"*Upsilamba*!": the Joy and Sanctuary of Fiction in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*

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"Upsilamba became part of our increasing repository of coded words and expressions, a repository that grew over time until gradually we had created a secret language of our own. That word became a symbol, a sign of that vague sense of joy, the tingle in the spine Nabokov expected his readers to feel in the act of reading fiction; it was a sensation that separated the good readers, as he called them, from the ordinary ones. It also became the code word that opened the secret cave of remembrance" (Nafisi 21).

I remember one particularly languid, humid August afternoon that forces itself to the forefront of my memory out of the haze of my early childhood. I was perhaps seven at the time, and I had set aside one precious, empty summer day, relinquishing an energetic tromp in the polluted, mossy stream behind my home to count every single book I owned. I was determined to make a tally of them, memorize the number so I could recall in my later years, with pride—or so I thought at the time—that as a young child I owned X amount of books. I don't recall the exact number now, but it was well into the two hundreds. It's an irrelevant figure to me, and has long since faded from my cache of memories. Yet what has stayed with me is the passion for these bound and battered objects, my unhesitating certainty that they are, by far, the most precious things I own.

My mother, who owned an independent bookstore throughout the formative years of my childhood, would always caution me not to break the spine of any book. Books were sacred to her, and this act represented an inexcusable disregard for the lifespan of the book in question. I always differed with her in this respect, carrying my books with me everywhere I went, recklessly adoring them, writing in them, drawing in the margins, smearing and staining their pages as I greedily consumed both words and food. I would take absurdly long baths accompanied by piles of books, maneuvering the taps with dirty toes and soaking stories into my skin like the steam that would fill the small bathroom. I vividly recall dreaming of plots I had read about, and upon waking I would be utterly incapable of distinguishing these dreams and plots from my conscious reality.

In The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Kundera refers to voracious readers as members of a "secret brotherhood" (45). Tereza, the main character in the novel, elaborates on this feeling of solidarity: In Tereza's eyes, books were emblems of a secret

brotherhood. For she had but a single weapon against the world of crudity surrounding her: the books she took out of the municipal library, and above all, the novels…They not only offered the possibility of an imaginary escape from a life she found unsatisfying; they also had a meaning for her as physical objects: she loved to walk down the street with a book under her arm…It differentiated her from others (Kundera 45). Like Tereza, the women of Reading Lolita in Tehran actively utilize books as a defense against a “world of crudity” where literature’s magic quality is disavowed and feared. Nafisi explains, “We lived in a culture that denied any merit to literary works, considering them important only when they were handmaidens to something seemingly more urgent—namely ideology” (25). In a land governed by patriarchy and a stern totalitarian regime, both books and women were dismissed as insignificant and worthless. However, as so often is the cause when something is loathed, at the root of this disregard was a deep and unutterable fear of both.

By creating a space in which they could lay claim both to themselves and to books, the women of Reading Lolita in Tehran engaged in an act of transgression against the state. The space they invented was both literal—the open, airy living room in Nafisi’s home, and metaphorical—in the world of the mind. As Nafisi says, “That room, for all of us, became a place of transgression. What a wonderland it was! Sitting around the large coffee table covered with bouquets of flowers, we moved in and out of the novels we read” (6). Since the government was so preoccupied with denying women space in every sense of the word, this was the ultimate act of resistance and defiance. It provided them with an opportunity to explore their own identities, escape the confines of their lives, form bonds of solidarity with each other, and partake in the joy of experiencing great

works of art. Essentially, it allowed them to become visible—in spite of the weighty silences and hypocrisies of their government, and the heavy black cloth of the chador that shrouded them from the eyes of the world.

During a heated and fervent debate between Nafisi's students regarding the morality of Nabokov's *Lolita*, one the girls impatiently exclaims, "'Is it possible to write a reverent novel', said Nassrin, 'and to have it be good? Besides, the contract with the reader is that this is not reality, it's an invented world. There must be some blasted space in this life,' she added crossly, 'where we can be offensive, for God's sake'" (Nafisi 50). Yet Nafisi negotiates a different contract with her reader than Nabokov. Nafisi is not portraying "an invented world," and she wants the reader to be cognitive of this from the beginning. By recognizing the very real world that Nafisi describes, the reader can serve as witness to the women's process of becoming visible. In the opening pages of the book, Nafisi refers to the collective desire of the women to be seen. Before sharing their story, Nafisi asks something directly of the reader, saying, "But to steal the words from Humbert, the poet/criminal of Lolita, I need you, the reader, to imagine us, for we won't really exist if you don't" (6). She continues on to request: "Against the tyranny of time and politics, imagine us the way we sometimes didn't dare to imagine ourselves: in our most private and secret moments, in the most extraordinary ordinary instances of life, listening to music, falling in love, walking down the shady streets or reading Lolita in Tehran" (6). At this point, if the reader chooses to continue, it is with the knowledge that Nafisi is asking them to allow her world of words and woven phrases to become inextricably entwined with their own reality.

Nafisi, like Nabokov, defines all fine literature by one common trait: it is all different variations on the theme of a fairy tale. The alternative world that Nafisi and her students create is a gossamer web of fairy tales and fiction. In discovering the invented world of others, the girls find an open space within their own lives that helps them to enlarge the boundaries of their reality. Nafisi explains why the concept of the fairy tale fosters such an impetus towards expansion needs smoother transition: "Every fairy tale offers the potential to surpass present limits, so in a sense the fairy tale offers you freedoms that reality denies. In all great works of fiction, regardless of the grim reality they present, there is an affirmation of life against the transience of that life, an essential defiance" (47). This is the central rational behind the class. Not only do the girls read, discuss and analyze the novels; they also come to internalize the stories contained within the pages of the books. As the books become adapted to the context of their lives, the girls enter into a relationship of possession with the words they read. As a result, Nafisi's novel becomes "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 6). In claiming the book as "our Lolita", Nafisi and her students are erecting an intellectual and fantastical barrier around themselves that separates them from the political and social turmoil of the streets below Nafisi's apartment.

When I was packing the essentials for a semester abroad in Morocco, I originally set aside two shirts, two pairs of pants, and one sweater. Then I packed a duffle bag full of books. I was almost to the airport before I realized the absurdity of the situation. I knew I would be traveling often, and frequently alone, and it was not wise to bring my weight's worth in books if I wanted to manage comfortably. I sat down and picked

through them, eventually deciding that everything other than my required readings for my courses and my Arabic phrasebook would have to stay put in the States. At the last moment, I reversed my decision and shoved Things Fall Apart and Anna Karenina into the top compartment of my backpack, already close to bursting with oil pastels and "Ithaca is Gorges" t-shirts of varying sizes and colors—gifts for my host family.

Some days in Morocco I would carry these books with me just for the sheer comfort of their weight against my back as I negotiated strange streets with my broken Arabic. Although there was much I loved about the country, I could barely tolerate the near constant sexual harassment I was subject to. Traveling alone on buses, stopping at a quiet café for a glass of tea with mint leaves straining against the confinement of a frosted glass, or waiting on a street corner in front of a tiled fountain to meet a friend, I would often pull out a book to deter the curious glances or comments of passing men.

To a similar end, Nafisi and her students would escape into literature in the face of an antagonistic world. As Nafisi says, "This class was the color of my dreams. It entailed an active withdrawal from a reality that had turned hostile"(11). Escapism became a survival mechanism because it provided them a space in which they could assert themselves. Nafisi 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 out own little pockets of freedom. And like Lolita, we took every opportunity to flaunt our insubordination (25). The state sought to dehumanize and devalue women and literature because it feared them both. By laying

claim to their voices, themselves and the books they read, Nafisi and her students also reaffirmed their essential humanity.

The girls began to open up in that room, spread out across the couches with the expansive view of the mountains outside as backdrop to their discussions. One of the most symbolic manifestations of this was the removal of the chador, although this was not always accomplished without pause. Nafisi describes Mashid, one of her students who arrived at her house slightly unsure and faltering that first morning of classes: "As she was taking off her black robe, I told her, there are no men in the house—you can take that off too. She hesitated before uncoiling her long black scarf"(12). There was a "collective intimacy" to the class that was initially uncomfortable for some of the students, and also for Nafisi herself (Nafisi 18). In a sense, it was a slightly forced intimacy, born of necessity rather than choice. Nafisi readily admits that many of the girls would not have sought each other's company outside of the class setting, and that it was often difficult to discuss such personal topics among near strangers: "We had to reveal aspects of ourselves to one another that we didn't even know existed. I constantly felt I was being undressed in front of perfect strangers" (60). Yet Nafisi also considers this to be the greatest achievement of the class—the gradual manner in which they managed to generate, as one of the students phrased it, "a sort of communal version of Virginia Woolf's room of her own…'a space of our own'" (Nafisi 12).

Of course, Nafisi and her students would not have succeeded in escaping into literature had books not inspired a deep and life-affirming joy in them. In their somber and, as Nafisi describes it, often colorless world, joy was the ultimate taboo. Nafisi eloquently states, "Every great work of art…is a celebration, an act of insubordination

against the betrayals, horrors and infidelities of life" (47). This insubordination and appreciation for something that existed so far beyond the reach of the state, allowed them to "experience how the ordinary pebble of ordinary life could be transformed into a jewel through the magic eye of fiction" (Nafisi 8). Nafisi and her students used the "magic eye of fiction" in a creative and non-combative way to contest the perpetual stare of the state's eye. Nafisi refers to the "evil of the state" as an "individualized evil" because it had permeated even the most private spheres of their lives. In the face of such evil, Nafisi poses what she terms as "the essential question"—"How does the soul survive?" The response she provides to her students and her readers is "through love and imagination" (315).

When I was very young, younger than I was the day I sat down to count my books, I used to have reoccurring and chronic nightmares. I developed all sorts of tactics for combating them—sleeping in a certain position, wearing a ragged "lucky" shirt with leaping dolphins emblazed on the front, not letting any part of my body be exposed to the world outside my blanket. But by far, my most effective mode of defense was sleeping in my closet. There was a small crawl space beneath my book shelf, piled with pillows and stocked with hidden riches—a rusted, latched chest filled with foreign coins, a blue and white woolen woven blanket that my best friend Rebecca's mom had knit for me, a few doll-babies and half a dozen stubby pencils. I slept in the closet because I felt comforted by the enclosed space, but mostly because I sought proximity to my books. And the nightmares very rarely followed me in.

Reading Lolita is Tehran is a love letter to literature, and an affirmation of its life-sustaining ability. Nearly every well-written book can function either as a reminder or a

gift. Nafisi's novel serves both purposes simultaneously: it is a gift because it is a reminder. It reminds the reader of their own intimate and specific relationship with the written word, and calls them home to the books they have cherished and loved across the years.

Works Cited

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