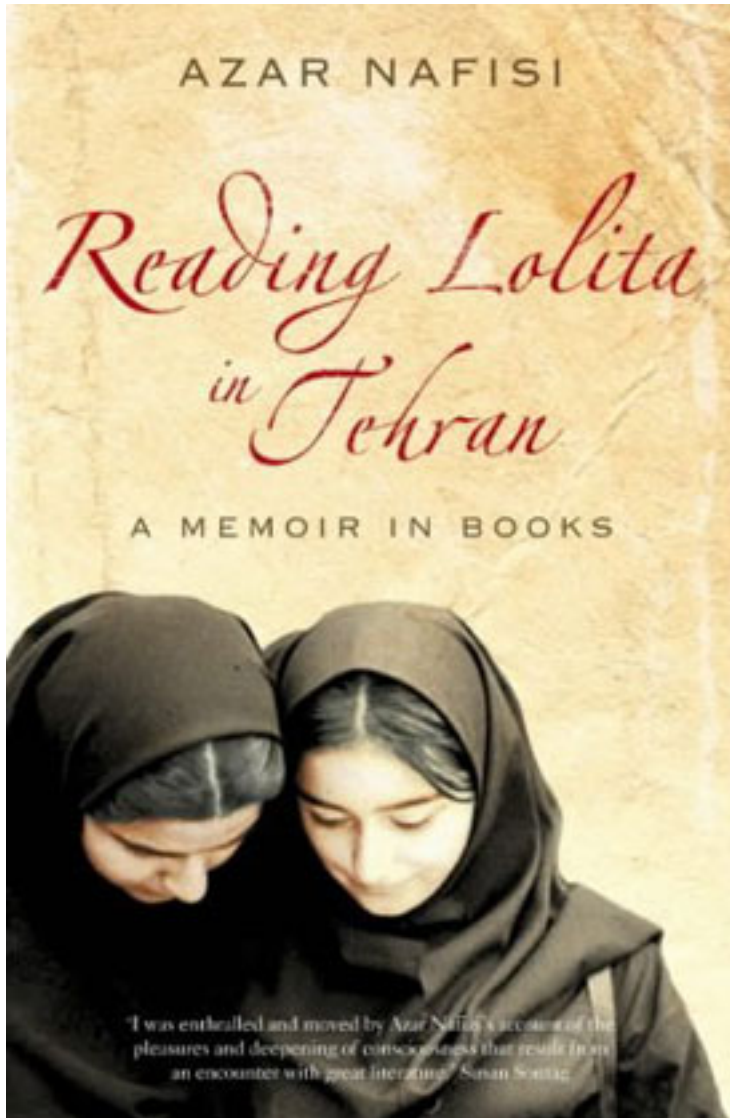


Reading between the Lines: Culture as Propaganda
Reading Lolita in Tehran

by Nasrin Jewell and Margaret Sarfehjooy



The cover photo of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* was cleverly and dishonestly designed to entice Western readers, insinuating that these repressed young women were bravely resisting the restraints of their backward Islamic culture to become enlightened by Western culture. The original photo was actually taken from a news report during Iran's 2000 parliamentary election. The young women are reading the results..

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"Reading Lolita in Tehran, written by Azar Nafisi, has unfortunately become an important resource for understanding Iran, its policies, its culture and its people, and especially the life of its women. Many book clubs have read and extensively discussed this novel, assuming that they are getting an insider's view. It has even been used as a textbook in many universities. Therefore, it is important to understand the context of this kind of Orientalist discourse and its role in our perception of a complex and nuanced society.

The influential cultural critic Edward Said is the author of *Orientalism*. In it, he dealt with false assumptions underlying Western attitudes toward the Middle East, and warned against native informants as the new mode of fuel for Orientalist ideology. Fatemeh Keshavarz, chair of the Department of Asian and Near Eastern Languages and Literature at Washington University and author of *Jasmine and Stars: Reading More than Lolita in Tehran*, broadly characterizes the New Orientalist works: "Thematically, (these books) stay focused on the public phobia (of Islam and the Islamic world) blind faith and cruelty, political underdevelopment, and women's social and sexual repression. They provide a mix of fear and intrigue the basis for a blank check for the use of force in the region and Western self-affirmation. Perhaps not all the authors intend to sound the trumpet of war. But the divided, black-and-white world they hold before the reader leaves little room for anything other than to surrender to the inevitability of conflict between the West and the Middle East."¹

These "Native Orientalists" are far more dangerous than their Western counterparts. They receive more attention because they provide "proof" to the Western reader of what they allegedly "know." The fact that Nafisi lived in Iran through the revolution and the subsequent events of 1980-90 supposedly gives her the credentials to be an authentic voice. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* satisfies the curiosity of the masses, and affirms preexisting perceptions. The recent proliferation of "Native Orientalist" memoirs by Iranian-Americans coincides with an increased U.S. focus on Iran and the military actions in Afghanistan and Iraq. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* has been the most successful of such recent memoirs. It was released during the most belligerent expansionist period in recent U.S. history, which has been desperately in need of public consent for its imperial designs. After 9/11, native Middle Eastern intellectuals were actively recruited by the neoconservatives to perform a critical function persuading the U.S. public to believe alleged atrocities taking place in the region of their birth. This was done to justify U.S. actions while professing to liberate the people from their oppressors.

With *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Nafisi provided something indispensable to the neoconservative project. Not surprisingly, neocons notoriously embraced her book, starting with Bernard Lewis, who supports U.S. war on Muslims and called this book "a masterpiece" in a blurb for the back cover. In the conservative *Weekly Standard* in 2007, Reuel Marc Gerecht cited *Reading Lolita in Tehran* to bolster his case for a first strike on Iran: "Although some Western female journalists have tried to depict Iranian women as liberated under their head scarves and veils," Gerecht wrote, "the

phenomenal global success of Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* has also made it more difficult to view the Islamic Republic's internal ethics, particularly regarding women, benignly."²

The cover of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, picturing two veiled teenage girls appearing to read banned Western literature, was cleverly and dishonestly designed to entice Western readers, insinuating that these repressed young women were bravely resisting the restraints of their backward Islamic culture to become enlightened by Western culture. However, the picture of these two teenagers was taken from an entirely different context. The original photo appeared in a news report during Iran's 2000 parliamentary election. In the original picture, the two young women are, in fact, reading the election results in the leading reformist newspaper *Mosharekat*.

On the surface, Azar Nafisi's book *Reading Lolita in Tehran* has a very simple plot. She conveys the story of an English professor at an Iranian university who is fed up with her perceived limitations of an Islamic government. She calls in some of her favorite students, and they get together to read masterpieces of Western literature. In reality, Nafisi is attempting to demonstrate the plight of people, especially women, in the Islamic world, and paves the way for the U.S. to play the role of savior. Her book tries to establish the idea that Islam is violent and abusive to women, and therefore fighting against Islamic terrorism helps save Muslim women from an unjust system. Nafisi reduces the complicated postrevolutionary Islamic Republic of Iran to simply a fundamentalist corrupt government, all due to the role of Islam. This perspective distorts the reality of a very difficult era in Iranian history including both postrevolutionary unrest and the Iran/Iraq war. The book has a total lack of sensitivity to cultural traditions, and displays a deep contempt for religion. No one will ever know by reading this book that Iranians have a rich history of literature of their own, including a large number of significant writers and poets, artists, and scholars. Postrevolutionary Iran has produced a glorious tradition of cinema that has garnered the awe and admiration of the film world. It has also produced a feminist press second to none.

But Azar Nafisi denigrates an entire culture of revolutionary resistance to a history of violence and oppression, and at the same time caters to reactionary forces within the U.S. Having been educated in Europe and the U.S., and sympathetic to Western culture, Nafisi demonstrates her disdain for daily life in the Islamic Republic of Iran. She shows her fear and mistrust by attributing everything backward and evil to Islam and the Iranian government, and glorifying Western culture, especially the U.S. There is no criticism of U.S. policies or their connection to the plight of people in the Middle East. She not only condemns the Islamic Revolution, but with it the entire nation, particularly the poor and disenfranchised, for whom she has no understanding, and the utmost contempt. Instead, she glorifies the U.S. leaders of the neoconservative movement.

With the support of neoconservative institutions, foundations, and think tanks, Nafisi has achieved fame and fortune. In her acknowledgments for *Reading Lolita*, Nafisi credits the Smith Richardson Foundation, one of the major right-wing foundations in the U.S., for its “generous grant that provided me with the opportunity to work on this book.” She was influenced by Leo Strauss and by Paul Wolfowitz, former U.S. deputy secretary of defense and dean of Johns Hopkins University’s School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS). Nafisi remains connected to SAIS, an institution that has been a base for numerous prominent neoconservatives like Wolfowitz and Gary Schmitt, who helped found and direct the Project for the New American Century (PNAC), a key conservative group that played a leading role advocating war in Iraq. Nafisi also sat on the board of trustees of Freedom House, a think tank and a “civil society” funded as part of the State Department’s modern “democracy promotion complex” that advances the neoconservative ideology of its trustees and government sponsors. Freedom House has a long history of destabilizing governments. Nafisi’s fellow Freedom House trustees have included Kenneth Adelman, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, Otto Reich, Jeanne Kirkpatrick, Samuel Huntington, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and Malcolm Forbes Jr.

Not since Betty Mahmoodi’s book *Not without My Daughter* (1984) has any book shown such hatred of everything Iranian. This puts Nafisi squarely in support of U.S. policies for demonizing Iran using the most obvious Orientalist discourse. Taking this book as a fair representation of Iran and Iranians is not only inaccurate but plays dangerously into the hands of those who seek to justify a U.S. policy of portraying Iran as an enemy. These “Native Orientalist” works provide misinformation, create misunderstanding, mistrust, and a dangerous sense of “us and them,” instead of a sophisticated global perspective leading towards understanding, respect, and trust. The atmosphere painted by this book leaves no room for a positive or constructive dialogue between the U.S. and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Those who want to prevent a war on Iran must analyze the potential consequences of such books as *Reading Lolita* in Tehran. Edward Said wrote: “I must ask my reader not to underestimate the kind of simplified view of the world that a relative handful of Pentagon civilian elites have formulated for U.S. policy in the entire Arab and Islamic worlds, a view in which terror, preemptive war, and unilateral regime change backed up by the most bloated military budget in history are the main ideas debated endlessly, impoverished by a media that assigns itself the role of producing so-called ‘experts’ who validate the government’s general line.”³ These are very historical times, and pro-war supporters are looking for any excuse to justify their actions. Support from representatives of a people they plan to invade and dominate is especially useful. These voices are now being honored and lauded throughout the U.S. Nafisi in particular is recognized as a champion of Iranian women’s rights. She was the recipient of the 2010 Don and Arvonne Fraser Human Rights Award in Minneapolis on May 20th. These sophisticated methods of media misinformation led to the war on Iraq and Afghanistan. We must not let this happen to Iran.

1. <http://www.commondreams.org/archive/2008/01/05/6192>
2. <http://www.popmatters.com/pm/feature/58030/fighting-words/>
3. <http://www.counterpunch.org/said08052003.html>

Nasrin Jewell is one of the translators of Iranian author Fariba Vafi's *My Bird*, Syracuse University Press, 2009, a novel "demystifying contemporary Iran by taking readers beyond the stereotypes and into the lives of individuals. Vafi is one of the most important voices in Iranian literature"--Amazon.com description. Dr. Jewell is professor of economics at the University of St. Catherine, St. Paul, Minnesota. She was born, lived, and studied in Iran, and was a Fulbright scholar and continued her work at academic institutions in Europe and South America. She has authored numerous articles in the areas of Middle East studies and women's studies. Margaret Sarfehjooy is co-chair of the Women Against Military Madness Middle East Committee. She has traveled to Iran and is active on Middle East issues.