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CULTUREBOX

Pawn of the Neocons?

The debate over Reading Lolita in Tehran.

BY GIDEON LEWIS-KRAUS

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This past June, Columbia professor Hamid Dabashi, alarmed by Seymour Hersh's *New Yorker* story about an alleged administration plan to use targeted nuclear strikes against Iran, felt compelled to take action against American imperialist aggression: He sent an irate essay to the Egyptian English-language newspaper *Al-Ahram Weekly*. But Dabashi, a scholar of Iranian studies and comparative literature, chose a peculiar antagonist: Azar Nafisi, author of the best-selling memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003). A less-than-coherent pastiche of stock anti-war sentiment, strategic misreading, and childish calumny, Dabashi's essay (originally written three years earlier, upon the book's publication) accuses Nafisi—whose memoir tells the story of a clandestine book club she convened for two years in her Tehran home—of being a neoconservative pawn: She sought "to recycle a kaffeeklatsch version of English literature as the ideological foregrounding of American empire."

Dabashi's basic point, draped in shopworn academic prose, is that Nafisi used her readings of some Western classics—Austen, James, Fitzgerald, and Nabokov—to undermine Persian cultural autonomy. Nafisi, on his account, is a "native informer and colonial agent" whose writing has cleared the way for an upcoming exercise of military intervention on Middle Eastern soil—this time in Iran. He labels Nafisi a "comprador intellectual," a comparison to the "treasonous" Chinese employees of mainland British firms, who sold out their country for commercial gain and imperial grace. He deconstructs the book's cover image—which appears to be two veiled teenage women reading *Lolita* in Tehran—as "Orientalised pedophilia" designed to appeal to "the most deranged Oriental fantasies of a nation already petrified out of its wits by a ferocious war waged against the phantasmagoric Arab/Muslim male potency that has just castrated the two totem poles of U.S. empire in New York." Apparently frustrated by the lack of anything resembling an outraged response, Dabashi intensified his attack in an August interview in *Z* magazine: "To me there is no difference between Lynndie England"—one of the soldiers convicted of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib—"and Azar Nafisi." Dabashi's determination seems to have paid off, with recent articles about this artificial controversy on the cover of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and in the *BostonGlobe*.

The truth is that Dabashi's skepticism about the merit of Nafisi's much-admired book isn't entirely off the mark. The book's failure, however, is not political—as Dabashi insists—but

literary. It is with the adjective *kaffeeklatsch* that Dabashi comes closest to articulating the problems with *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, which are its inadvertent mildness and its smug satisfaction. The story, by now familiar to millions of readers, goes like this: After Nafisi, a professor of literature, was forced to resign from her post at the University of Tehran (for among other things, refusing to wear the veil), she invited half a dozen of her most enthusiastic former students to continue class at her home once a week. There, the eight women assembled would read and discuss banned Western classics over tea and dessert. Jay Gatsby, Nafisi helps them understand, is a "romantic and tragic dreamer, who becomes heroic because of his belief in his own romantic delusion." In short, as depicted in the book, the seminars offered largely uncomplicated lessons about the power of hope, imagination, and individuality that Nafisi graciously bestows upon her doting students. Nafisi's emptily lyrical sentences ("It was evening. Outside, the sky was the color of dusk—not dark, not light, not even gray.") are perfectly suited for the facile readings she presents of the texts at hand: These sentences sound pleasant enough, but their meaning evaporates under even casual scrutiny. A piece of light flattery disguised as a searching memoir of life under totalitarianism, *Reading Lolita* stands to, say, Milosz's *The Captive Mind* rather as Bridget Jones stands to Elizabeth Bennet.

This self-importance reveals itself in the book's tone, which is more petulant than outraged. Though Nafisi tries to empathize (empathy, she reminds us, is the engine of the 19th-century novel) with the awful trials of her students and friends, she seems to lack the emotional capacity to rise above her own experience of life in the Islamic republic as a great inconvenience. Nafisi came from a prominent Tehran family; her father was mayor of Tehran in the '60s, and she was sent away at 13 to be educated in Switzerland and the States. She returned at age 30 in 1978, just before the revolution, and taught in a few different universities through the '80s until her forced resignation. Unlike most of her friends in Tehran, she gives the impression that she could leave at any time; this knowledge gives her life over two decades under the mullahs, at least as she presents it, a touristic quality. Where Dabashi accuses her of being an agent of Western imperialism, he might have been better off calling her a literary carpetbagger. This is not to impugn Nafisi's project itself, which was meaningful and brave, or her faith that literature can extend some promise of alternate worlds. Her obvious valor as a teacher and mentor makes it all the more unfortunate that her book is so self-important.

For example, the book closes with her decision, in the late '90s, to emigrate to the States with her husband and two children. In the final paragraph, she describes how her momentary sadness gives way to elation: "I went about my way rejoicing, thinking how wonderful it is to be a woman and a writer at the end of the twentieth century." It must have been extraordinarily difficult for her to leave Tehran—her mother, she tells us in the acknowledgments, died in Tehran in early 2003 after a long illness, and Nafisi was not allowed to visit. But she has made the decision to stake her memoir on uplift. Whatever the faults of *Reading Lolita*, Nafisi does not offer the political message Dabashi thinks she does —that American freedom and culture are better than Iranian oppression and backwardness. Rather, she extends a more therapeutic solace: Great literature is there to make you feel better, regardless of how oppressive the political world can be.

If Nafisi's book found such improbably joyful closure only at the expense of her own (presumably harrowing) emotional experience, we might merely shrug. What's much harder to defend is the implication that she's entitled to rejoice because of how much she's done for her students. The book's penultimate scene sees Nafisi at a coffee shop mulling over her decision to leave Iran when she is approached by Miss Ruhi, a former student. When we last encountered Miss Ruhi, she was a devout member of the revolutionary Muslim Students' Association and an icily disapproving member of Nafisi's course on Henry James at the

University of Tehran. Now she tells Nafisi that she has an 11-month-old daughter, Fahimeh, whom she calls by a "secret name": Daisy, as in Miller, James' headstrong heroine (who, Miss Ruhi and Nafisi have both perhaps forgotten, is ultimately jilted before dying of malaria). "I want my daughter to be what I never was—like Daisy. You know, courageous." Nafisi, shored up by the knowledge that she has introduced some nominal courage into this young woman's sad life, can leave Tehran with an unburdened heart: Her life-affirming work there has drawn to a natural close.

It's this kind of pat, self-congratulatory resolution that has made this book so irresistible to some American readers—but to book-club members, not imperialists. Rather than reading Nafisi's well-intentioned book, however, as a mostly inoffensive and well-marketed literary trifle—he is, after all, a professor of literature—Dabashi insists on seeing it as political perfidy. He writes that her book "pushes back the clock half a century" in promoting "the cause of 'Western classics' at a time when decades of struggle by postcolonial, black and Third World feminists, scholars and activists has [sic] finally succeeded to introduce a modicum of attention to world literatures." This sort of claim makes clear what ultimately binds Dabashi and Nafisi to each other: their shared overemphasis on the *politically* salutary effects of reading novels and writing literary criticism. Dabashi's purposes are not served by calling the book bad because it is cliché, which would be right but pointless. He must call it bad because it is dangerous. In the end, Dabashi must conspire with Nafisi to make the book more important that it is: The 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. But those whose fingers are on the triggers of those targeted nuclear warheads couldn't possibly care about what either of them has to say.

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