Nafisi makes an unmistakable association between integrity and resistance to the norms of society. She tells her students, “This struggle for power is rooted in the central character’s resistance to socially acceptable norms and in his desire for integrity and recognition” (*RLT* 213). She also explains to her students that James’ idea of home was essentially “bound up with the idea of civilization.” She says that James’ “affinity with England, and with Europe in general, came from that sense of civilization, a tradition of culture and humanness” (*RLT* 216). Nafisi’s portrayal of European culture as the center and origin of everything enlightened places the West as the “privileged norm” against which her students must measure themselves (Said, “In the Mind of Winter” 14). Edward Said in *The World, The Text, and the Critic* explains that when “our students are taught such things as ‘the humanities’ they are almost always taught that these classic texts embody, express, represent what is best in [the West], the

only, tradition” (21). He continues to explain that “the great texts, as well as the great teachers and the great theories, have an authority that compels respectful attention... because they are either old or they have power” (22). Looking up to Nafisi as their guide, her students integrate her reverence for James and the values that he represents. Last, but not least, as Nafisi discusses Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, she reiterates the importance of empathy in a cruel world.

Nafisi’s advice to her students that they should “enter” the world of their characters and “inhale the experience” reveals not only her appreciation of Western literature, but also her fascination with the West as the source of humanism, democracy and integrity. Her declaration in the middle of the book that as she was recording things in her diary, she felt satisfied in being able to impose on forces beyond her control a “rhyme” and “reason” also becomes applicable to her students (*RLT* 159). As she introduces her students to the world of western literature and shows them how refined and sophisticated it is, they have no other desire but to integrate her values, thereby reasserting the “flexible superiority of the West” over the East (Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* 7).

Chandra Mohanty in “Under Western Eyes” explains this same hierarchical binary but within a feminist perspective. According to her, first world women practice hegemony over third world women by producing a singular picture of each “that is fixed and contrastive.” She continues to say that based on the assumption that the West is the leading referent in values and power, first world women are usually represented as “educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions.” In contrast, third world women are represented as “ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family oriented, victimized” (243). By universalizing the picture of third world women as ‘powerless’ and ‘exploited,’ western literature makes it natural for first world women to practice hegemony over the first world women. In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Nafisi, as the representative of the West, practices hegemony over her students by showing them how it pays off to be associated with the culture in power. As westernized Iranians, they will become affiliated with qualities (modernity, education, civilization) that empower them to fight against abuse and harassment. By playing on their weaknesses and vulnerabilities as victims to an unjust system, she challenges them to transform themselves in her own westernized image of the strong, powerful female.

As part of her hegemony over the text, Nafisi also deliberately gives peripheral status to those characters that are unwilling to recreate themselves in her image. Unwilling to express the opinions of those subalterns that have

an independent voice from hers, Nafisi subjugates their voices, keeping them as underdeveloped sketches whose only function is to confirm the stereotypical picture of the Eastern as backward, violent and irrational. For instance, the argument that Mr. Nyazi, a conservative student, presents against reading *The Great Gatsby* reveals a backward Iranian who is too close minded to see beyond the superficial occurrences in the novel. Nafisi says, "He had demonstrated his own weakness: an inability to read a novel on its own terms. All he knows is judgment, crude and simplistic exaltation of right and wrong (*RLT* 128). Nafisi's opinion of Mr. Nyazi turns out to be not very different from her opinion of other non-westernized Iranians in the narrative. Mr. Ghomi and Mr. Nahvi are all depicted as sharing this same backward, demented mentality. Thus, Nafisi's choice not to include such people in her private classes reveals a deliberate effort on her part to dismiss them from her narrative.

When one of the most active students in the Muslim Student's Association burns himself in one of the classrooms in the university, Nafisi's guilt that she had never paid attention to someone like him (a conservative) causes her to become obsessed by his death. She says, "He who in life had been nothing to me in death had become an obsession." As Nafisi describes this burned figure on the stretcher, she admits to herself that she could not remember his name because feelings of resentment between the two groups, conservative and liberal, had "polarized" them, dividing the two into "us" and "them" (*RLT* 252). Her disapproval of this group's doctrines and principles had made them so alien to her that she never attempted to listen to them or make them part of her circle. She says that though she remembers "all the stories related to him and his comrades," she could not put a name or identity to him because he was part of a group that was insignificant to her (*RLT* 252). He belonged to a subaltern group that the West needed "to cancel, or at least subdue and reduce... its hostility" in order to absorb it "entirely" into the dominant mode of discourse (Said, *Orientalism* 87).

From the start of the narrative, Nafisi writes in a manner that blurs the spaces between herself and her students. Though she often complains that the Iranian state has abused its people by blurring the "lines and boundaries between the personal and the political," she makes the same mistake by obscuring the boundaries between her public obligations as a teacher and her private life as an Iranian woman (*RLT* 273). This blurring of the distinction between the private and public then makes it easier for Nafisi to stray away from facts as she indulges in an imaginary world of extrapolations. In the incident of the burned student, for instance, after Nafisi expresses her thoughts on the subject, she digresses into a description of how he burned himself. Though she was not in the room with him, she says "I kept thinking of

him coming early to the university with two full cans of gasoline... I see him going into an empty classroom and pouring gasoline over his head" (*RLT* 252). Following Nafisi's description, the reader forgets that this is the narrator extrapolating on how things might have happened and takes this account as true to life.

In a similar manner, Nafisi's closeness to her students in her private classes blurs the boundaries between professor and student, as all are united by the common malady of being women under the control of the Islamic Republic of Iran. They sit together, eat, share their secrets and find solutions to each other's problems. Nafisi says that for those few hours we felt "free to discuss [our] pains and our joys, our personal hang-ups and weaknesses." Nafisi's next sentence, "We articulated all that happened to us in our own words and saw ourselves, for once, in our own image" shows how strong an affinity she had with her students (*RLT* 57). They, like her, were trapped in a woman's body and needed saving from the "brown men" that were victimizing them (Spivak 33). Despite the differences in their backgrounds, social and religious affiliations, Nafisi depicts these women as being united in their desire to escape from the backward world of the East into the enlightened world of the West. Representing her students in her own image, Nafisi gives herself the prerogative to explain their every move and to express their every desire and fear.

The lines between reality and fiction in the narrative are so minimal, that when Nafisi switches from true events to imaginary ones, the reader is not able to notice this shift. In chapter seven of the first book, Nafisi discusses how censorship affected everyone in Iran and how her private classes were in part an escape from the "blind censor" (*RLT* 25). In the very next chapter Nafisi asks the reader to imagine one of her students, Sanaz, leaving her house, donning her robe and scarf and walking in the streets of Tehran. As Nafisi describes how Sanaz' gait and gestures change in this public place, she no longer seems to be imagining but describes the scene as if it were unfolding in front of her. Nafisi continues this practice of speaking for Sanaz as she discusses with her reader Sanaz's probable thoughts as she is walking down the street. Moving from one idea to the next, Nafisi finally decides that "Most probably, she tries to distance her mind as much as possible from her surroundings" (*RLT* 27). A few lines later, Nafisi says "These girls, my girls, had both a real history and a fabricated one. Although they came from different backgrounds, the regime that ruled them had tried to make their personal identities and histories irrelevant" (*RLT* 27-28). Unhappy with the fact that the regime had depersonalized people's lives, Nafisi makes the same mistake with her students. By generalizing her students' actions into one

universal experience, as when describing one of them walking down the street, she also practices “hegemony” over them (Gramsci 673). As the representative of the first world woman, Nafisi assumes control over her characters and narrative by categorizing them on the “basis of a shared oppression” (Mohanty 244).

As Nafisi manages in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* to impose the West as the privileged norm against which her students must measure up to, they strongly aspire to live up to her standards, assimilating her values and acquiring her dreams. Refusing everything Iranian, these students no longer just want to dream about a better world, but they also become restless in not being able to attain it. Yassi’s solution to her problems and frustrations is to leave to America, to live like her uncles live, presumably free. At one point, even Nafisi admits to having had a negative effect on her students when she tells her magician, “You know, being with me, hearing about my past experiences, they keep creating this uncritical, glowing picture of that other world, of the West...” (RLT 281). When Nassrin calls Nafisi to tell her that she is on her way out of Iran, the other students all agree that “Nassrin has gotten the message from Dr. Nafissi... That we should all leave” (RLT 324). Menna confirms this saying, “I mean, you set up a model for us... that staying here is useless, that we should all leave if we want to make something of ourselves” (RLT 325). Though Nafisi admits that “guilt” had become part of her “make-up,” she is “startled” when she hears the “bitterness” of her students’ accusations. Nafisi has been willing and ready to fill their minds with dreams and hopes of a better life, but once her students directly point out her position as a mediator or “interpreter” of the western world coming to rescue third world women, she shies away from what she calls the “burden of choices” of her students (RLT 324). Realizing the mistake she had done in selling them a false fantasy, Nafisi defends herself by saying “people’s choices were their own” (RLT 341).

In her epilogue, Nafisi says, “I left Iran, but Iran did not leave me” (RLT 341). This statement carries many implications, but the most likely one is that when Nafisi left her country, she experienced strong feelings of nostalgia and alienation. Though she steers clear from mentioning this estrangement from her country in her memoir, her interviews and correspondences to her friends reveal a definite sense of loss. In a letter to her old student Manna, Nafisi tells her “Next to your massive sense of suspense and uncertainty, I feel so fake, so vacant” (“Do I have a life?”). As Said puts it in “The Mind of Winter,” “the achievements of any exile are permanently undermined by his or her sense of loss” (439). Having left everything that is familiar and no longer fighting for a cause, Nafisi’s life no longer had any direction or purpose.

As a hybrid living in a western society, Nafisi probably also experienced what most exiles do, which is a sense of estrangement from a culture that is very different from her own. Escaping from feelings of repression, Nafisi undergoes a very different set of negative emotions that keeps her from ever feeling really at home in the west. Though Nafisi refrains from talking about feelings and emotions in the epilogue, some of the facts that she recounts reaffirm this sense of alienation. For instance, she mentions that Nassrin, Mitra and Sanaz were now living in the West. However, her deliberate dismissal of their feelings at this point strongly suggests that they, too, were suffering from loss and displacement. Having been the force which encouraged them to leave, Nafisi would not have failed to mention their feelings of joy had they had any. Suffering from displacement, "fragmentation, a disturbance of direction" these girls were probably experiencing a "condition of terminal loss" (Goldberg 79). Yassi's earlier comment that "Over here we have an identity. We can make something of our lives. Over there life is unknown" seems an adequate description of their situation (RLT 287).

Like Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby*, once these students tried to realize the dream that Nafisi had sold them of the "uncritical, glowing picture" of the West, they were well on their way to corrupting that dream (RLT 243). Nafisi's comment in book two that Gatsby's dream "was never meant to be more than a dream" and that "Gatsby never should have tried to possess his dream" confirm her lack of faith in this dream's potential to turn into reality (RLT 115, 143). Nafisi says that "The city, like Daisy, has in it a promise, a mirage that when reached becomes debased and corrupted" (RLT 142). In a similar manner, once these girls reached the West and tried to live their dream, they discovered that it was not theirs for the taking. As émigré exiles, these girls were left on the "boundaries of society," marginalized "on the bases of secondary sociological and anthropological universals" (Mohanty 244). As outsiders living within, they are faced with the dilemma of being in a "Space without places, time without duration" (Althusser 78). Living in a "discontinuous state of being," they have traded a real 'home' and identity for something that is imaginary and fragmented (Said, "In the Mind of Winter" 440).

As the westernized Iranian, Nafisi had come back to Iran after many years of study in the U.S. feeling like "an emissary from a land that did not exist, with a stock of dreams, coming to reclaim this land as my home" (RLT 89). Though Nafisi clearly associates herself here with the colonizer who has come 'to reclaim' the land, she paradoxically undermines her own authority by stating that this land she was coming from is 'nonexistent.' Conscious at one level that her dreams were imaginary, Nafisi, nevertheless, goes ahead and plays the part of the savior who has come to rescue her people from abuse

and victimization. Powerless and fragmented herself, but refusing to acknowledge it in the story, she uses her students as pawns over which she can enforce her authority and superiority. Creating them in her own image, she exposes them to the same kind of victimization to which Nabokov exposes his characters. In the first chapters of the novel, she says that Lolita “becomes a double victim: not only her life but also her life story is taken from her” (*RLT* 41). In a similar manner, Nafisi abuses her students by not only selling them a dream which is imaginary, but also by creating them in her own image of the progressive Iranian whose continuous deprecation of Iranian culture becomes by extension a fascination with the West.

As a hybrid writer who has an opportunity to bridge the gap between the East and West, Nafisi does little to avail herself of this opportunity. Writing a memoir about her irreconcilable differences with Eastern culture, Nafisi’s narrative inadvertently confirms stereotypes and widens the gap between the two cultures in a way that leaves no room for mediation. Nafisi exclaims, “Too often we conclude that we are practical creatures, essentially political animals. But in us there is a far greater impulse - a longing for what I will bluntly call the universal. And it is this leap towards middle ground that we move closer to what effectively binds us: culture, stories, language. For it is here in what I like to call the Republic of the Imagination that we are most humane” (*The Stuff Dreams are Made of* 11). Nafisi’s need for the universal or what she calls ‘Republic of the Imagination,’ is in many ways a desire to belong to something that is larger than herself. However, when this process becomes a denial of the self and its true home in terms of traditions and culture, it creates an opportunity to widen the chasm by rejecting everything which belongs to this self. The result is a fragmented, deconstructed self that is ashamed of its past, unsure of its present and afraid of its future, tripping more than once only to fall over the spaces ‘in between’, left more cavernous and hollow than ever.

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