
NEGOTIATING IDENTITIES IN *READING (BEYOND) LOLITA IN TEHRAN*: HYBRIDITY OR NEO – ORIENTALISM?

NILAKSHI GOSWAMI

Abstract: ‘Identity’ is one of the fundamental concepts of cultural analysis. Both an agent and a prime effect of culture, an ‘identity’ in the contemporary times can be consolidated as a thinking ‘subject’ owing to its attribution to the political, cultural and social transformation in the conceptions of self; and life writings such as autobiographies, confessions and memoir writings constitute one such introspection of the evolution of ‘identity’.

The study of women’s autobiography and memoir of the late twentieth century and twenty first century ostensibly relates to the issue of self, representation and ‘identity’. Thus, “autobiographies provide a stage where women writers, born again in the act of writing, may experiment with reconstructing the various discourses – of representation, of ideology- in which their subjectivity has been formed”, states Gilmore (85). The paper here deals with *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003) by Azar Nafisy, and places her autobiographical memoir within the broader historical and political contexts in which specific cultural or religious interpretations are time and again exposed by the author in terms of its gendered biases. The narrative is, as much as, the story of Naficy’s experience, it is also the politics of identity and affiliation.

Not discrediting the fact that this life – narrative has a tendency towards self – Orientalising, feeding the European stereotyping machinery and its Islamophobia, and thereby, enforcing a harmful, widespread stereotype of Iranians, my argument centers on the fact that these memoirs do not have a deliberate intention of pursuing a certain discourse. Rather it is the socio – political context into which they are received can direct their interpretation in certain ways. While it is obvious that woman’s autobiographical writings are a valuable social document and a vital resource for exploring the contemporary culture, the paper would further delve into how construction and negotiation of identity within the diaspora that leads to an emergence of a new identity. Hence, my work explores the social shaping of interiority while examining how one’s sense of ‘identity’ is culturally rooted and contingent on possibilities provided by particular cultures.

Keywords: diaspora, Iranian gendered discourses, memoir, neo – orientalism.

Introduction: ‘Identity’ is one of the most fundamental concepts of cultural analysis. Both an agent and a prime effect of culture, an ‘identity’ in the contemporary times can be consolidated as a thinking ‘subject’ owing to its attribution to the political, cultural and social transformation in the perceptions of ‘identity’. Using Azar Nafisy’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (2003), the paper centers on the political turbulence and cultural chaos of Iran that led to Naficy’s political exile. Drawing on the notions of imagined spaces of ‘home’, Naficy constructs it as a temporal and portable entity. The paper places Nafisy’s memoir within the broader historical and political contexts in which specific cultural or religious interpretations are, time and again, exposed by the author in terms of its gendered biases. This narrative is as much the story of Naficy’s experience; it also entails the politics of affiliation and her quest for identity. With due credits to the

criticism the text has acquired, it can, in fact be read as a ‘New – Orientalist narrative’, feeding the European stereotyping machinery and its Islamophobia. It could also be brought into focus how “its selected and exaggerated account of life in post revolutionary Iran could enforce a harmful, widespread stereotype of Iranians so as to make them see, subhuman” (6), states Fatemeh Keshavarz.

Self- identity or the sense of ‘I’ are never ‘a priori’ or given but discursively produced with reference to a constellation of discourses, vividly discernable in Nafisy’s memoir. Some of the diverse discourses, which underpin different self-representations in this memoir, are religion, secularism and fundamentalism, nationalism and diaspora, and female body and gender discourse. Gilmore states, “autobiographies [memoirs in this context] provide a stage where women writers, born again in the act of writing, may experiment with reconstructing the

various discourses – of representation, of ideology- in which their subjectivity has been formed (85). This subjectivity, in turn, gives rise to an ever evolving sense of self and a quest for identity. Thus, the study of women's autobiography and memoir of the late twentieth century and twenty first century ostensibly relates to the issue of self, representation and subjectivity.

Set in contemporary Iran, Nafisy in *RLT* recounts her experience as an exilic Iranian who returned from US to Iran during the 1979 revolution. Nafisy taught in the University of Tehran until she decided to depart from Iran in 1997, owing to her refusal to wear veil and her subsequent expulsion from the University. Thus, the 1979 Revolution led to a mass migration of Iranian people, like Nafisy, across the national borders, mostly towards the West, Azar Nafisy being one of them. Nafisy is undeniably a part of the privileged section of the Iranian society, for whom the access to migration and Western literature was possible. Being part of such a small demography skews the perception of the revolution amongst the dominant population of Iranian citizens who were practicing Muslims or belonged to the lower class rungs of the society. Thus, the aim of this paper is to examine Nafisy's quest for her identity as a minority in the West, analyzing her diasporic experience and how the concept of 'home' comes about a change in the contemporary times of globalization. The autobiography also focuses on the Iranian Revolution, the Iran – Iraq war, and its aftermath. It celebrates the enormous power of literature explicated by the secret reading club initiated by Azar Nafisy with some of her students where they discussed books from Western literature like *Lolita*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Pride and Prejudice* and so on. Using Western literature as the center of their literary discussions, interlacing the personal experiences of the pre – revolutionary times in Iran as well in its aftermath with literary discussions, Nafisy portrays the cultural and social milieu surrounding them, and in the process probes into her own quest for identity.

Since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Islam and the Islamic movements have been the central tenets of analysis within which debates on women and gender have been placed. Religion and religious ideology have been singled out to explain the subordination of women. The Iranian government coerces women with compulsory 'hijab' – issues men do not have to be concerned about. This evidently underlies the state

sanctioned gender bifurcation – women's oppression and their sexual repression by men. This in turn, denies women the liberty to think about the concrete matters of the state, for instance, about politics and civil liberties which require much greater consideration. Nafisy in the memoir describes how the continual repression and lack of freedom leads to her flight from University of Tehran and then, from Iran. However, there is a clear indication of the fact that *RLT's* depiction of Iran is more in terms of a culture unreceptive to Western literature and books by Western authors. The autobiographical memoir denies any merit to Iranian literature or native literary figures. Instead, Iranian women and veil is presented as inevitably filled with misery and suffering. Critics like Fatimah Keshavarz clearly state that that Nafisy's memoir is an exemplification of the New Orientalist narrative. She believes that "its selective and exaggerated account of life in post revolutionary Iran enforces a harmful, widespread stereotype of Iranians so distorted so as to make them subhuman" (6). As the writer suggests, the title itself has unmistakable undertone of Otherness to it; as if reading *Lolita* is something one cannot expect to happen in a place like Tehran.

Nafisy in her autobiography states, "[m]y constant obsession with the veil had made me buy a wide black robe with kimono-like sleeves . . . I had gotten to the habit of withdrawing my hands into the sleeves and pretending that I had no hands (167)" – a clear indication that Nafisy views headscarves as the icon of oppression in the aftermath of the revolution. However, those Muslim women who choose veil as a conscious political choice find no presence in Nafisy's narrative. Thus, even though *RLT* is one of the foremost attempts at gender documentation, its reductionist portrayal of the Middle East and Muslim, as a religion in the Western world, is problematic. While it is obvious that woman's autobiographical writings are a valuable social document and a vital resource for exploring the contemporary culture, the paper further delves into how construction and negotiation of identity within the diaspora leads to an emergence of a new subjectivity. An exclusive focus on autobiographies as a source of social document could, however, lead to a subsuming of the individual in the social. This could result in a flattening out and excessive homogenization of the represented subject. Hence, the paper explores the social shaping of interiority while examining how the sense of self is

culturally rooted and contingent on possibilities provided by particular cultures.

Not discrediting the fact that *RLT* has a tendency towards self – Orientalisation, my argument centers on the fact that these memoirs do not have a deliberate intention of pursuing a certain discourse, rather it is the socio – political context into which they are received can direct their interpretation in certain ways. Naficy, indeed, presents an unpleasant and hypocritical portrayal of Iranian women, replicating the position of Muslim women as silent and passive, emphasizing its self – Orientalizing qualities. The argument centers on how Naficy's 'identity' in the face of diaspora, is a product of her transmigratory existence and hence, is much more fluid, malleable and at times even contradictory, and therefore, a product of its hybridity – an interrogation of the 'third space' (Bhabha) created in and by exile. According to Bhabha, 'unhomeliness' is not about physical absence of 'home' but rather the concept captures "something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world in an unhallowed place . . ." ("The World and the Home" 141 - 153). This leads to an emergence of a sense of new 'self', where one's sense of national identity is not marked by territories but is in a state of constant negotiation towards the Eastern and Western borders. As referred by Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* (1994), hybridity is not a mere result of infusion of two or more culture. Rather, it is an avenue of negotiation between or beyond binaries that concocts the ideas of culture and identity as dynamic (13 - 14) and thus, can be amply manifested in *RLT*, given the political background of the memoir where identity is in constant negotiation across the Eastern and Western boundaries. Hybridity therefore, challenges the notions of cultures and identities as fixed or stable entities.

Migration of a group leads to their subsequent regrouping into a new location, giving rise to reconstruction of new histories and reconfigurations of their ethnic projects. The general assumption that migrants and minorities will exhibit an exclusively loyal allegiance to the nation state of its origin is therefore, now debatable in the face of globalization. Naficy is, therefore, an international citizen. Her memoir is neither about happy endings nor does it

leave us in a forlorn sense of despair. Its emphasis is to project a hopeful world of possibilities. The autobiographical memoir follow the author's return back to her natal place, where readers are shown the author's utter sense of fragmentation and ostracization in her homeland. America in the narrative, then, is not mere marketplace of desire, but a place where her imagined live is negotiated. In *RLT*, through her travel between Iran and America, her home and her host country, Nafisy acquires a sense of community that is both situated in specific geographic location, yet not tied down to a definitive sense of nationality. Her strive to carve out an identity for herself could be described as a convoluted process of growth and movement.

As Sanah Fotuhi observes, memoirs like Nafisy's *RLT*, generalizes the position of all Iranian women as static beings under oppression, who could be freed only through the intervention of the West, Western literature in particular. However, she also states how such diasporic authors, despite taking part in the self – Orientalizing discourse, cannot be said to be native informants. This is because "these narratives do not have deliberate intention to pursue a certain discourse; rather the socio – political context into which they are received can direct their interpretation in certain ways". Besides, the fact which cannot be overlooked is that these narratives are personal accounts of healing (Fotuhi 128 - 132). Naficy's work, undeniably, reframes both patriarchy and Iranian nationality, and reconstructs the female and cultural 'subjectivity'. Although she has been accused of serving the Western machinery of Muslim stereotyping and as a willing comprador reinforcing the one- dimensional portrayal of Muslim women (Hamid Dabashi), it cannot be, nonetheless, disregarded that her identity is a resultant of her lingering between the cultural juncture of the politics of her time and her Western upbringing, which is unable to negotiate with the socio – political arena of the Iranian society, between her kinship with the country of origin and affiliation with the host country. Her narrative is reflective of her sense of individual reality, thereby, foregrounding how the notion of self and subjectivity have been recast, so as to investigate into the complex view of the issues dealing with identity and selfhood.

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Nilakshi Goswami/English and Foreign Languages University/G- 11/Akka Mahadevi Hostel/Tarnaka/Hyderabad
- 500007/nilakshi.gswm@gmail.com/9177706884