

Bearing Witness: Gender, Fundamentalism, and the Construction of History in Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* and Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*

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Received: 2/10/2020

Revised: 31/10/2021

Accepted: 9/12/2021

Published: 30/3/2023

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Citation: Al Kassasbeh, R.T. (2023). Bearing Witness: Gender, Fundamentalism, and the Construction of History in Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* and Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. *Dirasat: Human and Social Sciences*, 50(2), 236–251.
<https://doi.org/10.35516/hum.v50i2.4934>

Abstract

Objectives: This paper examines the feminist testimonial depiction of patriarchy and fundamentalism in *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) by the Canadian writer Margaret Atwood and *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2004) by the Iranian writer Azar Nafisi.

Methods: This paper incorporates diverse ideas about dystopian literature, testimony, and feminist criticism by situating the individual in communion with a collective experience marked by marginalization, oppression, or resistance.

Results: Each book possesses its own narrative conventions of space, time, and character. While *The Handmaid's Tale* is a feminist dystopia which imagines a future United States governed by a totalitarian theocracy, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is a realistic account of a university professor about her life during the fundamentalist revolution in The Republic of Iran.

Conclusions: What these apparently two disparate texts have in common is that they attack patriarchy in all its forms, giving testimonial voice to the otherwise voiceless, with hope of promoting political change in contemporary societies.

Keywords: Dystopia, fundamentalism, testimony, feminist theory, Margret Atwood, Azar Nafisi.

أدبُ الشَّهادة: الجندر، الأصولية الدينيّة وبناء السَّرد التَّاريخي في "رواية الخادمة" لمارغريت أتوود، و"قراءة لوليتا في طهران" لأزار نفيسي

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ملخص

الأهداف: تتناول هذه الدراسة أدب الشَّهادة النسوي وتصويره للنظام الأبوي والأصولية الدينيّة في كل من: "رواية الخادمة" للكاتبة الكنديّة مارغريت أتوود (1985)، وكتاب "قراءة لوليتا في طهران" (2004) للكاتبة الإيرانيّة أزار نفيسي. المنهجية: تمزج هذه الدراسة أفكاراً متعددة عن الإستوبيا، وأدب الشَّهادة، والنقد النسوي وذلك من خلال وضع الفرد في شركة مع تجربة جماعية تتميز بالتمهيش أو الاضطهاد أو المقاومة. النتائج: يحفل كل عملٍ منهما بأدبيّات سرديةٍ لأزمنة وأمكنة وشخصيات مختلفة تماماً، بينما تعدّ "رواية الخادمة" دستوبيا نسوية تصوّر مستقبل أميركا تحت سيطرة حكومة دينيّة متطرّفة؛ إذ نجد أن "قراءة لوليتا في طهران" هي شهادة حيّة لأستاذة جامعيّة عن واقع الحياة في ظلّ الثّورة الدينيّة في إيران. الخلاصة: فيما يبدو أن العملين مختلفان في الظاهر، إلا أنهما يتفقان على مهاجمة تسلّط النظام الأبوي بجميع أشكاله، وكذلك يجتمعان على إعطاء الحقّ لتدوين شهادات حيّة لمن لا صوت له، وذلك أملاً بإحداث تغييراتٍ سياسيّة في المجتمعات المعاصرة. الكلمات الدالة: دستوبيا، الأصولية الدينيّة، أدب الشَّهادة، النظرية النسوية، مارغريت أتوود، أزار نفيسي.



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1. Introduction

Commenting on the numerous different methods which men employ to dominate women, Adrienne Rich (2017) concludes that 'we are confronting not a simple maintenance of inequality and property possession, but pervasive cluster of forces, ranging from physical brutality to control of consciousness' (p. 931). The idea of 'pervasive cluster' of which work together to enforce male domination in the private and public areas of life sums up very accurately the topic which links the two works discussed in this paper. Margret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), and Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2004) which form the center of analysis here are chosen with the aim of illustrating the feminist representation of the ramifying structures of patriarchy, religious fundamentalism, and totalitarian governments. While both works are written by female authors, the work that is usually associated to feminism more closely is Atwood's dystopia *The Handmaid's Tale*. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, a Fundamentalist revolution has occurred in America. The fundamentalists have taken control of the American government. The President was shot dead, the entire government was wiped out, the Congress was machine-gunned, and newspapers were closed. The revolutionary religious groups wanted to go back to a hypothetical past, when Christian laws and rules led the Christian Kingdom. Relying on biblical precedent, Gilead enforces extreme gender roles: women are held behind high walls, robed like nuns, banned from all literacy, and they are allocated to different positions in society based upon class and fertility. Their jobs, possessions, and even identities have been taken away by the new government. In response to declining birth rates, and the physical defects in newborn babies caused by pollution, and sexually transmitted diseases, the government returned to the practice of using handmaids who give birth on behalf of their mistresses. Offred, the protagonist of the novel and the 'handmaid' whose story we read, describes the processes of oppression and daily life in the Republic of Gilead, and provides us with flashbacks to her life before the theocratic régime. Offred with proven fertility is separated from her husband and her daughter is taken away to be raised by another family. A once financially independent working mother Offred is turned into a 'national resource' (Atwood, 1986, p. 75). She is forced to become a handmaid among other handmaids to a man of power (their new names tell who they 'belong' to, thus she is Of Fred). Because his original wife is sterile, Offred acts as a surrogate mother for wealthy upper-class white families.

While the dystopia presented in *The Handmaid's Tale* resembles a nightmare and should thus be prevented, the situation in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is miserably real. In 1979, after Nafisi earned her Ph.D. in American and English Literature at the University of Oklahoma, she found Iran far changed than it was when she was a child. An oppressive fundamentalist revolution was taking hold, and Nafisi had to survive the increasing repressive conditions and sexism in her society. Writers and reporters were jailed, magazines and newspapers were closed. Studies of Iranian women in postrevolutionary Iran confirm the testimony of Nafisi, who has devoted her narrative to investigate the plight of Iranian women. For example, the laws instituted in Iran after the Islamic revolution, in Haleh Afshar's words (1985a), have deprived Iranian women of 'most of their hard-earned civil rights and ... reduced them to the status of privatized sex objects required by the new religious order to be at the disposal of their husbands at all times.' Immediately upon taking power, Ayatollah Khomeini began a campaign to 'drive women back into the sphere of domesticity.' Within months women had been redefined as 'unequal' and 'impetuous' and biologically and naturally inferior. 'Their mere presence in public was described as 'seditious' and 'they were required to don the Islamic hijab, covering them from top to return to the home' (Ashfar, 1985a, p. 258). Defiance of the rule to wear the hijab was punishable by seventy-four lashes. The promulgation of such decrees created an atmosphere licensing male aggression toward women.¹ Nafisi begins her narrative with a portrayal of her life in the early days of the Revolution when she started teaching English literature at the University of Tehran in 1979 till her final departure to the United States in 1997. She was expelled from the university of Tehran for refusing to wear the veil. In the late 1990s, Nafisi created a private literature reading group with a select number of her best former female students. They meet at her home every Thursday to discuss important Western literary texts which were banned by the Islamic Republic of Iran because, they 'were likewise considered Western and therefore decadent, part of the plot by imperialists to bring down our culture' (Nafisi, 2004, p. 25). She takes great risks when she gathers her female students and they together read works by

¹ See also Afshar, Haleh. (1985b). "The Iranian theocracy". In Ashfar (Ed.), *Iran: A Revolution in Turmoil* (220-44).

authors like Nabokov, Jane Austen, Hemingway, Arthur Miller, and others.

Even though both works differ much regarding genre, setting and content, the themes are often similar. Sociopolitical themes such as religious fundamentalism, gender roles and the distribution of power are common themes of the two works. Three similarities can be recognized between religious fundamentalisms in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. The first is the literal reading of religious texts. Both texts indicate that fundamentalists are selective when it comes to the interpretation of religious texts they use. Second is the patriarchal power systems that govern the state of Gilead and The Republic of Iran. Women have no power in society and are controlled by commanders and Mullahs. In Atwood's novel women are child bearers, and aren't allowed to read, write, have no opinion or intellectual freedom. In Nafisi's narrative, Khomeini's government forced women out of their jobs and back into their traditional roles as mothers and housewives. Third is the rejection of religious pluralism and diversity. Furthermore, both works strongly share three major feminist observations summarized by Maggie Humm (1995) that 'gender is a social construction which oppresses women more than men; that patriarchy shapes this construction; and that women's experiential knowledge is the basis for a future non-sexist society' (p. x).

Both texts show how social and political inadequacies such as religious fundamentalism and dictatorship can culminate in apocalyptic situation. And while Atwood and Nafisi focus on the pervasive and unwavering structures of patriarchy and fundamentalism, it is not only the destruction brought by these structures that commands our critical attention but also the fact of the narrator's placement as witness. Therefore, it will be helpful, to read both texts with reference to Shoshana Felman's and Dori Laub's discussion of literature's ability to bear witness to historical trauma and, and its ability to transform history. Felman's and Laub's work (1992) is referring to the Holocaust, nevertheless their concern is not with its impact on the victims but, rather, on its 'historic onlookers: its witnesses' (p. 96). The function of literary testimony is 'to open up in the belated witness, which the readers now historically become, the imaginative capability of perceiving history – what is happening to others' (Felman, p. 108). We can draw upon these ideas to read *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Reading Lolita in Tehran* as forms of testimony. Both texts construct testimony to insist that victims must be remade as survivors through the acts of speaking out, telling their stories that critique larger cultural forces of patriarchy and fundamentalism. Gayatri Spivak (1986) has however questioned whether the 'subaltern', the woman in subordinate position, can ever 'speak', since she is required to use the dominant discourse of the oppressors that effectively silences her own voice. For Teresa De Lauretis (1984), 'strategies of writing and of reading are forms of cultural resistance. Not only can they work to turn dominant discourses inside out', but also 'to undercut their enunciation and address, to unearth the archeological stratification on which they are built' (p. 7). John Beverley (1992) explains that, in testimonio, the narrator intends to communicate the situation of a group's oppression, struggle, or imprisonment, to claim some agency in the act of narrating, and to call upon readers to respond actively in judging the crisis. Its primary concern is sincerity of intention, not the text's literariness (p. 94). As Dori Laub (1992) argues, "what ultimately matters in all processes of witnessing [...] is not simply the information, the establishment of facts, but the experience itself of *living through* testimony, of giving testimony' (Felman's & Laub's, p. 85). Beverley adds also that the narrative's function is the 'affirmation of the individual self in a collective mode' (p. 97). Atwood and Nafisi successfully appropriate these ideas about testimony. Both narratives are effectively situated at the intersection of bearing witness to suffering and reconfiguration of history. Though different in style, both texts agree in emphasizing the all-encompassing nature of patriarchal fundamentalism. They create complex, multifaceted representations of male dominance and violence which pervade sexual, psychological, social, and economic areas of life.

Dystopia, Testimony and Religious Fundamentalism in *Handmaid's Tale*

Although *The Handmaid's Tale* is presented as a dystopian society which is imaginary, its features are similar to the goals of some Christian Fundamentalist movements today. It is imaginative tale with a real substance. The setting of the novel is the fundamentalist totalitarian state of Gilead in the future United States. Hilde Staels (1995) reads Gilead as the continuation of the religion-based state of the New England Puritans of the seventeenth century. It emerges as a microcosm of patriarchal relations where the Law of Father is implanted. It is also a site of male violence and arena of the political

conflicts between the old liberal values of the United States and the new leading theocratic government. The legal foundation of Gilead and its cultural social structure are based on a literal understanding of the Judeo-Christian Scripture. The novel starts with an epigram which tells the Biblical story of Rachel who, unable to conceive her own children, said to her husband Jacob, 'Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her; and she shall bear upon my knees, that I may also have children by her' (Genesis 30: 1-3). The foundation of Gilead is based on the story of Rachel. This story acts as a representative myth in an analogical, condensed dystopia. The center where fertile women are held and brainwashed by Aunts to be handmaids is called the Rachel and Leah Centers. The novel exploits the nightmarish quality of dystopia by depicting the 'Birthing Ceremony', where the wife pretends labor while the handmaid gives birth (Atwood, pp 123-127). The Gilead Republic uses the bible to justify and rationalize the government's attitudes to female sexuality and the position of women. Natalie K. Watson correctly argues in her important study *Feminist Theology* (2003) that 'both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures were the product of patriarchal societies and are still being used by groups like the religious right to maintain patriarchal order that reduces women to their traditionally established roles' (14). Reading Bible or any other book is only men's privilege in Gilead. Offred says, 'The bible is kept locked up [...] we cannot read' (Atwood, p. 87). The commander reads only selective verses from the bible such as: 'Let the women learn in silence with all subjection,' and he would also read 'Notwithstanding she shall be saved by childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety' (Atwood, p. 221). These selective verses which enforce gender roles, and the state control over women's bodies 'are expressed in terms of universal truths', truths that are justified by the authoritative word of God (Staels 1995, p. 457). Deborah Hooker (2006) writes that 'the possibilities of Offred's life in Gilead are [...] circumscribed [...] fixed by the literate effects of monotheistic ideology' (p. 289). The collective prayers of the handmaids repeating the Church Fathers, with their message of female subservience and commitment to the scriptural texts echo in Offred's head throughout the narrative. Natalie K. Watson argues that throughout the history of the church these 'negative texts' (14) have been appropriated and used as 'a tool of women's oppression' (15).

It is through this powerful and essentialist image of women's role, based on natural and God-given differences, that we can understand the basis of fundamentalism's obsession with reproduction and sexuality in Atwood's dystopia. C. A. Howells (1996) highlights 'the strong infusion of the American New Right Ideology of the 1980s', of which Gilead can be seen as a direct extension (p. 127). Atwood shows that motherhood is seen conventionally and unproblematically as the fundamentalist goal of a woman's education, and the task for which a girl growing up had to be prepared. Rayah Feldman and Kate Clark (1996) explain that fundamentalism portrays 'women as mothers of the nation and transmitters of its cultural inheritance through their management of home. Whether or not fundamentalists focus directly on restricting access to reproductive services such as abortion or contraception, the insistence on women being dutiful wives and mothers always reduces women to a reproductive role' (pp. 16-17). Gilead values and defines women solely on their reproduction abilities. Offred and other handmaids are systematically reduced, in Offred's words to the status of 'two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices' (Atwood, p. 176). Feldman and Clark argue that 'confining women to a strict conception of womanhood as mothers who bring up their children religiously, also ensures that women maintain and reproduce the fundamentalist version of society' (p. 17). They argue further that 'this image of woman as mother and homemaker is often seen as under threat, even in apparently secular countries like Britain and the US' (p. 17). It is alleged that men can't be sterile, 'there is no such thing as a sterile man anymore, not officially. There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren, that's the law' (Atwood, p. 79). Infertile women or those who have refused to bear children for the state (such as former nuns or feminists) have been labeled as 'Unwomen' and sent to live in the 'Colonies', where toxic pollutants are dumped (Atwood, p. 323). Feldman and Kate argue that 'women's autonomous sexuality, and control of their own fertility are anathema to fundamentalist. Women's autonomy is a threat not just to manhood but to social order' (p. 17). Offred prays to get pregnant because she comes to identify her only role in the Gilead state with 'breeding purposes' (Atwood, p. 176), and she fears the consequence for failure. She says, 'I don't want pain. I want to keep on living, in any form. I resign my body freely, to the uses of others. They can do what they like with me. I am abject' (Atwood, p. 286). Offred's body to which she has been reduced, lacks identity and autonomy. She and other handmaids are paralyzed under

Gilead's enforced religious ideals, and their destiny is determined by their fertility.

The Handmaid's Tale is based on a reoccurring pattern of scenes built around pregnancy tests, menstrual anxiety, and unsuccessful tries at impregnation: all are aspects of a handmaid's life. Every moment of the narrator's life centers on her identity as a potential producer: 'Each month I watch for blood, fearfully, for when it comes it means failure. I have failed once again to fulfill the expectations of others, which have become my own' (Atwood, p. 73). It is interesting to note that this description of femininity and the identification of women with body and nature are similar to Mary Daly's (1978) representations of femininity as a type of 'robotitude' in which woman acts out as a part of a script. According to her, femininity is a reduction of women's lives in the state of servitude (p. 56-7). Indeed, Offred reflects such thoughts, 'what we prayed for was emptiness, so we would be worthy to be filled: [...] with semen and babies' (Atwood, pp. 250-1). This collective prayer of the handmaids reveals the power of patriarchal religious discourse over their bodies. The dystopia in Atwood's text was already a reality in other parts of the world. Atwood openly describes these dismays in the novel's "historical notes": 'Rumania [...] had anticipate Gilead in the eighties by banning all forms of birth control, imposing compulsory pregnancy tests on the female population, and linking promotion and wage increases to fertility' (Atwood, p. 305).

Testimony in *The Handmaid's Tale* is also implicated and inscribed in many ways with women's situation as the victim of male violence; a motif which forms the basis of *The Handmaid's Tale* and many of Atwood's works of fiction. Testimony here cannot be subsumed by its familiar notion; it doesn't simply report facts but, in many ways, it makes us encounter a 'believable evil' as described by Glenn Deer (1992, p. 215). It also offers 'the distorting (and clarifying) looking glass of Atwood's feminist satire to the lives of contemporary women', and 'other "real-life" discourses that define the roles of women' (Michael Green, 1999, p. 13). *The Handmaid's Tale* provides convincing analysis of the different patriarchal structures in which the female subject is trapped. However, it makes little if any effort to represent Offred involved in any act of resistance at a collective or individual level. On the contrary, it depicts a gloomy representation of her as secluded from other handmaids and susceptible to Gilead's oppressive psychological and cultural forces. To find depictions of the female subject as a motivated agent, determined to have control over her own life and working actively with other women to challenge patriarchal structures, Atwood needs to turn from the non-realist dystopian text to another kind of text. This is, of course, the so-called testimony.

The Handmaid's Tale reveals pronounced affinities with testimony. Atwood added an essay-like appendix to the novel called 'Historical Notes'. Indeed, until this additional section, readers think they are getting the details of Offred's experience straight from Offred herself as they occur. But in this supplementary section 'Historical Notes', we realize unexpectedly that what we have been reading is, indeed, a 'partial transcript of the proceedings of the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies' (Atwood, p. 299) in which male researchers have reconstructed the tale from around thirty tape cassettes. The tapes were found arranged in no order, concealed with various musical selections and accents. However, the speaking voice 'is a woman's [...] the same one throughout' (Atwood, pp. 301-302). This epilogue takes place two hundred years in the future, long after the fall of Gilead. The aim of 'The Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies' is to arrive as near as possible to the facts of the Gilead's society, relying on the testimony of eyewitness. What is interesting in adding this section of the 'Historical Notes' is that Atwood emphasizes the need to consider the context in which trauma is remembered and to question the conventions by which it is brought into existence. The military patriarchal power of the Gilead Republic is of a more interest to the male researchers than the daily life of a helpless handmaid. Atwood's feminist project would want to reconstruct that woman author as central.

Indeed, by merging the conventions of dystopia with testimony, Atwood signals her evident moral preoccupation of testifying about modern women trapped in the 'rape culture' which dominates society (Eisenstein, 1984, p. 104). Several dystopian images recur and receive elaboration in *Handmaid's Tale*. The most appalling ones are 'The Ceremonies' which are the officially sanctioned rituals in which a commander attempts to impregnate his handmaid function as a powerful symbol of patriarchal authority and fundamentalism at its most oppressive extremes. In the 'Ceremonies', Offred must lay face-up on her commander's wife and grasp the wife's hands while the commander has sex with her (Atwood, pp. 93-94). There are direct references to the biblical story of Rachel and Bilhah. In these ceremonies, as an act of survival Offred

'would steel [her]self. [She] would pretend not to be present, not in the flesh' (Atwood, p. 160). Offred saw these ceremonies, 'as a job, an unpleasant job to be gone through as fast as possible so it could be over with' (Atwood, p. 160). For Offred 'this state of absence, of existing apart from the body' (Atwood, p.160), is a strategy for survival. Even this speculative distance from her body cannot contain Offred's feelings of degradation and cultural devaluation. This phantasy of physical fragmentation corresponds to a breakdown of rational unity. In treating the episodes of 'Ceremonies', Atwood takes a radical feminist approach. She challenges the line of demarcation between conventional intercourse to which a woman consents and sexual rape. In a society in which men dominate women the concept of 'consent' is shown to have little or no meaning. 'The Ceremonies' around which Gilead life revolves, or even 'The rape-date system', around which pre-Gilead life revolves, to quote Andrea Dworkin (1984), 'sets up every woman as a potential rape victim' (p. 43).

Atwood has depicted a picture of The Gilead in which men enjoy the absolute freedom and women have been reduced to objects. Instead of introducing several male characters and institutions, each of whom represents different aspects of male domination; she allows the figure of the Commander to represent them all. He dominates the lives of all women in the novel. He controls the handmaid's life as a master and as a seducer at other times. Intellectual, religious, economic, and sexual power is invested in his person. For example, when the Commander takes her to Jezebel's club, an underground nightclub for other commanders and higher officials, Offred is introduced as a prostitute (Atwood, p. 236). Away from sensationalism, Atwood manages to convey to the reader a sense of moral anger at the brutally humiliating treatment of Offred.² And since Offred has received conflicting messages, she assumes contradictory views about herself. At times, Offred and other handmaids are treated as honorable nuns, and outside the constraints of the world of sexual codes. She reveals that: 'we aren't concubines, geisha girls, courtesans. On the contrary: everything possible has been done to remove us from that category' (Atwood, p. 176). Abigail Rine (2013) correctly argues that "the juxtaposition of the Jezebels and the handmaids demonstrates the virgin mother/whore dichotomy of female sexuality that is institutionalized in Gilead" (p. 67). When Offred demands to know why he brought her there, since she knows that 'this sort of this thing was strictly forbidden' (Atwood, p. 254), the Commander justified the act as a natural proof of manhood. He explains, 'you cannot cheat nature [...] Nature demands variety, for men [...] It is part of procreational strategy' (Atwood, p. 237). Atwood exposes the hypocrisy of patriarchal religious discourse about sex. By referring to this episode in Jezebel's club and the many occasions when the Commander took advantage of Offred sexually, Atwood makes the point that the position that Offred and other handmaids occupy as the source of prohibited male desires is a stereotypical one. It is a common feature of Western patriarchal culture.

Central to Atwood's account of the idea of prostitution is that it both promotes and perpetuates male dominance. Atwood's presentation of Offred's experience of victimization as a prostitute has affinity with the analysis of the prostitution system articulated by the radical feminists Sheila Jeffreys (1985) and Maureen O'Hara (1985). They argue that as well as the sexual objectification of women, it gives men the license, in exchange for a payment, to exploit them sexually. Prostitution enables men, in Jeffrey's words, 'to feel more powerful over all women by abusing them' (p. 69). O'Hara's interesting observation is also related, 'all women who work as prostitutes are treated as the legitimate prey of male sexual violence' (p. 72). Harriet Gordon (2018) argues that 'women's bodies are disciplined by being constantly sexualized and threatened by male sexuality, shaping the socially produced feminine body [...] to be coded and experienced as vulnerable to sexual violence' (p. 28). Once there at Jezebel's, these women are treated as 'legitimate prey', and become vulnerable to the abuse of commanders and other men in general. Women who work at Jezebel's cannot bear children. To escape certain death in the Colonies, they have accepted to work as prostitutes. Recruiting these women as prostitutes is motivated not by sexual desire but by the impulse to punish and humiliate these women who fail to conform to the rules of Gilead, as the Commander explains, 'They [the women] could not be assimilated' (Atwood, p. 237). Thus, it is women's failure to survive by Gilead rules, the Commander suggests which drives them to the club. Offred saw her feminist friend Moira in the club,

²See Gunne, SORCHA & BRIGHTLY, ZOE. (2011). *Literature and Rape Narratives: Violence and Violation*, on the narrative strategies employed when dealing with rape and sexual violence in literature.

wearing a very humiliating exotic costume. She tried to escape Gilead, but they caught her and sent her to work in the club (Atwood, pp. 238-239). Many of the women who work in the club, had paid jobs before Gilead, for example, Offred saw there a sociologist, a lawyer, and an executive in a chain of hotels. At Jezebel's the Commander slips around Offred's wrist a tag on an elastic band, and told her 'If anyone asks you, say you're an evening rental' (Atwood, p. 233). Offred's narrative shows that the handmaids' bodies are imprisoned in conflicting categories, by patriarchal definition, of pure and impure, of fertile and infertile.

The Handmaid's Tale is a deliberate parody of social and moral norms to show the impossibility of precise gender definitions. The comparison Atwood draws between the women wearing rabbit suits who inhabit the Jezebel club (Atwood, p. 239), and the holy handmaid fully clad in their covering rubes extends this parody even further. It unsettles the reader, destabilizing our conventional assumptions about the line between 'pure' and 'impure'. Atwood also investigates related issues. Which kind of society proves most tyrannical to women, the pre-Gilead society with liberating attitudes which encourage them to be sexy and makes them object of pornographic representation (Offred remembers her feminist mother who used to go into protests against objectifying the female body, and she used to burn these porno magazines as an act of disapproval), or the Gilead society which denies them personal freedom and enforces them to conceal their bodies beneath heavy robes. Atwood uses depravity to catch the sense of both the past and future. These women, who have unfixed identities in the society before and after Gilead, are whatever their society categorizes them. This agrees with the observation of Luce Irigaray (1985) who explains that in a patriarchal culture: 'woman is the reserve of 'sensuality' for the elevation of intelligence, she is the matter used for the imprints of forms, the representative representing negativity (death), dark continent of dreams and fantasies' (p. 141). Women bodies are almost literally burdened down with social meanings, prohibitions, and contradictions. Though Atwood's narrative is an imaginative portrayal of the way many women feel living in a patriarchal culture, it preserves aspects of testimony. And it may not be, in fact, the exaggeration which it seems at first.

This shift in Atwood's narrative from dystopia into testimony goes along with a strong awareness of intersubjectivity. Offred emphasizes the demands of the handmaid's tale for audience and necessary attention:

It is a story [...] I must be telling it to someone. You don't tell the story to yourself. There's always someone else. Even when there is no one [...] who knows what the chances are out there, of survival, yours? I will say you, you [...] You can mean thousands [...] I'll pretend you can hear me. (Atwood, pp. 39-40)

This passage shows that Offred's account depends on a relationship between the speaker and a wider implied audience (her assumed listeners/researchers). This agrees with Dori Laub's (1992) interpretation:

The emergence of the narrative which is being listened to – and heard – is, therefore, the process and the place where in the cognizance, the "knowing" of the event is given birth to. The listener, therefore, is a party to the creation of knowledge *de nova*. The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time. (Felman & Laub, p. 57)

At the same time Atwood stresses the importance and the difficulty of listening to such testimony. Offred apologizes for her 'limping and mutilated story' (Atwood, p. 267). She reveals:

I wish this story were different. I wish it were more civilized [...] I'm sorry there is so much pain in this story. [...] I'm sorry it's in *fragments* [...] But I can do nothing to change it [...] Nevertheless it hurts me to tell it over, over again. (Atwood, p. 267)

Leigh Gilmore (2001), discussing recent studies on trauma, notes that 'the subject of trauma refers to both a person struggling to make sense of an overwhelming experience in a particular context and the unspeakability of trauma itself, its resistance to representation' (p. 46). This also agrees with Shoshana Felman's explanation that 'testimony seems to be composed of pits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition' (Felman & Laub, p. 5). Thus, telling the story enables its teller and others to survive, and of the determination to survive in order to tell the story:

because after all I want you to hear it, as I will hear yours too if I ever get the chance, if I meet you or escape, in the

future or in heaven or in prison or underground, some other place. What they have in common is that they're not here. (Atwood, p. 268)

Atwood magnificently depicted Offred not only as a witness but also as a survivor. Offred is aware that her testimony impacts not only on her life, but on the lives of others. Offred reminds her listeners that 'as I said, this is a reconstruction' (Atwood, p. 140). Offred's production of testimony is described by her as 'composure'. Offred says, 'I wait. I compose myself. Myself is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. What I must present is a made thing, not something born' (Atwood, p. 66). The practice of reconstruction demonstrates that any notion of a unified and stable subjectivity of Offred is put under pressure from different perspectives. Felman explains, 'to testify – to vow to tell, to promise and produce one's own speech as material evidence for truth – is to accomplish a speech act, rather than to simply formulate a statement' (Felman & Laub, p. 5). Though Offred is denied the possibility of revising her relation to Gilead's oppressive reductive misogynistic categories imposed upon her, the 'reconstruction' of her trauma testifies and unmask the patriarchal violence done to the female body within the discourse of patriarchal fundamentalism.

Reading *Lolita in Tehran* as a Feminist Testimony

The horrific acts of oppression which *The Handmaid's Tale* recounts, possess a realistic basis. The loss of women's liberties described in Atwood's novel bears close resemblance to contemporary events in Iran as Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* testifies. Religious fundamentalism and male violence, as well as being major themes in *The Handmaid's Tale*, are also ones which concern Nafisi. Thus, they create a link between realist and non-realist texts. Atwood's dystopia and Nafisi's testimony are overtly political in emphasis and are suited to exposing the disturbing truth about women as victims of religious fundamentalism and male violence at both a personal and a cultural level. I argue that Nafisi's testimony should be taken seriously as a challenging testimony to the authoritarian fundamentalist powers threatening peace in many middle Eastern countries. Further, I identify two axes of patriarchy against whom Nafisi is fighting: the patriarchy of fundamentalism as well as dictatorship. A striking feature of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, one which is very relevant to this study of the interrelation between narrative practice and feminist theory in women's writing, is the strategy Nafisi adopts to foreground the connections between personal and political areas of experience. It is this trespassing on patriarchal space, undermining the division between the personal and the political, that we may speak of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Historically, women's accounts have been muted, they do not integrate so well with the dominant discourses, and so they need encouragement, and special listening.³ This increases the influence of women's testimonies. They are powerful instruments of awakening critical consciousness, through their own activities of reflection and learning, among those who lack power. Therefore, I argue that Nafisi offers through *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, a gendered, and particularly a feminist testimony.

One of the basic objectives of Nafisi's narrative is the condemnation of injustice and the defense of society's marginalized people such as Iranian women. Although the new radical rules of conduct in Republic of Iran changed the lives of all Iranian citizens, Nafisi demonstrates that after the revolution, women's rights and freedom were extremely reduced. The fundamentalist ideology in terms of behavioral requirements depicted by Nafisi is similar to Gilead's theocracy. In both, there are strict rules about dress, sexuality, appropriate speech, and behaviors that citizens are required to fulfill. All aspects of human existence are controlled; there is no personal freedom. Indeed, the costumes of Atwood's Handmaid's and Iranian women share many similarities. The handmaids wear an outfit that, like the Iranian women's hijab, covers the entire of their bodies. These strict rules are violently imposed in both societies. Gilead employs elderly women

³ This aim has obvious similarities with the feminist project of oral historians who have seen themselves as recovering women's lost voices and hidden history. See Jane Lewis, "Women Lost and Found: The Impact of Feminism on History," *Men's Studies Modified. The Impact of Feminism on the Academic Disciplines*. Ed. Dale Spender, (1981): 55-72; Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past, Oral History*. (1988); Luisa Passerini, "Women's Personal Narratives: Myths, Experiences, and Emotions," In *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives*. Ed. Personal Narratives Group, (1989): 189-197.

as 'Aunts' to enforce the rules and uses a group called the Eyes that keeps monitoring them. In Iran, a police-group of older women and young men are authorized to go around and beat or arrest women showing hair, wearing make-up, or defying the dress code in any other way. The State in Nafisi's narrative possesses many of the features which Atwood identify with fundamentalist patriarchal culture. Military rule prevails, accompanied by focus on discipline, and hierarchy. Due to the enactment of the so-called Islamic dress code; 'the streets have been turned into a war zone, where young women who disobey rules are hurled into patrol cars, flogged, fined, forced to wash the toilets and humiliated' (Nafisi, p. 27). Perhaps, most poignantly, when Nafisi documents the several instances of 'sexual molestations' she had (Nafisi, p. 166). The worst one was when she was scolded by a female guard for not wearing the correct clothing, and then rubbed roughly on the face with a tissue though she was not wearing makeup (Nafisi, p. 169). She writes: 'the female guard told me to hold my hands up, up and up, she said, as she started to search me meticulously, going over every part of my body' (Nafisi, p. 168). She describes her feelings after such harassment: 'my face was burning, and I felt dirty – I felt like my whole body was a soiled' (Nafisi, p. 168). Harriet Gordon (2018) argues that patriarchal societies establish 'state domination through disciplinary control of women's bodies, positioning the state as the protector of women. When women challenge this protective role by speaking out against the state, power relations begin to shift' (p. 33). Gordon explains that the 'state authorities respond by sexually assaulting women' (p. 33). To face these repetitive assaults, Nafisi created psychological games to distract her mind off the situation like fantasizing that her whole body vanished underneath her robe (Nafisi, p. 168). She explains, 'I decided to make my body invisible' (Nafisi, p. 168). The absence of a tangible sense of self registers her response to the ruling of the Republic which has already overwhelmed her, which has invaded her and yet simultaneously escaped her full understanding. There is a sense of an identity painfully split between an inner and an outer self. Nafisi mimics the way women were made invisible by the radical republic that denies their freedom to show their individual identities to the world. This is similar to Offred's narrative which constantly emphasizes how the imposed homogeneity of Gilead leads to the negation of her individuality and alienates Offred from her body and her sense of self, as she gradually embodies the reductive categories enforced upon her.

Then for Nafisi, the notion of silencing suggests that women's stories typically do not reach the public domain. This places an obligation on her to elicit the unspoken or unspeakable testimonies by other women in her narrative. Awareness of intersubjective dynamics is central to Nafisi's narrative, and her feminist project. This agrees with Dori Laub's (1992) understanding of the power and value of testimonies:

Repossessing one's life story through giving testimony is itself a form of action, of change, which has actually passed through in order to continue and complete the process of survival after liberation. The event must be reclaimed because even if successfully repressed, it nevertheless invariably plays a decisive formative role in who one comes to be, and in how one comes to live one's life. (Felman & Laub, pp. 85-86)

Nafisi's narrative displays a series of events forming the object of witness – a referent whose reliability and significance must be decisively established to insure the testimony against failure. The witness's narrative is necessarily referential, or to quote Felman's words, 'one which, by its very definition, transcends the witness who is but a medium, the medium of realization of the testimony' (Felman & Laub, p. 3). Nafisi's narrative intentionally blurs the lines between fact and fiction. There are hard facts in *Reading Lolita*, and there are fictive sections, such as the passages in which Nafisi takes on other female students' identities and memories in order to tell their stories. Both these fictional and nonfictional elements are combined to investigate the part played by ideology and state in maintaining the suppression of Iranian women, and to explore the function of sexual violence as a tool for subjugating women. One of the illustrations of these testimonies to the life under tyrannical rule is the experience of Sanaz one of Nafisi's students. Without any validation, she and a group of friends are detained, exposed to 'virginity tests', enforced to sign 'confessions' and condemned to twenty-five whips for ambiguous allegations of immorality and illegal activities (Nafisi, pp. 72-4). Nafisi's narrative also narrates testimonies of women's specific resistance to military rule, such as the story of Yassi, another student of Nafisi. Yassi's mother and aunt joined a 'progressive Muslim women's group', an opposition group when they 'felt that the Islamic Republic was a betrayal of Islam rather than its assertion' (Nafisi, p. 31). *Reading Lolita in Tehran* grants Yassi the opportunity to tell her mother

and aunt's experiences of suffering, disappearance, and torture because of their participation in the oppositional struggle (Nafisi, pp. 31-32). This example drives Nafisi to ensure that their story and the stories of many executed political opponents are heard, written, and read. Since for these women, anonymity and passivity are not valid reactions.

Nafisi's testimony thus seeks to affirm a female experience which has often been repressed and rendered invisible by writing it into existence. On starting her university teaching career, Nafisi comes across many obstacles. She was controlled in what she had to wear, how she could act and teach. The dialectic of sex separates her from her colleagues, the majority of whom are male. Her independence and anti-revolutionary ideas divide her from other conformists. Nafisi expresses anger at the injustice of the male-dominated cultural and educational systems after the revolution. Nafisi writes, 'university had once more become the targets of attack by the cultural purists who were busy imposing stricter sets of laws, going so far as to segregate men and women in classes and punishing disobedient professors' (p. 9). She adds, 'the government would make the veil mandatory and put more students and faculty members on trial' (p. 153). According to her narrative, the word university is loaded both with desire and resentment and refers to an institution which creates conformity, and thus contributed to reinforce her propensity to marginality and invisibility. Where male students have been given free rein – 'to them the main door, with its immense portals and emblems and flags, is generously open' (Nafisi, p. 30) – the university security guards enforce the rule by which female students are not allowed to enter the university through its main green gate. They are restricted to a small opening with a curtain hanging from it next to the main gate to be inspected (Nafisi, pp. 29-30). Sexism is institutionalized; Nafisi reports the testimony of one of her students:

I would first be checked to see if I have the right clothes: the color of my coat, the length of my uniform, the thickness of my scarf, the form of my shoes, the objects in my bag, the visible traces of even the mildest makeup [...] all would be checked before I could enter the campus of the university, the same university in which men also study. (Nafisi, pp. 29-30)

Nafisi shows that men and women operate in separate symbolic and spatial domains. She identifies the fact of being denied access – whether to entering the university or teaching the books she likes as another type of the infringement of the freedom of the female mind. These obstacles symbolize the effects of this educational culture that radically restricts the scope of Iranian women's intellectual exposure. This exclusion is very radical, and it does not only disturb a life-long development of an individual, but the intellectual development of the whole society. She noticed that the state's attempts to increase separation result in an increased male anxiety about control and dominance rather than less, and an escalation in domestic violence occurs. In the process, the boundary between the female and male spatial dominance was drawn ever closer to the household doorstep. Regarding mobility and job-related choices, women's lives are very restricted. For instance, a woman is legally not allowed to leave the house without the permission of her husband or a male relative, and she must get a written permission before travelling abroad or getting a job. Officially, a woman is discouraged from gaining employment outside the home. Of those who are employed, many are fired under the pretense of failure to observe the Islamic Hijab. Nafisi states emphatically, 'at the core of the fight for political rights is the desire to protect ourselves, to prevent the political from intruding on our individual lives' (p. 273).

Nafisi's testimony is not intended to condemn religion itself, or even conservative religious practices. Nafisi's true objection is toward this fundamentalist group who uses their dogma to create laws for the rest of society, who attempts to regulate private behaviors under the guise of religious belief and establishing moral behavior. This corresponds with Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale*; religion is used as a tool for control to manipulate women and enforce misogynistic concepts. Nafisi explains that the paradox of the Islamic Republic, 'was the ideological approach to faith that differentiated those in power from millions of ordinary citizens, believers like Mahshid, Manna and Yassi, who found the Islamic Republic their worst enemy' (Nafisi, p. 273). Nafisi explains, 'the issue was not so much veil itself as freedom of choice' (p. 152). Nafisi observes that Iranian women were free to wear the hijab in pre-revolution era as a symbol of their faith. But then hijab was not a symbol of gender seclusion or separation. Women were able to move freely on the streets without the fear of male harassment even when unescorted. It did not interfere with their mobility. It is only after the revolution that hijab or veil becomes a symbol of gender separation. She refers to the example of Mahshid, who chose to wear the head scarf before the revolution. Nafisi explains, 'at that time, she had worn the scarf as a testament to her faith. Her decision was a voluntary

act. When the revolution forced the scarf on others, her action became meaningless' (Nafisi, p. 117). Nafisi also documents her grandmother's story who refused to leave her house for three months when she was forced to unveil by the rule mandated by Reza Shah in 1936. The unveiling then had been a debatable symbol of modernization in Iran (Nafisi, p. 152).⁴ Nafisi identifies with her grandmother's belief of the freedom of choice, she writes, "I would similarly be adamant in my own refusal" (Nafisi, p. 152). Nafisi's narrative indicates that Iranian women were subject to different ideological pressures, constituted in constantly varying discursive formations. She protests that among the most serious repealed laws regarding women are: 'the age of marriage was lowered to nine [...]; and women under law, were considered to have half the worth of men' (Nafisi, p. 261).⁵ This has a close similarity to Atwood's text that Offred repeatedly discovers that her gendered body is already commodified, violently appropriated, beyond her control. In Nafisi's text, the female body is the site of a complex focus of conflicting social and ideological meanings, and femininity is seen as problematic, and disruptive within the phallogocentric social order before and after the revolution.

The situation in Iran after the revolution allows Nafisi to contrast gender issues by making them the center of her narrative. In the pre-revolution Iranian culture, universities represent for women the idea of social promotion or salvation through education, and the principle of the 'equality of opportunities' beyond social and gender condition. Nafisi like her mother belongs to the pre-revolution generation which received the benefits of the women's liberation movement and did not have to struggle to see their women's rights acknowledged, whereas her daughter and female students belong to the revolution generation. Nafisi was more openly rebellious than her female students. Her background encourages her unconventionality. She comes from a female-oriented pioneering family. Her mother 'had been one of the first six women elected to the parliament in 1960s, there were little differences between my rights and the rights of women in Western democracies [...] we were demanding more rights, not fewer' (Nafisi, p. 261). As her life-narrative makes clear, Nafisi enjoyed considerable freedom as a child in Tehran in which she grew up. Nafisi movingly talks about her life before the revolution, 'my youthful years had witnessed the rise of two women to the rank of cabinet minister. After the revolution, these same women were sentenced to death for the sins of warring with God and spreading prostitution' (Nafisi, p. 261). Nafisi testifies that one of them was the minister of education and her former high school principal, was put in a sack and stoned to death (Nafisi, p. 262). The oppression of women activists is an attempt to delegitimize their political agency, 'reducing protesting to dishonorable, sexually promiscuous, and impious subjects' (Hafez, 2014, p. 27). Political dissidents and anyone who did not strictly conform to the government's rules were executed under the justification of immorality.

Nafisi's testimony represents her two worlds which never join: a mythic world marked out by literature and the pre-revolution Iran on the one hand, and the world of Iranian Republic reality on the other. The second universe is grasped through the figure of a single character, allowing him thus to emerge as a symbolic embodiment of patriarchal dominance. Of course, this is like Atwood's *devised*, who also brings together several different facets of male power in the figure of the Commander. Censorship was taken to an extreme. In Gilead, women are restricted from all forms of written language. Reading is considered sinful and is punished by the severing of a hand (Atwood, p. 89). In Iran, censorship was almost as extreme. The character of the blind chief film censor in Iran is introduced to be Nafisi's representative of radical patriarchal power:

⁴ See Nayereh Tohidi, "Gender and Islamic Fundamentalism: Feminist Politics in Iran," in *Third World Women and The Politics of Feminism*. Ed. Chandra Mohanty, & Ann Russo & Lourdes Torres, (1991): 251-267. Tohidi explains that women were forced to remove their veils in 1935 under Reza Shah. This measure was designed to help "modernize" Iran. To enforce the idea, police were ordered to physically remove the veil from any woman wearing it in public. Tohidi argues that this would have been a liberal step if women had decided to do it themselves. Instead, it humiliated and alienated many Iranian women, who decided to stay behind closed doors and not to go into the streets in order to avoid this embarrassing confrontation. Consequently, "the veil became politicized". See p. 266.

⁵ To read more on the present situation of women in Iran, and for detailed information on the violations of women's rights under the civil code practiced by the Islamic regime read Nayereh Tohidi, "Gender and Islamic Fundamentalism: Feminist Politics in Iran", especially p.253-253.

Our world under the mullahs' rule was shaped by the colorless lenses of the blind censor. Not just our reality but also our fiction had taken into on this curious coloration in a world where the censor was the poet's rival in rearranging and reshaping reality, where we simultaneously invented ourselves and were figments of someone's else imagination. (Nafisi, p. 25)

Nafisi here openly calls into question the very institution of literature as an ideological apparatus of alienation and domination in the hands of the blind censor. Atwood and Nafisi, while differing radically as regards the aspect of patriarchal structures they choose to emphasize, display common concern to foregrounding its ubiquity, vigor, and interrelated facets. Nafisi writes, 'When I am asked about life in the Islamic Republic of Iran, I cannot separate the most personal and private aspects of our existence from the gaze of the blind censor' (p. 273). Indeed, she emphasizes the tentacular structures of patriarchy symbolized by the blind censor, along with the Iranian women's struggles which they wage to escape these oppressive structures. Nafisi writes that her class was a direct reaction to this society, 'an attempt to escape the gaze of the blind censor for a few hours each week' (p. 25). Nafisi's experience after being expelled from the university of Tehran in 1997 severed her link with the outside world. It placed her into the margins of society; she had to create 'a sort of communal version of Virginia's Woolf's room of her own'(Nafisi, p. 12). Nafisi's class 'entailed an active withdrawal from reality that had turned hostile [...] whole contact with the outside world will be mainly restricted to one room' (Nafisi, p. 11). The tension arises between the two worlds is increased by fetishizing the world of literature. Nafisi writes:

An absurd fictionality ruled our lives. We tried to live in the open spaces, in the chinks created between that room, which had become our protective cocoon, and the censor's world of witches and goblins outside. Which of these two worlds was more real, and to which did we really belong? [...] Perhaps one way of finding out the truth was to do what we did: to try to imaginatively articulate these two worlds and through, that process, gives shape to our vision of identity. (p. 26)

The resolution of the tension between these two universes is presented as the ultimate significance to be given to the lived experience. Nafisi's testimony thus presents women who overcome failure through the claiming of difference and the status of an outsider in a society dominated by patriarchal fundamentalist rules. The two worlds do not remain isolated, they are connected through her reading group. She writes referring to creating her class, 'there on the brink of the void, I could invent the violin or be devoured by the void' (Nafisi, p. 24). Nafisi feels that the class also gives her some freedom to be herself and to be the teacher she had wanted to be. The world outside signifies closer restriction, so her private class has become the perfect artefact.

In both *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and *The Handmaid's Tale*, the books taken for granted in the pre-revolution periods, once banned, become powerful liberating approaches. Within this context, Nafisi's introduction of the banned classic work *A Thousand and One Nights* as the first book in her class is a significant symbol of the importance of women using their intellect to save themselves from tyrannical powers. Nafisi introduces her students in the group to 'a lived-through' experience of reading. She writes, 'the theme of the class was the relation between fiction and reality' (Nafisi, p. 6). Nafisi describes her approach of reading, 'each [student] would have a private diary, in which she should record her responses to the novels, as well as ways in which these works, and their discussions related to her personal and social experiences' (Nafisi, p. 18). Methodologically this leads literary criticism to a more ethnographic approach, moving from the formal text to its lived reception. Nafisi and her students read *Great Gatsby* to find a likeness between Gatsby's thwarted efforts to repeat the past and the Iranian theocracy, 'which had come in the name of our collective past and had wrecked our lives in the name of a dream' (Nafisi, p. 144). And they discuss Henry James's female protagonists Daisy Miller and Catherine Sloper as women who 'both defy the conventions of their time,' who 'both refuse to be dictated to' (Nafisi, p. 194). Nafisi believes the book that best reflects what life like in Islamic Republic of Iran is Nabokov's *Lolita*. She writes, 'what Nabokov captured was the texture of life in a totalitarian society, where you are completely alone in an illusory world full of false promises, where you can no longer differentiate between your savior and your executioner' (Nafisi, p. 23). At the beginning, *Lolita* functions as a commentary on their life in the Islamic Republic of Iran and emphasizes the connection between the individual and tyranny. Then the division between text and pretext becomes blurred, as the pretext takes over it:

It is of *Lolita* that I want to write, but right now there is no way I can write about the novel without also writing about

Tehran. This, then, is 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, p. 6)

Reading Lolita in Tehran enters a dialogical relation with *Lolita* as it rewrites it. *Lolita* is highlighted only to underscore its manipulation by the text it frames, thus subverting the tradition it represents. Of *Lolita*, Nafisi writes: 'Lolita belongs to a category of victims who have no defense and are never given a chance to articulate their own story. As such, she becomes a double victim: not only her life but also her life story is taken from her' (Nafisi, p. 41). In contrast to *Lolita*, Nafisi emphasizes the social and political urgency of telling her own story. For Nafisi, writing *Reading Lolita in Tehran* which includes descriptions of Iran is not only a form of self-presentation, but also a form of resistance in a situation of being exiled and excluded, which is directly connected to the obligation of Nafisi as a writer toward her world. That is why Nafisi's narrative is marked by strong sense of moral decline, that she is trying to face with the ethics of responsibility and tradition of dialogue and listening closely to the voices of other Iranian women.

Nafisi is interested in collective evaluation of texts. Relocating meaning first in the reader's self and then in community strategies that constitute it, Nafisi has re-politicized reading literature and criticism. There is an attempt to reclaim literature for the purpose of intersubjective communication in a society in which texts are regarded as commodities to be regulated by the Republic's ideology. Nafisi writes, 'we lived in a culture that denied any merits to literary works, considering them important only when they were the handmaidens to something seemingly more urgent – namely ideology' (p. 25). Therefore, the government banned the texts she teaches since they treat topics taken from the devalued realm of western experience and culture. In a satirical note, Nafisi says that: 'could one really concentrate on one's job when what preoccupied the faculty was how to excise the word *wine* from a Hemingway story, when they decided not to teach Emily Bronte because she appeared to condone adultery' (p. 11). Even knowledge (especially gender politics and religion) is shown to be a construct reflecting masculine control. Therefore, Nafisi's active involvement in this community/women reading group creates a tradition outside the formally academic one dominated by the ideology of the revolution and acts as a political practice of consciousness-raising. Nafisi attempts to reconstruct reading strategies as forms of resistance using gender categories against dogmatic and accepted standards. She seeks signs of spiritual and intellectual freedom common to the work of many Muslim women scholars, which are realized through the affirmation of 'the right of Muslim women to higher religious education (active participation in the ongoing 'reading' and interpretation of the Qur'an) as the foundational means to becoming the spiritually and intellectually autonomous person mandated in the Qur'anic view of the individual, male or female, as 'trustee' of God' (Webb, 2000, xvi). On this point, credit is due to the influence and popularity of many Muslim women scholar activists, both inside and outside of North America who search for Islamic feminism which can interpret Islamic texts and literature, thus defining her own liberation and boundaries.⁶

Though reading literature is recognized as providing a temporary source of solace and support, it is also depicted as unstable and brief. In fact, Nafisi candidly states that:

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 humiliated and frightened we were, like Lolita we tried to escape and to create our little pockets of freedom. (p. 25)

The group reading's nickname as a pocket (referring to its smallness) suggests a prison, and though it gives Nafisi and other women freedom it is also the setting for their sense of failure. This image speaks for the paradoxical dichotomies of female experience – the conflicting desires for boundless freedom and for her safety and enclosure. The rejection of constraints is coexisting with terror of the world outside, and the revolutionary spirit is undermined by its own awareness of inevitable defeat.

Indeed, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is constructed upon a basic binary configuration; it opposes indoors and outdoors, and thus inverts the social image of the ideological and cultural image of the woman in her society. Nafisi does this as she

⁶ See Wadud, Amina. (1999). *Qur'an and women: Reading the sacred text from a women's perspective*; Webb, Gisela, ed. (2000). *Windows of Faith: Muslim women scholar-activist in North America* (2004). *Women's identity and the Qur'an: A new reading*.

describes her students in two photographs, she took of them as a group:

In the first there are seven women, standing against a white wall. They are, according to the law of the land, dressed in black robes and head scarves, covered except for the oval of their faces and their hands. In the second photograph the same group, in the same position, stands against the same wall. Only they have taken their coverings. Splashes of color separate one from the next. (Nafisi, p. 4)

The significance of the relationship between space and gender emerges from these two pictures. Nafisi's text demonstrates that there is an explicit ideology of gender separation and an explicit allocation of space by gender which affect the ways in which women move within their society. Nafisi frequently refers to the act of veiling as a symbolic aspect of this gender separation in the Republic of Iran. She notes the way that women's bodies are conceptualized as space, a space which is invested with power, and defenselessness at once. This agrees with Irigaray's (1985) argument that a phallogocentric culture sees woman as a being who, though 'lacking all power of logos', none the less 'offers unawares an all-powerful soil in which the logos can grow' (Irigaray, p. 224). As her students take off their scarves and robes when they enter her home for the class, they become individualized, and achieve self-definition. *Reading Lolita* is semiotically crowded; Nafisi often describes and explores the individual subjectivities of her students through their clothes. She highlights the fact that having to cover these clothes is a performance of concealing their distinctive characters. Especially that 'this was a country where all gestures, even the most private, were interpreted in political terms' (Nafisi, p. 25) such as 'the colors of my head scarf or my father's tie were symbols of [...] imperialist tendencies' (Nafisi, p. 25). Nafisi explains, 'like Lolita, we took every opportunity to flaunt our insubordination: by showing a little hair from under our scarves, insinuating a little color into the drab uniformity of our appearances, growing our nails' (p. 26). Though the representation of individualistic and independent womanhood quite absent from *Lolita*, Nafisi and her students work to develop their own possible collective womanly achievements and to wrench the psychoanalytic concept of women's inner space out of those patriarchal meanings which rely precisely on women's oppression. The treatment of the theme of collectivity in Nafisi's work resembles in many aspects that of sisterhood. While Nafisi presents women's community as a valuable base for feminist work-projects and political struggle, Atwood's novel shows the difficulties women encounter in trying to work together on a collective basis. The relationship between Offred and other handmaids in the novel functions on a political level as a depiction of the ambiguities of comradeship/hostility between women of different backgrounds.

Nafisi is clear-sighted about the ironies of the female conditions in the Republic. Their predicaments, regardless of their different backgrounds, were common, and resulted 'from the confiscation of their most intimate moments and private inspirations by the regime' (Nafisi, p. 273). She realizes that like Lolita is powerless against the grim determinism which rules her life. The images of the outside in this narrative are shown as ultimately treacherous, both controlling the individual and increasing her vulnerability in the sphere in which she has been placed. she writes:

The second photograph belonged to the world inside the living room. But outside, underneath the window that deceptively showcased only the mountains and the tree outside our home, was the other world, where the bad witches and furies were waiting to transform us into the hooded creatures of the first. (p. 24)

Conventionally, images of interiors are used to express women's entrapment; but here for Nafisi and her students 'that living room with its window framing [her] beloved Elburz Mountains became [their] sanctuary, [their] self-contained universe, mocking the reality of black scarved, timid faces in that city sprawled below'. (Nafisi, p. 6) The Elburz Mountains, opposing its external charms, build one more link in the chain which encircles Nafisi. Against this apparently idyllic background, the natural perfection of the scene mockingly glosses the delusiveness of this personal freedom. When these women wear their black robes outside, they recognize of the unescapable conditions of their present existence. Indeed, Nafisi's testimony is marked by the specific conditions of marginalization and powerlessness that have shaped her experience. The text is full of repeated references to anxiety, fear, uncertainty, as if the constant repetition of such words will bring the text closer to its goal of transparent disclosure of Nafisi's lived experience. However, the act of writing her testimony promises power and control, endowing subjective experience with authority and meaning.

Conclusion

To see the two narrative modes discussed above as totally separate is, of course, something of a simplification. Both texts construct testimony as a genre that exposes gender oppression, disturbs silencing, and challenges objectivity by situating the individual in communion with a collective experience marked by marginalization, oppression, or resistance. Both texts represent women as possessing several disadvantageous attributes such as social, political, and economic immobility, which unite them in a subordinate group. Both works succeed in combining a focus on the psychological complexities of female subjectivity with the overtly political themes of collective feminist struggle and women's community. Atwood and Nafisi, however, do experience considerable difficulty in reconciling and uniting their respective themes and interests. While *Reading Lolita* has a positive affirmation of values of sisterhood, *The Handmaid's Tale* has a satiric expose' and parodying of women's oppression. In a sarcastic note, Atwood says, 'you wanted a women's culture. Well, now there is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists' (*The Handmaid*, p.127). The repeated references to certain stereotypical female situations, occupations which describe female identity only in terms of biology (menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, housework, sexual exploitive encounters with men in the different Ceremonies at Gilead) emphasize the monotony and dreariness of the conditions in which Offred and other handmaids are trapped. Women's feelings of uneasiness and concern at the deterioration of women's rights are reflected in both works. One gains the understanding from *The Handmaid's Tale* that Atwood, not only writing out of anger at patriarchal oppression and injustice, but also, motivated by feelings of frustration at the ineffectiveness of the Women's movement itself. Atwood aims in *The Handmaid's Tale* to make an interference in feminist politics, forewarning women of the existence of the threats of fundamentalism and patriarchy. This is especially appalling at a time when, in Islamic Republic of Iran, women's rights are under serious attack and suffering increasing erosion. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* reveals, in fact, a very strong sense of concern at the vulnerability of women to exploitation and appropriation by the forces of fundamentalism and patriarchy. Both texts create testimony to reinterpret gender as an imposed and falsified construction, and as a kind of violence done to women in the name of patriarchal fundamentalist interpretations of the divine. In this sense, Atwood's, and Nafisi's revisions of the 'belated' relation of women's testimony – to use Filman's expression once more – to women's bodies produce the kind of resistance to the dominant discourses of gender identity. This approach has resulted in a new understanding about how marginalized women build solidarity, and respond to and resist dominant culture, laws, and policies that perpetuate inequality.

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