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Uniting in Differences

The impact of circumstance on anyone’s life is immense. Each human being is made up of an overwhelmingly complex series of life experiences rooting from where they came from. In Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran,* Nafisi takes her readers into a life that may seem completely unimaginable, especially when read through a first-world lens. While living in Iran, Nafisi faces her own fair share of difficulties that shape her into the woman she is. However, her memoir also brings in a cast of young women who face similar difficulties but are all certainly unique and individualistic thinkers. The culture of Iran embraces uniformity in their oppressive policies against women that restrict what they can wear, their interactions, their work, and their education, but this uniformity is far from present in Nafisi’s living room literature class. While the women share common problems and fears, the solidarity they find strengthens the women instead of weakening them. The classroom is far from perfectly serene, however. The women have disagreements and arguments, and their personalities shine through in Nafisi’s work. Still, their differences ultimately strengthen their community as they unite against the Iranian expectation for quiet and unopinionated women. In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Nafisi employs the contrasting themes of individuality and solidarity by sharing carefully selected anecdotes that show the women sharing fears and grievances, but also sharing stories of clashes and intense differences in belief. This emphasizes how her class gives women in Iran a place to gain community but also foster unique viewpoints, which creates a space rebelling against Iranian wishes for docile, ubiquitous women.

Living in Iran certainly makes an impact on the women found in Nafisi’s memoir, as they all face similar poor treatment and injustices rooting back to the Iranian government. One of the most compelling injustices found in the memoir happens to Nafisi’s student Sanaz. After sharing her horrific encounter with law enforcement involving a forced virginity test and a stint in jail, the women of Nafisi’s class, and Nafisi herself, are stunned. They know that what happened to Sanaz could have easily happened to them. Nafisi shares the impact Sanaz’s story has on herself: “I remember this incident just as I remember so many others from my own life in Iran; I even remember the events people may have written or told me about since I left. Strangely, they too have become my own memories” (74). In this quote, Nafisi illustrates how living in Iran has made her supremely aware of other’s experiences. She evokes a feeling of sympathy and connectedness by acknowledging how peculiarly the pain of others has become apart of her. By quickly expanding from Sanaz’s story to the stories of countless others, she emphasizes that this instance of unity is far from an isolated instance. Nafisi equates the memories of so many others to her own memories, which seeks to show how the conditions in Iran create similar barriers and obstacles for large groups of citizens. The feeling of connection due to these shared experiences, vaguely referred to as “strange”, rebels against Iranian norms for women, which encourage woman to stay isolated. In this particular instance, Nafisi explains how she shoulders the personal pain of Sanaz, and how this ties them intricately together. In Iran, the expectation would instead be for Sanaz to have learnt her lesson and remain quiet. However, for the women of Nafisi’s room, this trauma unites them instead. By choosing this anecdote about Sanaz to share, Nafisi wants her readers to grasp the unity shared by the women against the injustices of the world outside. Thematically, this illustrates the deep-set emphasis on solidarity found in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*.

While Nafisi’s class gives the women a place to unite, it also gives the women a place to argue and disagree. Nafisi chooses to write about various instances where the women do not get along so perfectly. Nafisi describes how the women begin to bicker during a discussion of Lolita: “There was something in the air that day that did not relate to the book we read. Our discussion had plunged us into more personal and private areas, and my girls found that they could not resolve their own dilemmas quite as neatly as they could in the case of Emma Bovary or Lolita” (51). In this quote, Nafisi starts off by grounding the reader with the fact that her class extends into matters beyond literature. There is more going on in her living room than just a strict literary analysis, and “something in the air” implies an atmosphere of tension. As their discussion about Lolita intensifies, Nafisi describes the all-enveloping feeling as the women are “plunged” into a charged discussion. The environment is clearly overflowing with discourse, debates, and differences in opinion. She explains how the women struggle to overcome their differences, which implies that the women hold strong, and firm beliefs. This contrast of beliefs helps to highlight the emphasis on individuality that permeates Nafisi’s class and writing. This also acknowledges that the dynamic found between the women is far from perfect. There are friendships and feuds, but they are both important to the class ecosystem, so Nafisi takes the time to write about and acknowledge them. Iranian expectations encourage these women to be quiet and unassuming. With rules on how women can dress, a distaste of the education of women, limits on who women consort with, and other restrictions, Iranian standards push women to be largely homogenous. Nafisi gives these women a place to be uniquely themselves, even if that causes conflict. They all can freely express their thoughts without fear of repercussions or punishment. By writing about the differences in belief found in her class, Nafisi shows how each woman in her class is individualistic with independent opinions and attitudes, which rebels against social norms.

Nafisi has evidently established that the women of her class bond and support each other – but also clash and disagree. The women are unique and layered, but their world has additionally linked them together almost inexplicably. While this may seem contradictory, Nafisi shows how these two facts coexist in the women’s discussions of *Lolita*. Nafisi writes:

…our discussions were colored by my students’ hidden personal sorrows and joys. Like tearstains on a letters, these forays into the hidden and the personal shaded all our discussions of Nabokov. And more and more I thought of that butterfly; what linked us so closely was this perverse intimacy of victim and jailer. (37)

Nafisi describes her women using the metaphor of a butterfly to bring attention to each of their deepest selves. She describes how they “color” the conversation, with each woman sharing intimately personal and unique contributions. Just like a beautiful, multi-colored butterfly, they add saturation and complexity to their discussions. In their deepest personal selves, they all are so different, and yet, they make up one entity – the butterfly, or in reality, the women of Iran. By pivoting quickly from a separate view of the women to a joint view, Nafisi points to how something greater than themselves ties them together. Beyond the metaphor of the butterfly, Nafisi’s choice to discuss specifically the time spent reading *Lolita* brings an additional level of symbolism. In *Lolita,* Lolita is oppressed by Humbert in terrible ways, and so much of her life is completely out of her control. Humbert has Lolita where he wants her, and despite what she wishes, she must obey Humbert. He is her jailer, and she is the victim. The women of the class know what it is like to be oppressed and forced to act in defiance of what they truly want, as they face the realities of the country they reside in. Just as Lolita, they are the victims, and the Iranian government is their jailer. The women are all bonded by this strange relationship, and this is the root of their solidarity. The world outside of Nafisi’s living room forces the same realities on all of them, despite how colored and diverse their inner selves are. In contrast, Nafisi’s class creates a haven for the women to be their truest selves. By expressing themselves, they resist restrictive Iranian norms for women. In their individuality, they form a collective defiance. Nafisi intertwines examples showing how the women are different artfully with examples displaying what bonds them together, and in this the reader sees how the women’s display of individuality allows them to unite.

Throughout *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Nafisi masterfully chooses stories to share that clearly demonstrate what made her class such a special place. The freedom for the women to bond and express themselves completely triumphs over Iranian social norms which encourage the women to stay isolated and silent. By expressing themselves, they join in solidarity against the restrictive wishes for women that permeate Iran. Even while reading this memoir in a first-world country, these themes are important. Despite the country, many women face higher powers attempting to gain control of their own lives. For example, the ongoing battle for reproductive freedom is an extremely relevant topic here in the United States. While primarily women are impacted by legislation surrounding this topic, they still must fight to have their voices heard. On a less policy-driven scale, in many public and professional spheres women are taken less seriously than their male counterparts. For instance, the debate over the wage gap has continued for years. With barriers still in place holding women back, it is so important for there to be spaces that allow women to exist wholeheartedly and come together as a community. Spaces such as historical women’s colleges, women’s rights groups, and various other organizations provide a similar haven to Nafisi’s class. To be heard, to be deeply understood, and to connect with others is invaluable for women internationally.

Works Cited

Nafisi, Azar. *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2008.