

Authoring *Reading Lolita in Tehran* in America: Diasporic Memoir and Rebirth of the Author

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Abstract:

Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is a diasporic memoir that simultaneously challenges Roland Barthes' *Death of the Author* and benefits from the said vacant position Barthes bid farewell. The vacated authorial seat, previously occupied by a majority of eastern and western male authors by tradition, is an invitation for diasporic female authors. Azar Nafisi and other Iranian female memoirists like Marina Nemat, Masih Alinejad, Shirin Ebadi, and others have long had their voices, fantasies, and beings conventionally constrained by the banality of their day-to-day lives, not necessarily by the male figures in their lives, but under the strict patriarchal watch that speculates every dim corner of their private lives. The exilic life in diaspora is a condition of liminality that thrusts the individual into an in-between state of constant becoming. In diaspora, the selective nature of memory, as an elusive and illusive faculty, contributes to the author's process of identity-making. The homeless author cuts off her roots from homeland, so that she may float on the tides with no solid destination; but the uncertainty, also, presents authorship as a liminal initiatory step for the author to construct her identity where belonging seems to be a bygone tale. As such, Nafisi, the previous *reader* of Nabokov's *Lolita* in Tehran, occupies the vacated seat of the dead author as a diasporic author and pens her worldview from the position of an exile in form of a memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, a mouthpiece for the hitherto silent reader.

Keywords: Death of the Author, Liminality, Middle Eastern Diaspora, Iranian Diaspora, Belonging, Memoir, Exile.

There is curious ambiguity in the title of Azar Nafisi's first memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. On the face of it, the first and foremost matter in the memoir is *reading* a written text; but the entanglement of a variety of readings with the text(s) proves the act beyond what seems to be a silent act. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (*Reading Lolita*), indeed, situates a process in which the borderline between writing and reading is intently blurred along with the authority of the author that is claimed by either of the parties, the writer and the reader. The term *author* has been on the

ebb and flow of power for some time. The post-structuralist attention that Roland Barthes paid, in defiance of the “author having cultural capital” and “the idea of [his] solitary genius,” to the significance of the interaction between the text and the reader only temporarily led to the *death of the author* (Bold 2016, 3-4). Almost about the same time that Barthes published “Death of the Author,” Michel Foucault essayed to redefine what was generally meant by the term *author*. While for the former the author’s death was a necessity for the text and the reader to come to life, the latter circumvented their execution by defining the term in a broader, extra-textual sense. In both cases of course, “this author was not only solitary and literary but white and male . . . more likely [as] a site of contestation,” for the newly rising voices, those previously unheard of, to occupy the vacancy, even if not forever (Bishop and Starkey 2006, 16-17). By the same token, the Foucauldian notion of *authorship*, beyond the confines of the act of writing, stands at odds with the Barthesian definition of the author as the bygone progenitor of the produced text. Foucault admits such a privileged position of the author is created by “the conditions that fostered the formulation of . . . fundamental critical category of ‘the man and his work’” (2010, 1476). He also agrees with Barthes on “the link between writing and death manifested in the total effacement of the individual characteristics that a writer generates between himself and his text [, which] cancel[s] out the signs of his particular individuality” (1477). This essay offers *Reading Lolita in Tehran* as a possibility for Nafisi as a formerly Middle Eastern Iranian reader to reclaim the author’s position only a few decades after Barthes’ and Foucault’s debate on the death or life of the author. The memoir adjusts and fictionalizes Nafisi’s previous life in homeland for the non-compatriot, necessarily Western, and specifically U.S. reader, and works as a case in point “of how to read in a writerly way” as Barthes seems to suggest (Kao 2015, 277). To briefly highlight the difference between the two reading strategies, we could say that writerly reading “produces new interpretations, that refuses to ‘plasticise’ a text and remove it from its continuous changeability,” whereas the “readerly way is to inherit a set of already-formed readings . . . as a closed collection of timeless objects” (278). The question is whether, by reading in a writerly way, it is possible to revoke the death of the author and breathe life into the bygone authority, albeit in a whole new condition. Relatively, we could ask whether *Reading Lolita* as an Iranian diasporic text, highlights memoir as a manipulatable genre for a Middle-Eastern female author who aims to reoccupy the authorial position of the Barthesian dead classic author.

Barthes and Foucault agreed that the term *author* gained power in the modern times, entitling both the writer and publisher with their various rights regarding the inscribed words. With “writing . . . slowly becoming more open and democratic,” the claim effectively shattered the allegedly illusory entitlement of the two claimants to the ownership of the published letters, which were since recognized as an independent living entity, endlessly reborn with each individual readership (Bold 2016, 5). Added to what Barthes and Foucault had maintained about the *work*—what is penned on the paper—Wolfgang Iser later stated that the aesthetic nature of a work only renders a partial value of the *work* as a whole. What brings about the artistic creation may not and

cannot equate with the aesthetic one, “the realization accomplished by the reader” (1972, 279). The living status of the work—and not its material and linguistic existence—lies, according to him, not within the domain of the author but the reading process. For Iser, the value of the text is determined by the “gestalt” of its comprehension:

. . . an individual act of seeing-things-together . . . inseparable from the reader’s expectations, and where we have expectations, there too we have one of the most potent weapons in the writer’s armory—illusion. (289)

But this clarification leads to an equally significant manoeuvrability; the writer uses the same armoury to regain the lost authority; after all, the “literary meaning is not an innocent act” from the ideological and political roots (Kálmán 1997, 56). Accordingly, such “slogans” as the author’s death seem “empty;” instead, “we should reexamine the empty space left by the author’s disappearance . . . its new demarcations, and the reapportionment of this void; we should await the *fluid* functions released by this disappearance” (Foucault 1969, 1479). The fluidity is precisely where the function of an exilic diaspora writer takes its turn from having formerly been an invisible, muted, marginal reader, to a voice that rises to a new-born authorial one. In fact, Barthes’ death of the author generates the vacancy where the hitherto silent, now mutinous diasporic memoirist fits his/her memoir in a popular Western genre.

Writing in diaspora is that new breath that, once exhaled, challenges the Barthesian death sentence. The challenge can be even more noticeable in the works of female diasporic authors, whose voices, fantasies, and beings rise from the constrained banality of their day-to-day lives—their former domestic lives often fictionalized as “a colonial harem”—and under the strict watch of the patriarchal laws which speculates every dim nook and cranny of their private lives (DePaul 2008, 78). Such colonial association is, of course, based on two grounds: the first is the depiction of the Iranian woman living in a patriarchal social condition which enforces the restrictions on her daily life, from dress code to social interactions; and the second ground relates to the way that the Western memoir market desires the Iranian woman to be depicted in a patriarchal “harem” by the memoirist. While the first analogy of the Iranian women’s condition in Iran is entangled with the factual history of their lives, the second view is a combination of the market’s demand for dense and at times exaggerated images in addition to what is readily engraved in the mind of the American reader and the memoirist as her past life. In both of these two senses, Iranian women at large are shown as being caged in what DePaul calls a “colonial harem” with the gaze of an essentially patriarchal society dictating them how to live. Azar Nafisi’s selective memory, in her confrontation with the gaze, chooses the scenes of her memoir by “depicting post-revolutionary women as helpless,” in such a way that Hamid Dabashi describes as a call for the “white men saving brown women from brown men” (DePaul 2008, 84; 2011, 69). the depiction, of course, contrasts her own character as a bold and heroic “mouthpiece for an entire country . . . creating a work that plays to western desires to orientalise Middle Eastern countries” (Clemens 2014, 584). The contrast between

these female images leads Nafisi to be reluctant in appreciating the voices of the *other* women, those that do not accord with hers or her team of loyal students, and to depict them as the unsavoury odd ones out of Nafisi's close-knit circle of confidantes. Razieh's moment is a case in point as one of Nafisi's female university students whose name suitably resonates as religious, and who dares to chastise, and thus startle Nafisi for having left "their small college to teach at the University of Tehran" (Nafisi 2003, 222); Razieh declines Nafisi's invitation to participate in her future classes at the University, despite her avid interest in literature. Her physical and emotional features are described as categorically different from the girls of the private reading club:

... a strange mixture of contradictory passions... bitter and determined, stern and tough, ... an inarticulate writer...a figure wrapped in a black chador, a small figure[with a] narrow face and large eyes, *like an owl's, or an imp's* in some invented tale. (222)

Razieh is an outsider to Nafisi's group, one of the women who, according to the narrator, "envy people like you and we want to be you; we can't, so we destroy you" (222). The author's recollection, here, discriminates between the female students who follow her lead and those who, perhaps year later, have the same worldview as Nafisi's on their own. Razieh's instance is one that can attune the analogy of the "colonial harem" to the mind-set of the western reader and promote him/her to patronize the diasporic author that draws the story for his/her eyes. Nafisi's educational background in the States provides her with the advantage of knowing this about the cultural market of the American readership. As such, she benefits from the now destabilised conventions of authorship and, "influenc[ed by her] imagined world" (DePaul 2008, 76), narrates the lives of those like Razieh—in contrast with the members of her reading club—in diaspora through the writerly reading of *Lolita*.

We should now consider the condition that facilitates Nafisi's voice and memory as those of a female diasporic memoirist to rise beyond the restrictions of her former life in Iran. Hamid Naficy refers to the exilic life of diaspora as one that is possible only in a liminal space, an in-between state of constant becoming. For the writer in diaspora, "identity . . . occurs in the space between cultural borders" (Ogan 2001, 6). As such, liminality—also known by Homi Bhabha as hybridity—is not a one-time event like birth, one which initiates with its happening a necessary beginning and an inevitable end; it continually recurs along the way. In diaspora, one simply cannot *be*, but constantly *becomes*. Therefore, the lack of beginning or end of any sort defies a definite sense of identity, birth, or an eventual death. The exile, whether self-willed like Nafisi or obligated like many political asylum seekers, becomes uprooted from his/her homeland, floats on the flows of change; therefore, it is almost impossible, at least in the beginning, for the exile to cling to any sense of belonging. Identity as a matter of essentially constant becoming turns to a constant reshaping by the bits and pieces that the exile voluntarily or otherwise gathers around him/her, and in accordance with the proximity of the social

interpellation, an illusion tried to be defined through the subject's view on his/her self. Thus, in such a liminal space as diaspora, the certainty of states of birth and death—of the Barthesian author, reader, or any identity—is caught in the flow of the constant change, in the dynamic of the social forces. Liminality is an essentially foreign event; however, it is better highlighted once the individual is distant from the familiarity of what was once known as home, and is positioned within the diasporic space of constant becoming. Feeling exiled, in fact, takes the initial steps in one's homeland where one no longer feels he/she belong, and the affinities with her society is lost into meaninglessness. However, in the condition of geographic deterritorialization, the liminal tone remains less critical, more subtle and less explicit, the reason for which may be the societal pressure still weighing on one's thoughts and heart. Therefore, when memory, as the impact of the present conditioning, is activated retrospectively—versus the factual validity of history which is the fruit of the past, it works under the influence of both past and present life conditions of the writer as well as the prospect of the future for the diasporic author. In this regard, Nafisi's *Reading Lolita*, published in 2003, about 15 years after her immigration to the States (Nafisi 2003, 341), sounds like a well-settled one that is far passed that liminal stage of diaspora, a memoir written from the author's selective bank of recollections as remembered and made sense of in her current mind-set and with regards to what it may bring forth to her, a recollection that comes back from the future.

The selective nature of memory may function in such a way that is both elusive and illusive, a characteristic that, with the help of intriguing assets like old family films and photographs, provides for the dislocated writer the opportunity to tailor a lived experience that could lead to their growth in the void of the new home. Exile is a trauma, be it self-willed or forced upon the individual. It is a divorce from anything that once felt familiar, whether appealing or otherwise. Nafisi, in the same fashion, observes the new land to redefine what life may have meant back in homeland, now that she is miles and years away from it. Past memory is a necessity to live by, until the time gives the exile the luxury to have planted new memories in the new home. The exile needs this sense of belonging to survive; otherwise they will be devoid of agency of any sort. Creativity, thus, turns to a life force, so as to render this invisible, anonymous being the comfort of the return of authority, the authorship of one's life. Coming to such conclusion is the beginning of becoming, not in the new land, but in a third space that Hamid Naficy defines as 'liminality.'

The author has his/her roots cut off from the soil, and for some seemingly endless time, they float on the tides of waves with no solid destination to land on to. What necessitates the exile to write memoir as a "catalyst . . . for an 'economy of affect'" is the uncanny nature of that liminal nowhere land and the readership of such displacement (Ostby 2007, 74). The essential fluidity of in-betweenness enforces a "recontextualization of the . . . text by" a hybrid "intertext that replaces relations to the source literature with relations to literary traditions in the receiving culture that a reader of the translation must possess" (Venuti 2011, 185). The new condition contradicts the

tie with one's past life; for, as sweet and idealistic as it may seem, setting out for a new life is a herculean task for the individual—the exile, the refugee, or the immigrant—in diaspora, facing the unknown, the destabilizing forces of the past, and uprootedness. At odd times, even, the illusory and idealized version of the past memories helps one to forget about the anxiety of what may or may not await her; at other times, the past is what exactly she/he desires to run away from, the nightmare of the bygone life haunting the rootless exile to the end. Nevertheless, for Nafisi as a long diasporic female author, freed from the patriarchal gaze of the past and in a post-liminal state, the dam can be already broken and the words flooding out, so much so that nothing could bring a halt to this flow of memories. The liminal space combines the identity of the author and the reader within a different set of codes as the moment of identification *becomes*. Nafisi publishes *Reading Lolita* in post-9/11 times, conveniently at a time that the American hostile sentiments against the Middle Eastern Muslims and Iran, coinciding with George W. Bush addressing Iran as the “Axis of Evil,” were at its apex (Dabashi 2011, 58). It is in such atmosphere that Nafisi's voice as an exilic one plays by the hegemonic rules of the new land that selectively works on her memory of the past, and makes a bestseller of her memoir in the market of the American readership.

As a female Middle-Eastern (Iranian) author and by the laws of her homeland, Nafisi suggests that she narrates the untold tales of domestic and social life, as well as the mundane banality of not just her own, but many other Iranian women's invisible lives that belong with her social class. Such invisibility she talks about may seem at odds with today's way that Iranian women participate in cultural, political and social aspects of life. But the truth is even today the frameworks of conventions are designed in such a way that leaves the minimum liberty for a woman in a given social status to enjoy manoeuvrability on her life path. As the convention rules and by the time she reaches her mid-life period, an urban woman like her is will expected to be married, with a husband and two kids to tend to and gradually accustomed to the day-to-day force of habit, almost oblivious of when and where she left her dreams and identity behind. The laws of the land, despite having changed their colours on the surface of everyday modernity, still favour patriarchy and family-orientedness, and the conventions divorce the woman's self from her female body. Hardly among the Middle-Eastern women does a full awakening take place from such a spiritual hibernation; yet if it does, the outburst of the untold tales flows vehemently, lashing out in an accusatory tone and a blinding bias against all men. Almost no man is ever portrayed contrarily; every man becomes a potential enemy and connives against this rage, this rising desire from the ashes. Likewise, it is through the commiseration and commemoration of the past, and those of her chosen authors—ironically three out of the four Western authors are male—that Nafisi demonstrates the “desire to ‘allo-identity,’ to read [her] self across . . . *other selves*” (Avtar Brah, qtd. in Malek 2015, 367). For this reason, the tenacity in Nafisi' quest for the rebirth of this new authorial voice, what she has long been deprived of, seems as relentless towards the western fictional characters like Nabokov's Humbert Humbert as her fellow women/girls and men from her own background society.

Either as an involuntary or self-exerting exile in the liminal and post-liminal life of diaspora, Nafisi's memory of the past turns to an illusion of a safe haven of *belonging* that is no longer associable, the nostalgic flashback of not-such-a-sweet home. For, had it been so, there would have been no reason for her to leave *home* and be pushed away from it in the first place. Her past achievements—acknowledged by a few and almost unknown to the public—fade away as far-fetched ideas no longer having any real trace in her life in exile. Becoming in liminality—as is the case with most of exiles/immigrants—starts from the estranged uncanny within, where the old refrains from integrating with the new. One feels lost as to where one should call home and where the heart beats for, the place that has so far built up their identity within, or the new land which appears indifferent to their exilic history.

Globalization and displacement, today, align with the rising interest in auto-fiction as a genre that focuses on identity when it is uprooted from its origin and has not yet reached where it can call home. Memoir as a genre allies the silenced voice and the mutilated hand to come to life and pen down a biography now safely *fictionalised* in retrospect. Nafisi avoids the promise of veracity in her note before she starts the memoir, generalizing the liminality of her narrative to the nature of memory: "The facts in this story are true insofar as *any* memory is ever truthful" (*Reading Lolita*, "Author's Note"). Nafisi was a promising English professor in Tehran before she left Iran for the States for good. She may have had some academic output here and there, but she was not known as a writer before *Reading Lolita* hit the market as a bestseller. Her auto-fiction embeds her years of studying English literature, her readerly readings of Nabokov, Fitzgerald, James, and Austen which gradually became more and more interpretive and writerly, to the extent that they positioned her on the author's seat. The pre-established identity of the author moulds her readerly character into a writerly one that is no longer muted, yet neither one is separated from the other. Nafisi's memoir as the interaction of these identical forms is determined by the writer's liminal loyalty in the expanse between the past and the new life. One may note the nature of such confused loyalty in Nafisi's diasporic memoir when she recalls how estranged she felt in the post-revolution Tehran, "it was not until I had reached home that I realized the true meaning of exile" (2003, 145). The hegemony of the new land affects her imagination to shift from the former set of codes to the current ones, and her recollections adjust the past with the expectations of today's reader; it is such adjustment that can guarantee the survival of her rising authorial voice in the reading market.

Sooner or later, the heart starts to betray the former life, and re-initiation takes its toll. The publication of *Reading Lolita* is done within good timing; it coincides with "an explosion of largely female book clubs and reading groups starting in the 1990's America," and the American growing awareness of Iran," during the Bush administration, and as mentioned before through the hostile sentiments against Iran (DePaul 2008, 74, 73). It is a moment of—an author's estrangement from her homeland; the main frame depicts a narrator—the fictional and autobiographical Nafisi who is becoming increasingly isolated, feeling betrayed by her own people, especially once she is

forced to resign from all her social activities. She, then, forsakes her established academic *being* for an unknown authorial *becoming* by initializing her self-exile to the imaginative area of refuge, where “art and literature became so essential to [their] lives; they were not a luxury but a necessity” (Nafisi 2003, 23). As such, one may note that her liminal condition emerges long before her immigration to the U.S. It develops precisely in the living room of her house, where “looking out towards distant white-capped [Elburz] mountains,” and mesmerized by their sublime beauty, she feels caged and incapable of reaching out for them (22). Her survival requires her to gather seven of her likeminded former *female* students who are compared with “the virgins, who, unlike Sheherazade, have no voice” in *A Thousand and One Nights*, and share with her the isolation that the new Islamic regime has put them in (19). The group has the necessary prerequisites as a community: a “group of people with the same or similar aim or aspiration . . . connected by . . . personal relation[s] [and] . . . interpersonal interaction[s] (Kálmán 1997, 53). Generally, what is shared by the members of a community distinguishes it from any others, and causes the members’ “desire or need to express such a distinction” (55). As for Nafisi’s team, each single one of the girls finds her life drastically affected by the contemporary social and political currents of events. Each is introduced and described at length and in detail, and as their ideological backgrounds are reviewed, the reader would notice the similarity of their despair and the dire urgency for them, at least temporarily, to lose themselves in the liminal world of fantasy, regardless of their apparent, ideological, and social differences and as a necessary defence mechanism.

Another feature of a community resonates in the power relation between the members of Nafisi’s reading club. Although ideally regarded as democratic, there is always a hierarchic relation between the members of any kind of group. In “a community of interpretation” as Samuel Weber asserts, “the gap between inner and outer is bridged by a *voice* speaking in terms of a *name* that in turn is invoked to guarantee the unity of what is separate” from the outside world; yet the power hierarchy is hardly undone by necessity, despite the said gap being bridged by the author’s voice (Weber 1990, 57). Nafisi, having resigned from her position as an English literature professor in Tehran, and as a not-yet internationally reputed author, hosts the girls mainly because she is too frustrated to remain institutionally engaged in the rising hostile regime. After her immigration to America, this proves not a totally altruistic act of hospitality. Nafisi advantages from her superior position throughout her memoir; in fact, nowhere in all the 343 pages of *Reading Lolita* does she refer to the students as friends or equals. Their statuses as former students remain intact even within the privacy of their newly formed haven. In a sense, the reader may notice the hierarchic binaries of host/guest, professor/student, and author/reader still in effect throughout *Reading Lolita*, years later enlivened in the words. However, we should note that the binary sense of status may not have actually been a conscious, conspiratorial thirst for the authorial power on Nafisi’s side at the time that the weekly meetings took place. Nonetheless, the mentioned hierarchic binaries maintaining the imbalance of power—which Barthes deprived the author figure of—now turn into a positively charged void calling for occupancy.

Nafisi's anonymity of the exilic diaspora gradually gives its place to a more settled sense of home and identity, especially when she has established herself with a career at Johns Hopkins University. Her memoir writing happens at this stage of the diasporic life and although as a female activist, she desires to give her students the opportunity of being read by a new community, her memoir also aims "to create an interpretive community, [for which] the presence of some transcendental power is inevitable" (Kálmán 1997, 63). What we should keep in mind is that:

... only the voice of a living individual leader' can call the community of interpretation into being. The community can thus be called into being because it has always already existed in spirit, in whose name the founder declares its reality. (Kálmán 1997, 63)

After "the attacks on [her] elite upbringing," mainly done by the Iranian diasporic community, she seeks an audience from a different fabric than her fellow Iranians—at home or in diaspora—to appreciate her desire of establishing an authorial voice with all the empowerment it may entail (DePaul 2008, 78). Her group-reading act turns into a rioting move of a critical reader who eventually aims for the power of the author, a mutiny within "a sort of domestic class for ego-reinforcement and consciousness" (Naiman 2007, 34). Nafisi subscribes to no patriarchal authority of any sense, neither the one from her origin, nor the Barthesian death of the author; instead she uses the vacant spot by raising her voice from the readerly position to that of the writerly, the voice of the new author.

Reading Lolita combines the ups and downs of Nafisi's personal and professional background, with those of the classic English novels' characters, so much so that the reader almost cannot help but pause his/her reading process, and review the intertext of the western classics and the frame of the memoir, eventually to go through the deceased authors' lives, whose voices are incessantly echoed throughout *Reading Lolita*. The texture of this web expands beyond the scope of the imaginary world of fiction; it insists on the *reality* of the authors' voices, their choice of words, and what once gave way to how they invested imagination in their creations. Nabokov, Fitzgerald, and Austin's voices are the necessary component particles of what gives life to *Reading Lolita*. Memoir as a frame in *Reading Lolita* embeds the literary texts in an *A-Thousand-and-One-Night* narrative style, including Vladimir Nabokov's *An Invitation to a Beheading*, *Bend Sinister* and *Lolita*—the three "stories that share a political subtext" (DePaul 2008, 81), Jane Austin's *Pride and Prejudice*, and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Each text is deliberately chosen and put on a pedestal that later becomes their trial stand. The initial admiration of the texts later confronts the harsh critiques of the girls, mirroring Nafisi's disappointed view towards death at large, and the suffocating condition that the rise of the Islamic regime reflected. Nafisi's previous life abroad as an English student and "the US's powerful need for this narrative" facilitate Nafisi to claim for the position of the author (Clemens 2014, 584). She employs her insight on the U.S reader's interest in the

exoticism of a Middle-Eastern land and the turmoil of the post-revolutionary agitation to full advantage. English is the chosen language of the memoir by intent, so that the text would dialogue with an essentially Western-Orientalist mind-set, and Nafisi's scholarly expertise nourishes the souls of those in search of the Occidental associations within the text. She brings the voice of the past authors—mainly Nabokov's—to appropriate the exotic in the Western reader's imagination, and describe how it would be even possible to live under a stifling regime, witnessing infinite executions of the voice, body, and soul. Accordingly, she reminds the reader about Nabokov's "Cincinnatus C., his imaginative and lonely hero ... [and] his originality in a society where uniformity is not only the norm but also the law;" the group, in turn, models after Cincinnatus C. in their "retreat into [themselves] in order to survive" (Nafisi 2003, 20; 23). Reading for the group evolves into a Nabakovian "Upsilamba," lacking meaning as much as meaning anything: "the impossible joy of a suspended leap . . . the image of small silver fish leaping in and out of a moonlit lake . . . three girls jumping rope and shouting 'upsilamba' [or] . . . the paradox of a blissful sigh," etc. (20-21). It is in such a way that the coming-to-life of the dead authors, as well as the desire of the designated reader consolidate the authority that was assumed long passed by Barthes and Foucault. In fact, had it not been for rebirth of the dead western authors, it may have been not too easy an act for the Western reader to relate to Nafisi's characters' lived experiences in post-revolutionary Iran. *An Invitation to a Beheading* would have been a befitting title for Nafisi's memoir—considering the immense censorship of life in its entirety under the Islamic regime during the 1980's—if it had not been already taken Nabokov's titular choice. *Reading Lolita* invites the reader to witness the invisible corrosion of identity and watch the masquerade of life being eradicated. By the same token, she narrates the "unique perspective to [that] historical moment" and the "democratic nature of [her] memoir" invites the reader to share the agony of the experience (Dabashi qtd. in Clemens 2014, 585; Adam qtd. in Malek 2015, 360). Therefore, Nafisi needs the voice of the bygone Western authors to come to full life as she cannot possibly do it on her own. There must be a connection made with the targeted reader's imagination—which is almost unfamiliar with this state of non-living—to make them feel the author's own experience of desperate deterritorialization.

Nafisi's fictional authority is established upon a bit of fictional exaggeration of facts, especially in the eye of the Iranian reader who has the experience of having lived in the war-stricken society of Tehran of 1980's. Yet, the make-believe of fiction authorizes Nafisi to make such exaggerations; even those who have been in the heart of the actual truth momentarily suspend disbelief for the authorial power of fiction. Despite Nafisi's admiration of Nabakov, he fails her in the shift from a readerly to an authorly position; he admits that due to the affinities and "allegories between literature and politics, strong writers . . . have more in common with political dictators than . . . victims" (Naiman 2007, 25). However, Nafisi also confesses that "for [her], the kind of power [she]'d like to exert is through writing," as a site for power struggle (Nafisi 2014, 00:35:00). Writing for American readership motivates her

pre-exilic memory to rise in mutiny against the Barthesian death, in alliance with a different reader, “in a different America,” and with the “kind of ideological perspective that the American and European [readership] . . . expect” (Donadey qtd. in Clemens 2014, 586). In such a liminal upheaval of the authorial hierarchy of writer/reader vs. Western/Eastern, Nafisi as a Middle-Eastern, female, diasporic author struggles for and gains power over the Western reader. By the same token, her authorship, as well, is embraced as a self-empowering act as she escapes, rebels against, and redeems her exilic condition. Dabashi is of the conviction that America is:

an empire lacking, in fact requiring an absence of, long term memory, and banking heavily on the intensity of short term memories—one to two wars per one presidential election. . . . This act of collective amnesia accompanies a strategy of selective memory. . . . A particularly powerful case of such selective memories is now fully evident in an increasing body of memoir by people from an Islamic background . . . perhaps best represented by Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran*.

This amnesiac short-term memory is the catalyst for *Reading Lolita* to become a bestseller, for several reasons: First, her tale would have only been one among millions of her likes, of lives lost by the tyranny of war, the memory that many of us would have wilfully tried to *not* remember. Secondly, for a reader who has already undergone such massive traumas as war, regime change, totalitarianism, and massacres of intellectuals and political prisoners, no proper language can touch the actuality of atrocity; it is the help of the cultural amnesia that facilitates the success of Nafisi’s language. If *Reading Lolita* were considered as a purely historical testimony of the post-Islamic-revolutionary decades, during which time so many allegedly anti-revolutionists, monarchists, Mojahedin, and communists were unfoundedly and brutally massacred, it would accord Nafisi to the rather harsh description Hamid Dabashi attributes to her, “the personification of that native informer and colonial agent, polishing her services for an American version of . . . US imperial operation” (2006). Yet, the fictional aspect of Nafisi’s memoir is what saves her from the accusatory attacks that came with the publication of *Reading Lolita*.

For the rebirth of the new author, Nafisi as a critic pens her worldview from the position of an exilic author in the form of a memoir, a mouthpiece for the hitherto silent reader/critic, in the secure quiet of the exilic anonymity. She defies the *death of the author* by rising hers once she destines her reader to be non-Iranian, English-speaking or at least English proficient, and by relying on the texts from among the English classical masterpieces rather than Persian ones. It is she as the *author* who decides the reader’s extent of affinity to texture of the tale, and consequently, establishes her interpretive community. She takes the author’s death as recent news as a survival tactic, while the vacant space braves her to occupy it. Like Cincinnatus C., “the only way to leave the circle, to stop dancing with the jailer, is to find a way to preserve one’s individuality;” and so she finds hers in rising above the state of a reader (Nafisi 2003, 77).

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