

In the eye of the storm

The Iranian writer Azar Nafisi stands accused of being allied with American warmongers – just because she read *Lolita* in Tehran.

The fact that Afghani women are forced to wear hijabs, niqabs and chadors, and maybe even to be married to power-hungry booksellers, has recently been presented as reason enough for military intervention. And now that four Iranian women – Azar Nafisi, Shirin Ebadi, Marjane Satrapi and Azadeh Moaveni – have all published their memoirs, many more than the usual literary audience are eagerly turning the pages. A merciless debate is raging, showing that literature and ideology can sometimes be hard to separate.

No one has tasted the bile more than Azar Nafisi. Her book *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, about her years as an English professor in the Iranian capital, has deservedly become a bestseller, but it has also come under heavy fire: not everyone thinks that clandestinely reading old classics under the duvet or wearing lipstick behind the veil are such heroic acts.

Ruthless criticism

The harshest words have come from Hamid Dabashi, professor at Colombia University in New York. In an interview last summer, Dabashi, a fellow Iranian, called Nafisi a “native informer”, and even compared her to the American war criminal Lynndie England. His point was that Nafisi made it appear as if American values, represented by its literary classics, were the only thing that could save Iran.

When I meet Nafisi in Washington she is not too willing to talk about this controversy, but is clearly both irritated and hurt. She aspires to be an advocate for democracy, but her strategy is dialogue, of which *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is a good example.

“President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad has recently stated that 27 years of Islamist revolution has not been enough to eradicate secularism and liberalism from Iranian universities. In reality, this tradition has lasted more than 150 years, and Iran was, until the revolution in 1979, one of the most progressive countries in the region. And, in spite of the problems I describe in my book, these currents still dominate Iranian academia.”

In her autobiography, Shirin Ebadi, Iranian Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, states that the Iranian middle class is the last enclave in the Middle East to still have some pro-American sentiments.

”Yes, I think that is true. After 9/11, streets around Iran were filled with thousands of people holding candles and roses, showing their support to the Americans. They were beaten by police. Actually I think one can compare the current situation in Iran with that in Eastern Europe during the Cold War: the atmosphere is full of suppressed feelings.”

Nafisi is of the opinion that there should be more emphasis on literature as an agent for merging dissimilar or even contradictory cultures. When Americans read books about Iran, they discover something new: an Iran that is more complex and less threatening.

“There is a potential to learn how much all peoples have in common, and when this happens, we can see that empathy is the most important product of literature. I don’t believe we can

change regimes this way, but it is certainly possible to change people's mindsets. Here, too, Iran is a good example: we got rid of one regime, but now we have another one which is even worse. What we have to do is to change society in such a radical way that no one will accept being governed in this manner anymore."

Civilian and religious laws

The same Shirin Ebadi trusts that an innovative reading of the Koran (called *ijtihad*) can prove to be the key to more freedom in Iran. Nafisi is more sceptical about how much innovation the Koran and Sharia permit.

"Sharia seeks to make the presence of religion felt everywhere, but no religious law can be applicable to all citizens. Therefore my opinion is that civil and religious laws must be separated. The point of having a secular state is not to destroy religion, but to protect it."

The mixture of literature and everyday life in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is, in all its simplicity, a very good idea. The book abounds with tragicomic stories. For instance, Nafisi reveals how students are so adept at quoting from teacher's lectures word for word, that teachers are convinced they are cheating.

"The origin of this way of thinking is how the Koran is taught at school. The result is an ingrained respect for authority that produces insecure students who will never trust their own judgements."

The book also contains a story of how they set up a mock trial of F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic *The Great Gatsby* in the classroom. The teacher, Nafisi herself, was given the task of defending the novel, but her students were not able to separate the book from its writer, and all signs of decadence and immorality were taken as proof of their preconceived view of American society. But in what way is *The Great Gatsby* of relevance for Iranians today?

"It is undoubtedly a very American book, but it is also, as all literature should be, of universal importance. So, if you want to learn about the US, you can read *The Great Gatsby*, but at the same time you will be reading a story that could take place anywhere. More than anything, it is a book about how people are blind to each other ..."

The native informer

Some of Dabashi's accusations include allegations that she has been fraternizing with US neoconservatives. His rhetoric has been quite extreme, but the debate is interesting and sharp, even if Nafisi herself has so far decided not to participate.

"Well, I have to say that I look at this as a joke. This is exactly how the Islamic republic treats people, by calling them names. This happens continuously to Iranians who want to speak out: they are accused of being agents of America or Israel. I am used to hearing this from the Iranian regime, but from an academic?"

"I have always been against the invasion of Iraq, and I am opposed to any plan to attack Iran. I have made statements about this in public, for those who care to check. This is a free country, and people can be conservatives, for that matter, without being agents. I do not believe in guilt by association."

Dabashi uses harsh words, but doesn't he still have a point if one reads your book in a specific context? Like Edward Said does with Western literature in his book Orientalism?

“He seems to have forgotten that what I have written is a book containing my memoirs. Would he have preferred that my experiences were different? He has also attacked Salman Rushdie in much the same way, and I have nothing against being compared to him ...”

Nafisi refuses to subscribe to ideas which imply that everything, including human beings, is subordinate to politics.

“My opinion is that a writer, when working, should be able to overstep his own prejudice. Let us return to *The Great Gatsby*: it might be true that F. Scott Fitzgerald admired and envied the rich, but he exposed them all the same.”

A troublesome dictatorship

Another commentator, the American writer Gideon Lewis-Kraus, has criticized both Nafisi and Dabashi. He claims that Nafisi never seems to be able to describe the Iranian dictatorship as anything worse than a “great inconvenience”. He concludes that a “besieged Nafisi gets to preserve her fantasy that removing her veil to read Austen in her home was not only therapeutically powerful but politically noble, and Dabashi gets to preserve his fantasy that criticizing Nafisi makes him a usefully engaged intellectual.” Does that mean that Nafisi’s belief in literature’s refining capabilities is nothing but wishful thinking?

“My wish to write an apolitical book may seem impossible, since everything from make-up to veils becomes politics in an authoritarian society. But I think that at the core, the struggle against the rulers in Iran is just as much an existential one as a political one.”

By the look of it, Azar Nafisi has become a hostage to an ideological battle that was never really hers. It seems that what she wants to talk about is *The Great Gatsby*, *Lolita* and all the other classics that she clearly loves, but the circumstances that she herself inadvertently created will not permit her. She has reason to feel trapped.

“Almost every day I am confronted with the fact that I am a woman that was born in Iran and is now living in the US. Only in my own imagination can I escape these categories, only there is there no East or West.”