



Colonial Legacies, Theocratic Authoritarianism, and Feminist Resistance in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*

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Abstract

This paper examines Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* through a postcolonial feminist framework, focusing on the intersections of indirect colonial legacies, theocratic governance, and women's intellectual responses in post-revolutionary Iran. It analyzes how the text represents gendered restrictions under the Islamic Republic while situating these conditions within broader historical and geopolitical influences. The paper explores Nafisi's use of both Western literary works, such as Nabokov's *Lolita*, and Persian narratives, including the tales of Scheherazade, to consider literature as a space for reflection, dialogue, and meaning-making. Rather than approaching the memoir as a critique of Islam as a belief system, this article emphasizes its attention to the state's use of religious authority in regulating women's lives. At the same time, it considers how global literary traditions shape the articulation of feminist concerns. Overall, this paper presents *Reading Lolita in Tehran* as a text that reveals the complexities of cultural influence, literary engagement, and women's agency within an authoritarian context.

Keywords: Postcolonial feminism; *Reading Lolita in Tehran*; gendered authoritarianism; feminist resistance; literary resistance

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INTRODUCTION

Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* captures her struggle in teaching literature within the restrictions imposed by the Iranian post-revolutionary regime. Set in the period of the Islamic Republic's false theocratic regime, the memoir documents the resistance movement initiated by Nafisi and her female students in their secret literature class as they confront ideological repression and gendered restrictions through a literary approach. Discussing literary works from Western literature by authors such as Jane Austen, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and mainly Vladimir Nabokov. In Persian literature, Nafisi depicted The stories of Scheherazade which is known from the One Thousand and One Nights and other Persian poetry in her discussion alongside Western literature. This is due to their relevance in Iranian Persian culture and not to be influenced by Western

literature. This intellectual engagement becomes a symbolic act of resistance against a system that seeks to control women's minds, bodies, and voices. The memoir not only documents personal and educational struggles but also reflects broader socio-political shifts in Iranian history from Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's authorities with similar governance as the Western society into the Ayatollah's Islamic theocratic governance in the post-revolution era.

Postcolonial feminist theory is the intercourse between postcolonial and feminism themselves. In the field of feminism theory itself, postcolonial feminism is remarked to be the branch disciplinary among other branches. Feminist theory encompasses multiple branches, including formative feminist traditions, multicultural feminism, historical feminist inquiry, postcolonial and Third World feminisms, transnational or global feminism, ecofeminism, and Black feminist perspectives (Shenmugasundaram, 2017).

In the term of intercourse of postcolonial feminists, this theory objects to the idea of the commonality and universality of women's lives, since these were generally based on the universalization of western women's experiences, and wanted their own voices to be heard. Through the lens of colonialism, they were able to explore a lot of issues relating to subordination, such as migration, slavery, representation, suppression and resistance, rather than treating gender in a simplistic sense. According to Spivak (1994), colonial rule introduced and strengthened structures of male dominance through Western ideological influence, leaving a lasting impact on how gender is experienced in postcolonial contexts.

The postcolonial feminist theory also analyses the parallels in feminism over the colonialism effects, since geopolitically diversified among nations between colonizers and colonized which are considered different. Yet, the colonizers tend to disrupt the indigenous and aboriginal sociopolitical norms and values with their own "Eurocentric" feminism value. This created a term of Third-World Feminism which forced the native aboriginal citizens or the colonized society to obey the "white" feminism norms as the symbol of white superiority. This term is also known as marginalization in the cultural aspects of the white-washed cultural society. This is testified by the women's oppression history in Afghanistan, Islamic Republic of Iran, India (British Raj), Bosnia, Croatia, Albania, Malay Peninsula, Indonesia, Nigeria, Libya, Tunisia, and many other colonized nations (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003; Afary, 2004; Liddle & Joshi, 1985). According to Nair (2023), postcolonial feminist theory addresses the problem of homogenizing women's experiences by examining the distinctions between Western and indigenous women.

Therefore, the definition of postcolonial feminism is the term for analysing and understanding the scope of feminism during colonialism period and the after effect of "Eurocentric" colonialism itself, by shifting values of sociopolitical society in the colonized countries worldwide with the approach of political, social, cultural, and historical factors. Third-World feminism, often identified with postcolonial feminism, emerges from the lived realities of women in postcolonial nations, focusing on issues that are specific to their national and social contexts (Nair, 2023). This aligns with the broader theoretical framework of postcolonial feminism, which examines the intersections of colonialism and neo-colonialism with gender, nation, class, race, and sexuality across diverse contexts of women's lives (Rajan & Park, 2000, p. 53). Within this framework, it becomes evident that women and silence can't be separated by race and class differences (Spivak, 1994).

The establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran under Ayatollah Khomeini marked a profound political transformation that reflected broader postcolonial dynamics. The Islamic Republic of Iran was established under the revolutionary movement led by Ayatollah Khomeini that took out the Pahlavi dynasty from the governance authority back in the Iranian Revolution in 1979. This caused the change of the Iranian state itself from an Imperial State under the rule of the Pahlavi Monarch Dynasty into an Islamic Republic under the rule of Ayatollah. The influence and interference of the United Kingdom, Russia, and the United States made the 1979 Iranian revolution an important episode in the process of decolonization. By removing the Shah from power, the people of Iran not only showed remarkable bravery but also challenged U.S. dominance. This historic event enabled the creation of a sovereign country that resists external control and refuses to oppress others (Supreme Leader's Office, 2025). Factually, the Islamic Republic of Iran has never been directly colonized in history.

Western domination in the region significantly undermined Iran's indigenous authority and disrupted the country's original sociopolitical structures. This is due to the interference of British-India and Russia in the early 20th century of their geopolitical rivalry in the Persian region. This event may be referred to as the Great Game, which is a rivalry between Britain and Russia in Central Asia back in the late 19th century and early 20th century. Persia found itself caught in a difficult position between the competing powers of Russia and Britain. The conflicts of these two empires, whether over Constantinople, Central Asia, or the Far East, were immediately felt and echoed in Tehran (Kazemzadeh & Firuz, 1968). The rivalry between Britain and Russia in Persia was largely driven by British concerns over Russian geopolitical expansion, as Russia sought to increase its diplomatic influence and control over trade routes and resources in the region. Thus in one generation Russia had vaulted the Caucasus, absorbed Georgia, northern Azerbaijan, and a part of Armenia, acquired extensive commercial rights and strong political influence in Persia, and established herself in the vicinity of British India. This set the stage for a prolonged rivalry between Russia and Britain, which dominated Central Asian and Middle Eastern affairs until the decline of British power following World War II (Kazemzadeh & Firuz, 1968).

In the mid-20th century, U.S. intervention in Iran extended the pattern of indirect colonization through political manipulation, economic influence, and strategic control. Using indication to provide aid to the nations that needed to strengthen their weapons and defense systems against interference by the Soviet Union. In the post-war period, U.S. aid was primarily directed not toward former World War II allies, but toward countries that required strengthening to deter potential Soviet expansion. Compared to Turkey and Greece, Iran received significantly less assistance (Iskandaryan, 2023). This proves that the U.S. interference was somehow significant towards the Iranian governance operations, by controlling geopolitically using their superior impact as one of the big empires during the 1950s. In 1953, Operation AJAX marked a direct intervention by the United States in Iran, resulting in the removal of the prime minister through a military-led coup (Iskandaryan, 2023). The U.S stances had been taking part in the Iranian Governance, this escalated under the governance of John F. Kennedy used a much deeper alibi by interference in their agriculture and cultivation system. Iskandaryan (2023) emphasizes that Bren, the Plenipotentiary Minister of the United States and chief officer overseeing the implementation of the Truman Doctrine's Article 4 in Iran, stated that during their stay in Iran and the broader Middle East, they tried to teach Iranian peasants how to cultivate the land, meet their needs, and

improve village life. The peak interference was the occurrence of the White Revolution, supported by the Shah of Iran of the Pahlavi Dynasty. The whole scenario brought the Iran-US relations into such a romantic relationship. Even though its relationship may be considered to be a toxic relationship committed by the United States by exploiting the Iranian government and its natural resources (i.e. oil, gas) and human resources through their controllable governance policy which may be considered to be neo-colonialism. The U.S. also played heroes by spreading fear propaganda to the Iranian government and people that the Soviet Union may take advantage of their repetition expansion into the Iranian region. By taking advantage of the Shah's concerns over potential Soviet expansion in northern Iran and leveraging the regional ambitions of the Pahlavi dynasty, the United States offered Iran assistance in multiple areas, while simultaneously assigning Tehran responsibilities that primarily served American interests (Iskandaryan, 2023). Thus, this makes the state of Iran under the rule of the Pahlavi Dynasty has been colonized indirectly through imperial pressure, economic manipulation, and strategic diplomacy. Especially by the three big empires of Britain and Russia in the early 19th century and continued by the U.S. in the mid-20th century. Which culturally assimilated with the Western dominant culture of liberalism and imperialism.

Ayatollah Khomeini's leadership during the Iranian Revolution challenged U.S. influence and ended the Pahlavi monarchy, marking a turning point toward postcolonial sovereignty. This leadership took away the dictatorship of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the one who was controlled by the Western domination of U.S. governance. He's knowingly to be the last remaining Pahlavi Dynasty and Monarch dictator until this present time. Although he has fled from Iran to the U.S. and other countries to seek refuge and safety from his allies. According to Encyclopaedia Britannica, on January 16, 1979, the shah left the country, and Khomeini assumed control. Although the shah did not abdicate, a referendum resulted in the declaration on April 1, 1979, of an Islamic republic in Iran. The shah traveled to Egypt, Morocco, The Bahamas, and Mexico before entering the United States on October 22, 1979, for medical treatment of lymphatic cancer. Eventually, he died on July 26, 1980, and the Iranian legacy continued in the hands of the Islamic Republic, not the Imperial Monarch state of the Pahlavi Dynasty. These dynamic political shifts embraced decolonization and started their period of post-colonialism era.

Socioculturally, the new political and social order established after the revolution was not widely accepted due to repression and restrictions, particularly affecting women in Iran. They usually live under the ideology and Western culture by the influence of American values in the early period of the revolution. Therefore, there were some nobility complications in the sociocultural aspects. Complications between modern civil society, popularized by the U.S., and interpreted Islamic values in the Shia perspectives. Iranian society recognized women's rights to vote and participate actively in political parties and groups, as demonstrated by the founding of the Women's Party of Iran in 1921. Modern civil society provides a platform for debating individual choices and related issues, whereas Islam emphasizes adherence to the ultimate meanings of the transcendental dimension (Zabardast, 2015). Meanwhile, these so-called Islamic values better referred to as radical-false Islamic values only benefit the men in their patriarchal world. This male domination regime in the early Islamic Republic regime created a term for gendered authoritarianism. Gendered authoritarianism itself refers to how an authoritarian theocratic regime mostly privileges men, which happens to be controlling women on how they should act, behave, and dress. Spivak

(1994) criticizes the mechanism used to enforce these constraints, arguing that they align with the scope of colonial values inherited by Westerns. The Ayatollah's regime ironically resembles colonial methodologies, specifically through the utilization of gendered authoritarianism. By glorifying an idealized masculine radicalism, it creates the notion of obscurement at women's agency as an object to be governed, not as civilians who have rights. Accordingly, Iranian gendered authoritarianism is fundamentally formed by their biased radical interpretation of the holy Quran and teachings of Shia Islam. Moreover, the regime did not hold back from somehow disciplining their women using violence, backed by their biased understanding of the holy Quran, to control society. Authoritarian violence with a gendered dimension serves as a powerful tool of social control by both incapacitating patriarchal communities in defending women and by creating a subordinate group of women viewed as suspect citizens instead of active agents of change (Fahmy, 2023). While some progressive men respected the women's agency, the authoritarian violence of the regime effectively disabled these communities by rendering their sympathy insufficient to protect women (Spivak, 1994). Moreover, Reflecting on this displacement, between patriarchy and imperialism, the Ayatollah's regime ironically resembles colonialism values by displacing the figuration of the third-world woman caught between tradition and modernization (Spivak, 1994). To analyze these dynamics, this essay utilized the framework of postcolonial feminism, a theoretical lens that explores the intersections between colonial legacies and feminist discourse in formerly colonized societies. Although Iran is not considered to be a colonized country in the colonialism era, the influence and interference by the United Kingdom, Russia, and The U.S. are strongly subject to Iran as their colonized asset of its oil and gas resources. Which is considered to be indirect colonialism and could even be identified as the approach of Neo-Colonialism. It also affected how women were treated due to the collapsing cultural and theological perception between Western and Islamic Persian values. How they were forcefully changed in the way they suited into the extreme Islamic theocratic society brought by the post-revolution regime from the western-liberal society imposed by Pahlavi's regime. These dynamic changes forced the women to suit themselves with the new regulations and restrictions without any amount of time to consider and voluntarily embrace Islamic values.

The post-revolution regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran has indeed become the objectification of Islamic Perception by the Western world, narrated by the American media with their propaganda. This perception marginalized the whole Islamic society in the world and brought skepticism and stereotypes of terrorism, women's oppression by the usage of a veil, and patriarchal society. These are big assumptions towards Islamic society which are only portrayed by their Western propaganda, which led to biased fallacies on how Islam treated women. Viewed through the lens of Gayatri Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak*, this essay conducts an analysis of Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* to examine the implications of her narration. Spivak's theory suggests that the *subaltern* is often silenced by the very discourses intended to represent them; in this context, Nafisi's memoir portrays the Iranian woman is caught between the tradition of a patriarchal regime and a modernizing, yet Western-centric, discourse that appearing a violent shuttling. This displacement occurs as the figure of the Iranian woman is squeezed between the Islamic regimes' gendered authoritarianism, which ironically resembles colonial methodologies of control, and an Western narration that risks objectifying her experience through the lens of indirect colonialism. This prioritization of Western literary risks raising the colonial impulse to rescue the

Third-World woman from her own culture. Consequently, the narrative may unintentionally fuel American media propaganda by framing the Islamic Republic as barbaric, that marginalizes the complex reality of Islamic society. Accordingly, this essay addresses two research questions: (1) How does Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* portray patriarchal authoritarianism as a force that produces gendered repression and enforces control through female identity and autonomy? (2) In what ways does Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* through its engagement with Western literary works, especially *Lolita* by Nabokov, address the tensions between Islamic values, feminist resistance, and critiques of Western-centrism in postcolonial discourse?

RESEARCH METHOD

The research methodology for this study utilizes a qualitative approach grounded in postcolonial feminist analysis to explore the nuances of the text. First, the primary data consists of the complete text of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, which is analyzed to examine the implications of Nafisi's narration and her strategies of intellectual resistance. This is supported by secondary data from Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, which is interrogated to analyze the shadows it casts upon Nafisi's interpretation of the Iranian condition. Specifically, the study examines how Nafisi utilizes the relationship between *Lolita* and Humbert Humbert as a metaphorical prism to narrate the Iranian women's experience of gendered authoritarianism and psychological captivity under the post-revolutionary regime. Second, this analysis is framed through Gayatri Spivak's seminal theory, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, specifically to interrogate whether the Iranian woman is rendered a subaltern figure silenced by the violent shuttling between domestic patriarchal structures and Western imperialist discourses. Third, the study incorporates historical reality as an extrinsic framework, tracing the transition from the Pahlavi Dynasty's Western-aligned governance to the post-revolutionary theocratic regime to understand the socio-political forces behind the memoir's events. Finally, the research investigates the implications of American media perception, analyzing how Nafisi's narration and her identity as an intellectual within the American media sphere interacts with Western propaganda to potentially facilitate further indirect colonialism and reinforce Western-centric stereotypes of Islamic society.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This section presents a critical analysis of Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, utilizing a postcolonial feminist framework to explore the intersections of indirect colonial legacies, theocratic governance, and women's intellectual resistance. By applying Gayatri Spivak's theory of the subaltern, the discussion interrogates how the Iranian women caught between the restrictive gendered authoritarianism of the post-revolutionary state and the complex influences of Western-centric discourse. The following findings examine how the text portrays patriarchal repression and the use of literature, specifically Nabokov's *Lolita* as a symbolic safe zone for reclaiming female agency and identity.

A Memoir of Women's Resistance in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* The depiction of the different world between the Imperial State of Iran and the Islamic Republic of Iran is portrayed in Azar Nafisi's memoir based on her own experience, properly curated in her work titled "Reading Lolita in Tehran". Nafisi herself was also a part of the family who was in charge of the parliamentary

political activities under the rule of the Pahlavi Dynasty. Her parents, Ahmed Nafisi and Nezhat Nafisi, both actively worked in the government. Ahmed Nafisi, a Mayor of Tehran from 1961 to 1963, and Nezhat Nafisi, one of the early women to serve in the Iranian Parliament in 1963. During her life, Azar Nafisi was also consistently influenced by the Western world, even she took and completed her degree in English and American literature and received her Ph.D from the University of Oklahoma. Then, she returned to Iran in 1979 after the Iranian Revolution and became an English literature lecturer at the University of Tehran.

While teaching at the University of Tehran, Nafisi confronted the mandatory Islamic veil, a regulation she refused to accept on principle, leading to her expulsion and redefining the course of her professional and personal life. She began teaching at Allameh Tabataba'i University, yet the expulsion was inevitable and obviously, she was expelled for the second time. Nafisi (2003) recounts:

“From the beginning of the revolution there had been many aborted attempts to impose the veil on women; these attempts failed because of persistent and militant resistance put up mainly by Iranian women. In many important ways the veil had gained a symbolic significance for the regime. Its reimposition would signify the complete victory of the Islamic aspect of the revolution, which in those first years was not a foregone conclusion. The unveiling of women mandated by Reza Shah in 1936 had been a controversial symbol of modernization, a powerful sign of the reduction of the clergy's power. It was important for the ruling clerics to reassert that power (Nafisi, 2003, p. 75).”

Azar Nafisi also somehow wrote her implication about what she felt in the political perspectives about the difference between these two different worlds. This illustrates how gendered authoritarianism under the Islamic Republic used symbolic and legal control to assert patriarchal power.

Azar Nafisi's memoir serves as a contemporary case study of the complex relationship between the postcolonial intellectual and the subaltern subject, as defined in Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Azar Nafisi did not want to be just a victim of the system, taking a resistance movement to criticize the patriarchal regime through the establishment of a secret literary class. This movement operates within a micrological texture of power where the interests that congeal the macrologies of the state are challenged at the level of individual bodies and private spaces. Azar Nafisi established a secret class in English literary discussions by inviting her promising female students to her house every Thursday morning. They studied several literary works on the topic of resistance and were considered controversial by the Iranian regime, such as Nabokov's *Lolita* alongside other works such as *Madame Bovary*. She also taught novels by F. Scott Fitzgerald, Henry James, Jane Austen, and many others. From a Spivakian perspective, this choice of Western canon reflects an interested desire to conserve the subject of the West as the primary source of liberating knowledge. The students' effort to create their own little pockets of freedom by identifying with characters like *Lolita* can be viewed as recognition through assimilation, where the Third World subject seeks to escape domestic oppression by adopting the Subject of the West. Even so, Nafisi portrays Nabokov's *Lolita* as the most highlighted in the book, which implies the position of Iranian women accordingly. As Nafisi (2003) describes:

“There, in that living room, we rediscovered that we were also living, breathing human beings; and no matter how repressive the state became, no matter how intimidated and

frightened we were, like Lolita we tried to escape and to create our own little pockets of freedom” (Nafisi, 2003, p. 19).

In the secret class, they often unveil themselves and letting their hair be exposed as part of their feminist resistance. The act of taking off their coverings and being photographed creates a scene of writing or a portrait of the self that breaks from the state-mandated identity. Nafisi (2003) illustrates this scene:

“I have the two photographs in front of me now. In the first there are seven women, standing against a white wall. They are, according to the law of the land, dressed in black robes and head scarves, covered except for the oval of their faces and their hands. In the second photograph the same group, in the same position, stands against the same wall. Only they have taken off their coverings. Splashes of color separate one from the next. Each has become distinct through the color and style of her clothes, the color and the length of her hair; not even the two who are still wearing their head scarves look the same” (Nafisi, 2003, p. 3).

This feminist resistance movement continued on her own even if the secret class had been dismissed after the students had already finished their studies.

Azar Nafisi eventually transitioned from the domestic sphere of Iranian resistance to the United States in 1997 to further her career. She continued her literary journey as a contributor to major Western publications such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The New Republic*, where she explored the political relevance of literature and advocated for the human rights of Iranian women. Through her articles and her 2003 memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, she utilized literature as a tool of resistance against the "gendered authoritarianism" and "biased Islamic values" of the Islamic Republic regime. Her trajectory reflects the complex legacy of postcolonialism in Iran shaped by the historic "Great Game" rivalry between Britain and Russia and the later influence of the U.S.-backed White Revolution. However, this shift from grassroots educator to a Western media figure complicates her role through the lens of Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Nafisi's career in the U.S. can be viewed as an embodiment of the postcolonial intellectual who assumes the role of a political proxy, or *Vertreten*.

Western and Persian Literature as Feminist Resistance

Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is a literary work written by an English literature lecturer who portrays the world using various literary reviews and references. Her critical thinking was already honed from an early age due to her family's obsession and passion for literary works like Persian classics, poetry, and folktales. According to the University of Minnesota Digital Conservancy (2009), Young Nafisi's literary interest was shaped by her family, who read and shared Persian classics with her during walks and before sleep. At an early age, Nafisi developed an appreciation for literature that would ultimately be the focus of her literary career. She is also the niece of a famous Iranian scholar, fiction writer, and poet Saeed Nafisi, known for his first literary magazine in Iran, namely *Daneshkade*, in 1918. Publishing many articles, Persian literary texts, and Sufism. With her family background, it could be concluded that the family has passing legacies of love in the literary works. Thus, Azar Nafisi has taken literary works into something impactful in her society, specifically the Iranian feminism movement. Through secret class with her seven female students every Thursday morning in Nafisi's living room. Nafisi's dedication to

the feminist movement is depicted in her book 'Reading Lolita in Tehran' which not only covers the perspectives of Western literature but also Persian literature to somehow intersect these two kinds of literature due to the relevancy of Iranian condition. As described by Nafisi (2003):

“The theme of the class was the relation between fiction and reality. We read Persian classical literature, such as the tales of our own lady of fiction, Scheherazade, from A Thousand and One Nights, along with Western classics-Pride and Prejudice, Madame Bovary, Daisy Miller, The Dean's December and, yes, Lolita (Nafisi, 2003, p. 5).”

Among the various literary works, only two titles are considered to be significant in the whole plot of the book. Those two are divided by what kind of literature they are. In Persian literature, the tales of Scheherazade from A Thousand and One Nights will be discussed. On the other side, Lolita by Nabokov is the most highlighted in the discussion.

Azar Nafisi was referencing the tales of Scheherazade from A Thousand and One Nights which implied that her life back before Ayatollah's regime was way better and liveable. As Nafisi (2003) expresses:

“I wanted to know the color of Scheherazade's dress, her bedcover, the color of the genie and the magic lamp, and once I asked him about the color of paradise. He said it could be any color I wanted it to be” (Nafisi, 2003, p. 11).

“Color” in this context can be interpreted as a metaphor for freedom, imagination, and self-expression without any restrictions and interferences. Nafisi (2003) also reflects on another form of imaginary vision:

“Then one day when we had guests and I was eating my soup in the dining room, my eyes fell on a painting I had seen on the wall ever since I could remember, and I instantly knew the color of my paradise. And here it is, I said, proudly pointing to a small oil painting in an old wooden frame: a green landscape of lush, leathery leaves with two birds, two deep red apples, a golden pear and a touch of blue” (Nafisi, 2003, p. 11).

It suggests that Nafisi was living a dreamful life, and she indeed reflects this metaphorical moment in her personal experiences through the depiction of the painting. Moreover, Nafisi has fond memories of her early life and the spaces that shaped her imagination, particularly her childhood garden. Nafisi (2003) reflects on her childhood garden:

“We lived in a large garden that belonged to my grandparents, she said, turning to me. You know the old Persian gardens, with their fruit trees, peaches, apples, cherries, persimmons and a willow or two. My best memories are of swimming in our huge irregularly shaped swimming pool. I was a swimming champion at our school, a fact my dad was very proud of (Nafisi, 2003, p. 11).”

Afterward, this depiction of freedom and entertainment fades into resentment, grief, and blankness. As the revolution had occurred, she depicted her very condolences at not being able to swim again as if her “Color” had faded away. As Nafisi (2003) narrates:

“About a year after the revolution, my father died of a heart attack, and then the government confiscated our house and our garden and we moved into an apartment. I never swam again.

My dream is at the bottom of that pool” (Nafisi, 2003, p. 11).

Nafisi also depicts her very own situation alongside the Iranian women in a locked cell, immobilizing their movement and somehow trapping them without having any glance of hope. As Nafisi (2003) portrays:

“The first work we discussed was *A Thousand and One Nights*, the familiar tale of the cuckolded king who slew successive virgin wives as revenge for his queen's betrayal, and whose murderous hand was finally stayed by the entrancing storyteller Scheherazade. I formulated certain general questions for them to consider, the most central of which was how these great works of imagination could help us in our present trapped situation as women. We were not looking for blueprints, for an easy solution, but we did hope to find a link between the open spaces the novels provided and the closed ones we were confined to” (Nafisi, 2003, p. 14).

Nafisi's narrative suggests a disjunction between state-imposed “Islamic” values and women's lived experiences, highlighting how religious discourse is used to justify authoritarian control. By forcefully imprisoning women in their very own houses and did not have any possibility of doing any kind of activities. This demonstrated a highly patriarchal structure of authority and should not be applied because women also have rights to be realized, as simple as to have imagination. Yet, it did not apply to them since men were dominating them in such a radical way. Nafisi and her seven female students discussed how they would survive the patriarchal regime based on their false theocratic interpretation by looking for some gap in escaping the cell. They were looking for something non-violence to be embraced to fight their feminist movement using imagination and wonder, which is through literature. This glance of hope reflects on how Scheherazade faces her enemies who are the king and his unreasonable regulations and kills his very wife (the queen) and virgins. As Nafisi (2003) illustrates this phenomenon:

“Scheherazade breaks the cycle of violence by choosing to embrace different terms of engagement. She fashions her universe not through physical force, as does the king, but through imagination and reflection. This gives her the courage to risk her life and sets her apart from the other characters in the tale” (Nafisi, 2003, p. 14).

In contrast, most feminist activists in Iran actively engaged in protesting the theocratic regime. These references from Scheherazade's tale are definitely documented how repressed the women are, by being locked in their own houses. Even if the women opened the lock, they would be either forced to go back to the cell or be tortured violently. This is due to Ayatollah's policy and regulations towards Iranian women to put men higher than women in authority. Within just two weeks of the 1979 Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini abolished the Family Protection Law, which had previously safeguarded women's rights, and introduced the Islamic Republic's family law. This new legislation gave men greater control over marriage, divorce, and child custody, while mandating the Islamic hijab and restricting women's access to work, public life, and political participation (Delpazir & Sadeghi, 2023). This demonstrates that Ayatollah's policies exemplify and align with Gayatri Spivak's observation in “Can the Subaltern Speak” that,

“Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the ‘third-world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization” (Spivak, 1994).

This suggests that Iranian women under gendered authority, become a subject that is defined as a whole through systems of male domination and ‘false’ theocracy authority. This implies Iranian women are in a displaced figuration position without having their rights or roles applied.

Azar Nafisi's tendency to reference Nabokov's *Lolita* is pretty urgent, this is due to how metaphorical Nafisi is in narrating the look-alikeness of the relationship between Lolita and Humbert Humbert with the Iranian women's relationship with the gendered authoritarian. In a summary of Nabokov's *Lolita*, the book tells us the story of an adult named Humbert Humbert who is legitly considered to be a child molester or pedophile perpetrator. His obsession with a girl is way too dangerous as if he was a girl-predator. One Day he met Dolores 'Lolita' Haze, or he preferred to call her 'Lo', and he approached her to introduce himself accompanied by Lolita's mother Charlotte Haze. The family lost a father since Lolita was just a baby and somehow Charlotte Haze was looking for a new father for Lolita. Charlotte Haze married Humbert Humbert at last, yet it was an alibi by Humbert Humbert. He does not want to marry Charlotte Haze at first, but after he discovers the existence of 'Lo', the so-called nymphet by Humbert's imagination. He accepted Charlotte's proposal with the stealthy intention of getting closer to Lolita, a 12-year-old girl.

According to the plot, Charlotte discovers Humbert's secret diary, which reveals his sexual obsession with her daughter. Afterward, she was horrified and felt manipulated, confronting Humbert and running out of the house. Out of nowhere, she was struck by a car and killed instantly while crossing the street in a rush. This moment is the peak of the climax in which he finally had Lolita as his prey sexually, he covered the death of her mother and did not even tell Lolita about her mother. He plotted a road trip with Lolita and he stopped at motels and hotels throughout the journey, where he started to commit sexual exploitation and psychological captivity to fulfill his desire. Lolita has already felt captivated by him and secretly contacted another abusive man to save her from him. Ironically, this man named 'Clare Quilty' is also a pedophile the same as Humbert. In the end, Humbert found Lolita who had already turned 17, and got pregnant by Clare Quilty. Living independently with another predator. As Nafisi (2003) describes:

"This was the story of a twelve-year-old girl who had nowhere to go. Humbert had tried to turn her into his fantasy, into his dead love, and he had destroyed her" (Nafisi, 2003, p. 24).

The whole plot of Nabokov's *Lolita* always leaves disturbing impressions on readers. This is exactly what Vladimir Nabokov intended, to make it deeply disturbing. The most disturbing part is when we are reading the book it is not using third-person perspectives, It was all intended to be Humbert's perspective. We are somehow playing imaginative action as a pedophile perpetrator. Azar Nafisi's main objective in depicting Nabokov's *Lolita* is to convince readers that Iranian women's situation under the rule of Ayatollah is indeed like 'Lolita' who has been abused by 'Humbert' which refers to the Islamic Republic regime. As Nafisi (2003) obviously states:

"This, then, is the story of Lolita in Tehran, how Lolita gave a different color to Tehran and how Tehran helped redefine Nabokov's novel, turning it into this Lolita, our Lolita" (Nafisi, 2003, p. 6).

Uniquely, Nafisi had emphasized that they positioned themselves as Lolita and Ayatollah as Humbert. Even though she did know that the readers would refer to them as these depictions. This is due to the fact that she wants to achieve a bigger dream by erasing the grain of totalitarian perspectives. This is aligned as what Nafisi (2003) emphasizes:

"I want to emphasize once more that we were not Lolita, the Ayatollah was not Humbert and this republic was not what Humbert called his principdom by the sea. Lolita was not a

critique of the Islamic Republic, but it went against the grain of all totalitarian perspectives” (Nafisi, 2003, p. 25).

Nafisi strongly depicted their situation of being Iranian women, especially whenever they want to take a break against tight rope which chokes their breath and bodies. This refers to her feminist resistance by her secret class alongside seven female students with various backgrounds yet having the same affairs in the feminist movement for fighting against the patriarchal system. As Nafisi (2003) states:

“Our class was shaped within this context, in an attempt to escape the gaze of the blind censor for a few hours each week. There, in that living room, we rediscovered that we were also living, breathing human beings; and no matter how repressive the state became, no matter how intimidated and frightened we were, like Lolita we tried to escape and to create our own little pockets of freedom. And like Lolita, we took every opportunity to flaunt our insubordination: by showing a little hair from under our scarves, insinuating a little color into the drab uniformity of our appearances, growing our nails, falling in love and listening to forbidden music” (Nafisi, 2003, p. 19).

Their behaviors do reflect resistance against the regime because all of those elements are being strictly restricted, backed with misconceptions of the Sharia law itself. However, their stances are alike with Lolita, who is not able to voice her defenseless against Humbert the perpetrator which categorizes themselves as a kind of victim. They need to be aware of their stances to not fall into the same mistake. As explained by Nafisi (2003):

“Lolita belongs to a category of victims who have no defense and are never given a chance to articulate their own story. As such, she becomes a double victim: not only her life but also her life story is taken from her. We told ourselves we were in that class to prevent ourselves from falling victim to this second crime” (Nafisi, 2003, p. 29).

This aligns with Spivak (1994), illustrating that women barely have the right to speak or voice their ideas and complaints. Because the subaltern cannot speak, the position of the female subaltern is even more vulnerable under the structures of male dominance.

Nafisi also addressed how rhetoric the regime is in manipulating their women like what Humbert did to Charlotte Haze and Lolita for his desire. As portrayed by Nafisi (2003):

“Like the best defense attorneys, who dazzle with their rhetoric and appeal to our higher sense of morality, Humbert exonerates himself by implicating his victim—a method we were quite familiar with in the Islamic Republic of Iran. (“We are not against cinema,” Ayatollah Khomeini had declared as his henchmen set fire to the movie houses, “we are against prostitution!”) Addressing the “Frigid gentlewomen of the jury,” Humbert informs us: “I am going to tell you something very strange: it was she who seduced me. . . .” (Nafisi, 2003, p. 30).

Counterargument on this “playing victim” behavior had already been addressed by Nafisi as well, by exposing Humbert’s or in this case Ayatollah’s rhetorical statements how false he is. As explained by Nafisi (2003):

“So far it would seem that Humbert the criminal, with the help of Humbert the poet, has succeeded in seducing both Lolita and the reader. Yet in fact he fails on both fronts. In the case of Lolita, he never succeeds in possessing her willingly, so that every act of lovemaking from then on becomes a crueler and more tainted act of rape; she evades him

at every turn. And he fails to completely seduce the reader, or some readers at least. Again ironically, his ability as a poet, his own fancy prose style, exposes him for what he is” (Nafisi, 2003, p. 30).

The depiction of Humbert itself does reflect how dictatorship is portrayed ideologically, to be exact in the vision and mission of running the state. It often only thinks about its desire and willingness to do anything it wants, it just implies that the dictatorship did not care about others' feelings. As Nafisi (2003) describes:

“Humbert, like most dictators, was interested only in his own vision of other people” (Nafisi, 2003, p. 34).

More questions were made by Manna, Nafisi’s student, regarding how some critics tend to be too biased and only see themselves as how Humbert is. Manna even related the condition accordingly. As Nafisi (2003) observes:

“I mean, the censors, or some of our politicized critics, don't they do the same thing, cutting up books and re-creating them in their own image? What Ayatollah Khomeini tried to do to our lives, turning us, as you said, into figments of his imagination, he also did to our fiction” (Nafisi, 2003, p. 35).

All of these related narratives by Azar Nafisi are indicative of how Nafisi and her seven female students represented Iranian women amidst totalitarian regimes. The regime covered themselves in the rhetoric of Islamic theocracy, yet misinterpreting the conception of the true Islamic theocracy itself. The resilient resistance portrayed by Nafisi and her students needs to get some gratitude due to their consistency in looking for truthfulness. Although, in every fight, there shall be challenges. Yet, their literary works' discussion made them critical in terms of the way they see the world they face. Which is supposed to be raised by their feminist movement to be known worldwide. As Nafisi (2003) highlights:

“Yet the novel, the finished work, is hopeful, beautiful even, a defense not just of beauty but of life, ordinary everyday life, all the normal pleasures that Lolita, like Yassi, was deprived of. Warming up and suddenly inspired, I added that in fact Nabokov had taken revenge against our own solipsizers; he had taken revenge on the Ayatollah Khomeini, on Yassi's last suitor, on the dough-faced teacher for that matter” (Nafisi, 2003, p. 24).

This feminist movement using literary works initiated by Azar Nafisi and her seven female students did create significance in the Iranian feminist movement. With the metaphorical and implications narration in the memoir itself putting their lives in a gaze of hope. And Nafisi successfully documented the whole scenario according to her own experiences in the eye of an English Literature lecturer which is uneasy to be controlled by the regime. Her initiation in the secret class created an environment where there was a safe zone for the women to embrace their own identity, without being forcefully mobilized by the authoritarian regime. At least embracing the rights in higher and critical education, uncovering their hair, expressing their true self, and living life happily in their safe zone. Keeping their presence out of the regime's authority. The literary approach is also the best way to criticize in more significant ways to raise awareness regarding the issue. Literature serves as a powerful driver of social movements, acting as a catalyst for change and activism. By employing storytelling, symbolism, and evocative imagery, it questions dominant ideologies, highlights pressing social issues, and inspires people to engage in transformative action (Chiranjeevi, 2023).

This approach remarked on the benefits caused by Iranian western-affected postcolonialism in using literature, precisely Western literature in the fight for Iranian women's identity. Nafisi's portrayal of herself is also part of postcolonialism due to the intersectionality of the Pahlavi's Dynasty influence on her family and the post-revolution era under the rule of Ayatollah. In continuation, Nafisi utilizes the power of literature to its further phase by promoting the issue globally using her privilege in the American media as a writer in *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *the New Republic*.

The Western-centrism and Literary Bias

It is obvious that Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* mostly puts its bias to the Western Perspectives. This is due to the history itself in Iran back when it was intervened by the Western Empires and as a result, the citizens had to bear the postcolonialism effect of indirect colonialism. Nafisi was narrating that they should not be wearing veils or niqab or hijab or burqa. It was not because she was against wearing it, it was because of the false Islamic theocracy ideology that the regime was using.

Even the movement by feminist movement makes it too obvious that they are against Islamic values. To be highlighted, they did not go against the true Islamic values. They are against the one who utilizes Islam's dignity as something they spread propaganda for. Following the cancellation of the relatively liberal Family Protection Laws of 1967, Iranian women were stripped of the right to initiate divorce, gain custody, serve as judges, or travel abroad without male approval. Polygamy was legalized again, sex-segregation rules were implemented, and the hijab became mandatory in public spaces. Structural discrimination in schools and workplaces curtailed women's opportunities, leaving many confined to household duties, early retirement, or informal employment (Darvishi, 2023). Even though the citation from Darvishi may be biased to the Western perspective, the regime was indeed the one who should be accused due to their implementation in the Islamic theocracy based on male domination and patriarchal desire. The regime also did not hold back by committing outbreaks of violence to the peaceful protest. By the record, I want to clarify to avoid another misconception about the Iranian feminist activists. Women's resistance was focused not on Islam or veiling itself, but on laws that constrained their personal freedoms and social rights (Darvishi, 2023).

Nafisi's work also narrated that one of her students used to love to wear a hijab because she voluntarily and faithfully followed Islamic rules. However, by the time Ayatollah's regime arose, she did not like it much more due to the enforcement of wearing it. The regime is indeed playing the name of Islamic theocracy and should be responsible for the spread of Islamophobia worldwide. Especially the narrative of patriarchal Muslim men and wearing a veil is a symbol of dehumanization spread by Western perspectives. Muslim boys are reluctant to integrate and well-disposed to gang life, while Muslim men are hypersexual, misogynistic, and prone to commit rape. Muslim girls are thought of only as victims of genital mutilation who are forced to wear a veil and take a husband, preferably an older family member, at the age of puberty. The post-9/11 political environment has seen right-wing politicians revive and amplify these misconceptions (Bjoernaas, 2023). And even worse, the misrepresentation of Islam as a terrorist religion, which is not true. Western narratives often misrepresent the East, framing Iran as a "sponsor of terrorism," a nuclear threat, and a violator of human rights. Iranian Occidentalism arises as a defensive response to these

portrayals, while similar distortions of the West appear in media across the Islamic world (Zabardast, 2015).

CONCLUSION

This paper examines Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* using the theoretical framework of postcolonial feminism that covers how Azar Nafisi portrays the situation in Tehran during the revolution in the Ayatollah's theocratic regime. This system is the part of colonialism brought by the United Kingdom and Russia in the Great Game event and Geopolitical interference by the United States escalated by the White Revolution. These colonialist legacies influenced the continuation of Iranian politics from the Pahlavi Dynasty to Ayatollah's regime which erupted in the feminist movement in the 1980s. Including Azar Nafisi and her seven female students' resistance through a literary approach. Nafisi uses both Western and Persian literature in relating it to Iran under the rule of a false-Islamic theocratic regime like Nabokov's *Lolita* and the *Tales of Scheherazade* from *One Thousand, and One Nights*. Depicting the feminist resistance in Iran correlating to the discussed literature against patriarchal and male-dominating authority. Moreover, further analysis of the book may have brought misconceptions about Nafisi's narration. Due to her perspectives on Islamic values based on a Western-centrism lens.

As discussed in this paper, the responses to these questions illustrate how indirect colonialism, driven by the geopolitical rivalry between Britain-India (Gurka) and Russia, along with U.S. intervention during the Pahlavi Dynasty, shaped Iran's political landscape. This portrayed Iranian politics as the regime had vis-a-vis relations with the U.S. and afterward affected the whole nation with liberalism and imperialism. Which ideology gradually influenced Iranian citizens to be either Islamic extremists or western-centrism. This erupted the Islamic revolution and then objected to the western-centrism women being forcefully obliged to their regulations. As a result, gendered authoritarianism was presented.

Nafisi correlates implicitly Western literature like Nabokov's *Lolita* and Persian literature like the *Tales of Scheherazade* with the Iranian women situation, resisting gendered authoritarianism. The narration written by Azar Nafisi indeed may have brought tensions between Islamic values, feminist resistance, and critiques of Western-centrism. Because it narrates the promotion of unveiling the hijab which many Muslim women would be in contrast with. However, Nafisi and the feminist activists only intended to resist the totalitarian regime, not Islam or hijab. This phenomenon is beneficial for Western-centric politics as they create stereotypes about Islam. To become superior over the eastern nations, usually referred to as 'Third-World Countries'. This is the part where everyone should be aware of preventing the repeating of the next colonialism in the present times, or so-called neo-colonialism.

In conclusion, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* demonstrates how Iranian women navigated the intersecting pressures of patriarchal authority, gendered authoritarianism, and the enduring legacies of Western-centric political influence. Through her engagement with both Western and Persian literature, Nafisi highlights the strategies of intellectual and cultural resistance employed by Iranian women under theocratic rule. The text highlights that opposition was not directed at Islam or religious practices such as the hijab by itself, but against the imposition of restrictive socio-political structures that restricted women's autonomy. Moreover, Nafisi's work highlights the subtle continuation of neo-colonial influence, emphasizing the need for critical awareness of

how external powers and ideologies can shape domestic governance and social norms. Ultimately, the memoir serves as both a record of feminist resistance and a cautionary reflection on the complex interplay between culture, politics, and gender in postcolonial societies.

While this analysis provides a comprehensive literary overview, its scope is primarily limited to qualitative literature reviews and textual criticism rather than empirical field research. To further complete this analysis, future studies should incorporate primary data gathered through field-based methodologies, such as interviews and ethnographic research. Furthermore, expanding the investigation to include broader geopolitical perspectives would offer a more nuanced understanding of how global power dynamics intersect with domestic social structures. By moving beyond the text and into active fieldwork, researchers can better capture the evolving landscape of resistance and the contemporary realities of gender politics in the region.

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