One of the, if not the, most notorious book on the subject of father–daughter incest published in the twentieth century is Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*. Nabokov’s provocative tale is told from the perspective of forty-something-year-old Humbert Humbert about his desire for twelve-year-old Lolita, a girl who is forced against her will to endure a two-year, cross-country trip, in and out of cheap motels doing dirty things with the man who calls himself her stepfather. Perhaps needless to say, this book has raised eyebrows over the years and generated difficult questions about father–daughter incest.

The novel’s critical reception and publication history are dizzying journeys in themselves. After being rejected by four American publishers, one of whom said that if he printed the book both he and Nabokov would go to jail, the novel was released in Paris in 1955 by Olympia Press, primarily a publisher of pornography. It would take another three years for *Lolita* to make its debut in the United States. Upon publication, *Lolita* elicited impassioned and often opposing criticism. Graham Greene praised it as one of the best books of 1955; Lionel Trilling trumpeted the novel as a love story; Ellen Pifer heralded Nabokov as an ethical writer. Anticipating some of the later dissenting criticism, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt argued that *Lolita* is “a tale of misogyny dressed up in transparent finery” (qtd. in Schuman 133). As debates over child abuse and sexual violence against women and children started to gain public attention in the late 1970s and into the 1980s, feminist critics such as Nomi Tamir-Ghez and Linda Kauffman faulted the book for turning the rape of a young
girl into an aesthetic experience and making art out of perversion. They criticized Nabokov for portraying the sexual exploitation of a pubescent girl as a joke, or, worse, a romance. No longer willing to be wooed by Humbert’s persuasive rhetoric and to overlook Lolita’s entrapment, these critics exposed the sexual politics at work in the novel and its initial reception, asking the critical question that resounds today—“Is there a woman in the text?” (Kauffman 131). And, Christine Clegg adds, at the turn of the century we have begun to ask, “why has it taken so long to find her?” (114).

Nabokov anticipated that the pendulum tracking the book’s reputation would swing. Confident in the immortality of his masterpiece, he predicted the day when some critic would cry that *Lolita* shows that he was really a moralist at heart: “In fact I believe that one day a reappraiser will come and declare that . . . I was a rigid moralist kicking sin” (qtd. in Clegg 96). Pointing out that by the novel’s end a genuinely remorseful, lovesick Humbert rues the day when he captured Lolita, many recent critics (Moore; Goldman; Quayle) have gone so far as to argue in favor of Nabokov’s feminist sympathies and claim *Lolita* as a proto-feminist narrative. Nabokov would not have been amazed by this, but he may have been surprised to hear that one of his most ardent defenders at the dawn of the twenty-first century is a woman from Iran. Azar Nafisi even titled her best-selling memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, which is a book that details her time reading several Western classics in her secret, subversive, female-student book club in her home country. In taking this for her title, she makes *Lolita* a synecdoche for great Western literature and a model text for exposing solipsists who deny their subjects humanity.

This article argues that Nafisi’s uncritical praise of *Lolita* is problematic, but her memoir succeeds in providing Western readers an insider’s view of the cruel patriarchal practices many Muslim women experience. Her memoir suggests that at the dawn of the century books about father-daughter incest were being imported not necessarily to comment on the act itself but to articulate a history of female subjugation in which incest is just one part of a larger network of oppression.

Strikingly, Nafisi’s 2003 book, which functions simultaneously as personal memoir, literary analysis, and political commentary, employs *Lolita*, of all books, to expose the insidious trauma females in Iran experience on a daily basis. Although no stranger
Christine Grogan

to revolution, Nabokov did not live to see his work imported into the lives of women in revolutionary Iran, “a world,” Nafisi notes, “unknown and presumably unknowable to Nabokov,” where the country’s cultural purists banned the work as a forbidden novel symbolizing Western decadence (22). But in this transcultural text about the story of Dolores Haze, better known as Lolita, Nafisi finds an ally in her war against the domination of women. Essentially, her best-selling memoir tells the story of a female professor of English literature, who was educated in England and the United States (receiving a Ph.D. in English and American literature from the University of Oklahoma in the 1970s). After resigning her post at an Iranian university, she explains that she gathered seven of her most devoted students to read and discuss Lolita and other works of Western literature in what became Thursdays with Nafisi. Divided into four sections, “Lolita,” “Gatsby,” “James,” and “Austen,” the memoir spans the years 1978 to 1997 (from the beginning of the revolution until Nafisi’s emigration to the United States), but the first section primarily centers on the two years of the book club, 1995–1997. The book recounts and bears witness to Nafisi’s painful experiences following the revolution in which Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s repressive regime rose to power.

Nafisi’s memoir was heavily criticized for its alleged neoconservative and pro-military messages. Critics argued that her agenda was not so cleverly occluded by the aesthetics of a book whose publication date was even suspect: perhaps not coincidentally the book was released less than two years after the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the same month that the United States invaded Iran’s neighbor, Iraq. The criticism is a valid concern I take up in the second half of the article, but I am more interested in what her work can tell us about transnational feminist discourse and reading father–daughter incest in the twenty-first century. To that end, I first explore how Nafisi reads—or, at times, misreads—Lolita, followed by my close reading of it. I argue that she overlooks the ethical and literary ambiguities and contradictions embedded in Lolita. Unlike Nafisi, I find that Nabokov chooses a narrative strategy that, at best, grants him the luxury of ambivalence about father–daughter incest and one that, at worst, celebrates the actions of Humbert Humbert as it glosses over how much this affair causes trauma to Lolita. Most of Lolita, Judith Herman correctly observes in Father-Daughter Incest, “is a brilliant
apologia for an incestuous father” as the narrative obscures the suffering of the girl (37). The article then focuses on some influential critics’ comments and their implications. It closes with a meditation on how Nafisi’s work illustrates what some trauma theorists contend about the literary—that it is the privileged site for representing and bearing witness to psychological trauma.¹ I add that the literary is also a prime site for articulating insidious trauma, a concept developed by feminist psychotherapist Maria Root that refers to the cumulative degradation directed toward individuals whose identities, such as gender, color, and class, differ from those in power. Root notes that these actions are often insidious—not always blatantly violent—but they threaten and denigrate the self worth of the socially othered who are often rendered voiceless. What we find in reading Reading Lolita is that insidious trauma is foreign to neither women of Iran nor to females living in the United States.

### Nafisi’s Reading of Lolita

Nafisi’s 350-page memoir opens with a 77-page section devoted to Lolita, the book she claims best represents her experience in revolutionary Iran. Sensing that her perceived American, female, probably feminist, readers would be curious about her choice of text, she articulates the question that is on most of our minds: “Why Lolita?” and “Why Lolita in Tehran?” (35). The first page of her memoir provides an answer: she says that if she were to “choose a work of fiction that would most resonate with our lives in the Islamic Republic of Iran, it would not be The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie or even 1984 but perhaps Nabokov’s Invitation to a Beheading or better yet, Lolita” (3).

She reminds us in the following chapters that she and her seven female students are not Lolita and that the Ayatollah

¹Recognizing that psychological trauma often defies language and linguistic processing, leading trauma theorists Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra advocate using figurative language to represent an event that may never have been put to words in the first place. They claims literature as a privileged site for “working through” trauma and for turning traumatic memory, in which trauma is unconsciously repeated, to narrative memory, which narrates the past as past and allows the writer to gain mastery over the trauma.
is not Humbert; however, she states that *Lolita* was “the most metaphorical of the situation in Iran” (Power 58). When asked, “Why was *Lolita*, in particular, such a crucial book for your class?” Nafisi responded:

I felt the regime was imposing its dream on us. As women, it confiscated our reality. It said, “Don’t be like this, be the way we think you should be.” In Humbert’s mind, Lolita had a precedent, a girl he meets when he’s younger—Annabel Leigh. Every girl he sees, he imposes his dream of Annabel on the reality of Lolita. The poignancy is that, as Humbert says, “Every night she had to run back to my arms, because she had nowhere else to go.” My girls, in the Islamic Republic, where else did they have to go? (qtd. in Power 58)

Knowing what it feels like to be powerless in the face of male authority, Nafisi closely identifies with the novel because she has experienced how religious totalitarianism can confiscate individual identity and replace it with distorted views of its own imagination. The story of a girl who is reduced to a figment of someone else’s fantasy resonates so much with her own situation in war-torn Iran. In this country, adultery and prostitution warranted being stoned to death, women, under *Sharia* law, were considered to have half the worth of men, and nine-year-old girls, or, as Nafisi states, really “eight and a half lunar years,” were ripe for marriage (261).

As her “Lolita” section unravels, Nafisi proceeds to forge unexpected parallels between the book and her life in the religious patriarchy of the Islamic Republic in which Humbert Humbert is not unlike Ayatollah Khomeini and other representatives of the Islamic state and Lolita shares striking characteristics with the women in the book club. Just as Humbert overpowers *Lolita*, Nafisi views her country as hijacked by a minority of radical revolutionaries. Readily identifying with Nabokov’s lead female character, she celebrates the work for its vivid imagination that helped the women of this book club recreate a world beyond the confines of revolutionary Iran. Maintaining that *Lolita* is designed to reveal what Humbert attempts to conceal, Nafisi contends that although Humbert is the most unreliable of narrators, Nabokov is a reliable author. Nafisi enthusiastically endorses Nabokov for motivating our condemnation of Humbert as well as our compassion for Lolita.
Nafisi is most concerned with the character of Lolita and her resistance to Humbert. Like Lolita, she and her students attempt to escape the repressive regime by creating little pockets of their own freedom: they shed their mandatory veils and chadors and enter into lively conversation about Nabokov’s novel, which they unanimously find to be *not* about “the rape of a twelve-year-old by a dirty old man but the confiscation of one individual’s life by another” (33). Nafisi and her students do not deny the sexual abuse of Lolita, which, they note, is rendered much more seriously and realistically than the murder of Quilty, but they subsume the incest under the larger crime of denying Lolita her individuality. Nafisi admits that as readers we at times sympathize with Humbert and are seduced by his poetic language; however, she and her students argue that Humbert does not succeed in winning over Lolita or his readers because he never possesses Lolita willingly “so that every act of lovemaking from then on becomes a crueler and more tainted act of rape” (43). They praise Nabokov for offering this subversive message. As hopeful as they are about Lolita’s glimpses of freedom and as optimistic as they are about Nabokov’s ability to expose brutal rulers, Nafisi acknowledges that Lolita is denied all of life’s normal pleasures. The bottom line, Nafisi notes, is that we simply do not know much about Lolita. To answer Clegg’s question about why it has taken so long for critics to find Lolita, it seems to have something to do with the fact that Nabokov has Humbert deceptively hide the “real” Lolita. Neither indifferent nor dismissive to the topic of child sexual abuse or how the narrative works to obscure Lolita’s trauma, Nafisi does not thoroughly comment on those aspects and concludes that the finished work is a beautiful defense of “ordinary everyday life” (33).

The majority of *Lolita* is rendered from Humbert’s perspective, eliciting compassion for a man, who, for most of the novel, is an unapologetic pedophile. Yet Nafisi praises Nabokov for evoking “sympathy for Humbert’s victims,” especially for the child Lolita (42). Highlighting Humbert’s rare insights that provide brief access into Lolita’s character, Nafisi sees the “real” Lolita, the one free from Humbert’s imagination, as a “hurt, lonely girl, deprived of her childhood, orphaned and with no refuge” (43). Nabokov’s genius, according to Nafisi, is in recreating a totalitarian society in which Humbert fashioned “an illusory world full of false promises” (23). Trying to reclaim the past and his childhood
love, Humbert imposed his relentless fiction on Lolita. Parading as a normal stepfather to her, he commits crimes against humanity, which are all the more terrifying to Nafisi and her students who seem to know too well how barbarism can be garbed in civility.

Viewing Humbert as a villain because he lacked curiosity about others, especially about the one he claimed to have loved the most, they see Lolita as a double victim, unable to live a life apart from her cruel stepfather and author her life story. Sensitive to the omissions of Lolita in *Lolita*, Nafisi and her students recognize that absences can have more importance than presences. At the start of the memoir the now-expatriated Nafisi reflects on the images in two photographs: one with her students donning the government-mandated *hijab* (head scarves and black robes) and the other with the same women stripped of their coverings. After a brief description of the six women who comprise her book club (Manna, Mahshid, Yassi, Azin, Mitra, and Sanaz), Nafisi mentions Nassrin. Not in the photographs, Nassrin is the one who “didn’t make it to the end” (5) and the one who, as we find out later, was probably most like Lolita in that she was sexually abused by her uncle when she was just eleven years old. Her tale would be incomplete, Nafisi states, without mention of those who did not remain with the group: “Their absences persist, like an acute pain that seems to have no physical source. This is Tehran for me: its absences were more real than its presences” (5). Nafisi’s words are an appropriate epigraph for her discussion of *Lolita*, in which, as Nafisi and her students observe, we don’t know much about the title character aside from what Humbert chooses to disclose about her. Lolita’s thoughts and feelings are seldom, if ever, shared, something that Nafisi attributes to Nabokov’s grand scheme of exposing the corruption of ideals and the tyranny under which Lolita, and many other women, suffer.

**My Reading of Lolita**

In place of Lolita’s voice, point of view, and traumatic suffering, Nabokov emphasizes Humbert Humbert’s hopelessly unreliable perspective. Nafisi reads the omissions as strategic moves on Nabokov’s part to expose the dangers of solipsism, but I’m not convinced he does so for such noble reasons. From the beginning of *Lolita*, he sets ethical traps for the reader. From the fictional
John Ray Jr.’s opening statement in the Foreword to Nabokov’s tagged-on afterword and Humbert’s narrative as the meandering middle, Nabokov structures his work in such a way that the reader is invited to identify with Humbert. Not only are we given the intimacy of the first-person narrative, we are also presented with a seemingly dapper civilized professor of Literature: “an intelligent, well-educated, middle-class man, with good manners and a sharp tongue” (Tamir-Ghez 163). He can outsmart most psychologists. He is a master linguist, has a good sense of humor, and tells us on more than one occasion just how attractive he is. Contrary to what Nafisi asserts, Nabokov makes it easier to sympathize with Humbert, whom we know so much about, than with Lolita, who is virtually unknown to the reader, and the little bit of information he does share of her, reveals her to be “a most exasperating brat” (148).

I agree with Nafisi that life and fiction as well as protagonist and author cannot simply be conflated, but, neither, as Sarah Herbold argues, can they be clearly separated (75). Choosing to disclose the story exclusively from Humbert’s perspective, Nabokov has to fully enter into his imagination to construct the sordid business in the first place. In so doing, he humanizes his male protagonist as he provides access into the mind of a man plagued by overwhelming lust for little girls, whom he calls “nymphets” (16). The sorry situation Nabokov writes about is often more comic than tragic or traumatic. Exhibiting more glee than disgust throughout *Lolita*, he demonstrates a moral mobility writing about incest and solipsism in a less than serious tone. He provides more questions than answers, leaving readers to wonder if he secretly condones Humbert’s actions and, in turn, if Nafisi is too quick in her praise of Nabokov.

The emphasis placed on Lolita’s body is one of the most troubling parts of the novel. Nafisi does not comment on the lengths that Nabokov goes to in order to embody Lolita, but she mentions many times throughout her memoir how emphasis is placed on the Iranian female body, especially on the veil that is intended to render women invisible yet ironically makes their presence ubiquitous. She insists that the major oppressive government policy is the constant surveillance of the female body and the threat of violence if the rules are not obeyed. It is curious that she doesn’t discuss how details of Lolita’s body and the bodies of other “nymphets”
are littered throughout the text in place of where their voices and thoughts might be. For example, Nabokov launches into almost scientific detail when describing the body of nymphets: “The bud-stage of breast development appears early (10.7 years) in the sequence of somatic changes accompanying pubescence. And the next maturational item available is the first appearance of pigmented pubic hair (11.2 years)” (20). One of the first items that catches Humbert’s eye as he scans the Haze household during his tour is “Lo’s” “limp wet things” hanging over the tub with “the question mark of a hair inside” (38). Nabokov has Humbert chart Lolita’s growth and development into what he thinks is dreaded womanhood. Throughout the book, he is concerned with Lolita’s hip movements in mounting (her bike, he tells us) and the tour of her thigh from exceeding seventeen and a half inches. The focus on the exact measurements of the female body raises disturbing questions. On the one hand, Nabokov may have been quite the researcher, scanning scientific textbooks that at that time had just begun to include such details about the human body and then mocking the generalizations he found in them. On the other hand, one may wonder if he is more concerned with the female body than with her voice and thoughts.

Lolita’s words are not completely absent, as Nafisi points out, but they are few and far between. When she does speak, however, her words call attention to the fact that Humbert is holding her against her will. She gets some stellar one-liners that mock Humbert, such as “What thing, Dad?” (112), and “You got a flat, mister?” (228). Before having sex with Lolita for the first time, an unusually tongue-tied Humbert fumbles for appropriate euphemisms to conceal their situation from her. *Lolita*, however, comes right out and says, “The word is incest” (119). Similarly, she refers to the Enchanted Hunters hotel, where they have sex (three times) the morning they first stay there, as “the hotel where you raped me” (202). And, Lolita threatens to turn Humbert in to the authorities in no uncertain terms: she yells, “You revolting creature. I was a daisy-fresh girl, and look what you’ve done to me. I ought to call the police and tell them you raped me. Oh, you dirty, dirty old man” (141). She shows that she knows of his transgressive behavior and wishes it to stop, evident when she asks Humbert, “how long did I think we were going to live in stuffy cabins, doing filthy things together and never
behaving like ordinary people” (158). He admits to censoring parts of Lolita’s speech, claiming, “she said unprintable things” (205) and swore to him in “language that I never dreamed little girls could know, let alone use” (170). The result is that far too often Lolita’s words are omitted.

The problem is not that the reader does not receive any words from Lolita, but for every one of her words, we get a hundred of Humbert’s. And, she remains under his narrative control as Nabokov gives free reign to his male protagonist and chooses to tell the story by having us read his journal. In Reading Lolita Nafisi and her students are painfully aware that Lolita is a double victim—of her life and her life story. But wasn’t it Nabokov’s choice to deny Lolita self-representation, the ability to author her own story? Shouldn’t he share in some of the responsibility of making Lolita a double victim? As Nafisi herself admits in a later part of her memoir, a good novel is “democratic” in that it “shows the complexity of individuals, and creates enough space for all these characters to have a voice” (132).

Most disconcertingly, Nafisi maintains that the novel is not about the rape of Lolita. She insists that Lolita is really about the “confiscation of one individual’s life by another” (33). Unlike Nafisi, I do not see the incest and confiscation as mutually exclusive and would argue that the novel is about both. To categorize the crimes of humanity in such a hierarchal structure is another form of victimizing the female figure, which Nafisi makes clear in other parts of her memoir is not her intention. There is much truth in the sentence that follows Nafisi’s assertion about the novel’s content: “We don’t know what Lolita would have become if Humbert had not engulfed her” (33). We don’t know what Lolita could have been because we don’t know much about the “real” Lolita from the book that bears her made-up name. Leland de la Durantaye perceptively observes, “She is everywhere referred to, everywhere described, everywhere poetically loved, but as to her thoughts, and feelings, Humbert offers us scarcely a glimpse” (323). For these reasons it is difficult, if not impossible, to assess the extent of Lolita’s psychological trauma.

Nabokov drops subtle hints that Lolita is suffering, passing statements that Nafisi cites as proof of Lolita’s trauma. For example, in her letter written to Humbert reproduced toward the novel’s end she says, “I have gone through much sadness and
hardship” (266). Also we learn that Lolita would prefer to live a life with a child pornographer, who does not love her, than with Humbert, who claims he so desperately does. Identifying the crux of the problem to be the perverse intimacy Lolita is forced to endure, Nafisi writes, “for two years, in dingy motels and byways, in his home or even in school, he forces her to consent to him. He prevents her from mixing with children her own age, watches over her so she never has boyfriends, frightens her into secrecy, bribes her with money for acts of sex, which he revokes when he has had his due” (44). In short, Humbert robs Lolita of the normal life of a girl her age.

The best piece of evidence that Lolita is suffering, which Nafisi points out, comes at the beginning of Part Two when Nabokov writes, “and her sobs in the night—every night, every night—the moment [Humbert] feigned sleep” (176). Nafisi comments on this disclosure, quoting Nabokov’s wife, Véra, with whom she and her class unanimously agreed. In her diary, Véra expresses her wish for some critic to listen to the cries of Lolita. Nafisi quotes,

Critics prefer to look for moral symbols, justification, condemnation, or explanation of HH’s predicament. . . . I wish, though, somebody would notice the tender description of the child’s helplessness, her pathetic dependence on monstrous HH, and her heartrending courage all along culminating in that squalid but essentially pure and healthy marriage, and her letter, and her dog. And that terrible expression on her face when she had been cheated by HH out of some little pleasure that had been promised. They all miss the fact that the ‘horrid little brat’ Lolita is essentially very good indeed. (40; ellipsis in orig.)

Consistently advocating for the heroine’s humanity, Véra lamented that Lolita “cries every night, and the critics are deaf to her sobs” (qtd. in Pifer 197). Similarly, Nafisi’s student, Manna, criticizes some of Nabokov’s critics: “‘some critics seem to treat the text the same way Humbert treats Lolita: they only see themselves and what they want to see’” (50). There are, however, valid reasons for why many critics have neglected to comment on Lolita’s tears, the main one being that Humbert’s confession fails to report Lolita’s reaction until a hundred-some pages have gone by. Additionally, he mentions it in passing. It is very easy to
gloss over what Nabokov places as almost a footnote in the adventures of Humbert Humbert. Nabokov’s lessons in close reading and rereadings can easily be lost on the hasty reader following in the footsteps of Humbert, a trap that Nabokov knowingly sets and for which he should therefore assume some of the responsibility.

Whereas it is easy to miss Lolita’s trauma, Nabokov makes it difficult to miss Humbert’s trauma, or, better yet, his feigned trauma. Humbert wants us to believe that his fixation with nymphets originates in the traumatic loss of his childhood sweetheart, Annabel Leigh, something that Nafisi seems to uncritically accept. Unlike some of the other vital information that Humbert withholds until the end of the book (such as his change-of-heart regarding his regret for what he had done to Lolita), he readily discloses the events with Annabel at the beginning. Nabokov’s choice to unravel the events in their chronological order allows Humbert to set up Annabel, the “precursor” to Lolita, as the noble cause of his trouble with nymphets (9). As we’ve already read, Nafisi takes Humbert at his word: “In Humbert’s mind, Lolita had a precedent, a girl he meets when he’s younger—Annabel Leigh. Every girl he sees, he imposes his dream of Annabel on the reality of Lolita” (qtd. in Power 58). Nafisi suggests that his “nympholepsy” is the result of being traumatized by the death of his first love. She does not mention that Nabokov might be mock- ing Edgar Allen Poe’s “Annabel Lee,” which is often said to be inspired by his wife, who was a cousin of his and a mere 13 years old when she married the 26-year-old Edgar. Also, as Nafisi fails to mention, Nabokov might be toying with the Freudian reader who would take stock in the psychological repercussions of traumatic loss.

Falling for Humbert’s claims to trauma may also blind the reader to what is the beginning of a vicious cycle in Nabokov’s work—the killing off of almost all of his female characters. In addition to Annabel, Humbert’s mother is said to have died when he was quite young. Nabokov tersely and parenthetically writes off the details as “(picnic, lightning)” (10). She is mentioned only one other time in Humbert’s narrative. There’s also Charlotte Haze, Lolita’s mother, who is killed off in fantastic fashion. More than just narrative interests (as Charlotte’s death allows Humbert to get closer to Lolita and sends the plot into motion) play into Nabokov’s decision to have Charlotte die early in the novel.
Nabokov does not seem to like Charlotte Haze, who represents the capitalistic-consuming, overbearing housewife and mother. After Humbert plots a clever scheme to drown Charlotte at Hourglass Lake, he doesn’t go through with it. Instead, her death is even more gruesome: she is struck down by the Beale car, which, while trying to spare a neighborhood dog, conveniently for Humbert, kills Charlotte, who had just discovered his sexual desires for Lolita. In addition, both Humbert’s first wife, Valeria, and Lolita die in childbirth. Lolita’s daughter is stillborn. (The last two deaths we learn with a reread.) And Nabokov even has Charlotte’s friend Jean Farlow die of cancer at the young age of thirty-three (104). All of these “traumatic losses” may lead one to wonder if the deaths of female characters in Lolita aren’t overkill.

As it becomes clear that theories of traumatic loss and childhood fixation do not alone explain Humbert’s situation, it seems likely that, as James Tweedie mentions, the main source of Humbert’s trauma “is the realization that Lolita maintains an identity outside his self-contained realm” (161). At the novel’s end, Humbert’s realizations about Lolita crystallize and there are a few instances in which he admits that in idolizing her, he has denied her humanity. For example, he acknowledges that he “did not know a thing about my darling’s mind and that quite possibly, behind the awful juvenile clichés, there was in her a garden and a twilight, and a palace gate” (284). In a similar statement, Humbert assumes some guilt: “it was always my habit and method to ignore Lolita’s states of mind while comforting my own base self” (287). He notes that “nothing could make my Lolita forget the foul lust I had inflicted upon her” (283). Using the word rape for the first time, wishing that Lolita’s child be a boy instead of a girl (whom he used to long for in order to practice the art of being a granddad on), and stating that he took her childhood away, Humbert reveals regret over his actions.

Realizing that Humbert’s awakening to Lolita’s suffering is critical to evaluating the ethical effects of the novel, this reader can’t help but wonder if Humbert’s realizations are, if not too little, then too late. We know that Humbert’s memoir, written while he’s imprisoned for fifty-six days, was at first intended to be read during his trial, leading the reader to ask if Humbert’s change-of-heart is genuine and triggered by true repentance of a guilty
conscience or is another one of the schemes he constructs as a get-out-of-jail-free card. His assertions are also undermined when he claims that Lolita failed to see him as a person: “I firmly decided to ignore what I could not help perceiving, the fact that I was to her not a boy friend, not a glamour man, not a pal, not even a person at all, but just two eyes and a foot of engorged brawn—to mention only mentionable matters” (283, emphasis added). Strikingly, he tries to pin on her what he has been guilty of for most of his narrative—denying her humanity by turning her into a figment of his imagination.

**Critics’ Reading of Nafisi’s Memoir**

Throughout *Lolita*, we witness Humbert’s efforts to contain Lolita, actions that resonate with Nafisi, who feels that the Ayatollah is imposing his warped views of what a woman should be onto the women of Iran. For most of her memoir, she reflects on the dire circumstances that define and confine the women of Tehran. In a passage often quoted by critics, Nafisi explains that before venturing outdoors, one of her students, Sanaz, has to re-veil herself for what she has been told is her own safety. Focusing on the regulation of the female body, Nafisi notes how Sanaz is transformed from a colorful individual to an anonymous veiled figure:

> She says her good-byes and puts on her black robe and scarf over her orange shirt and jeans, coiling her scarf around her neck to cover her huge gold earrings. She directs wayward strands of hair under the scarf, puts her notes in her large bag, straps it on over her shoulder and walks out into the hall. She pauses a moment on top of the stairs to put on thin lacy black gloves to hide her nail polish. (26)

As Nafisi sees it, the robe and scarf are erasers of feminine identity. Her description of Sanaz illustrates the great lengths that she and other women must go to just to walk down a street. Nafisi’s words convey to her foreign readers that women in Iran are victims of state-sanctioned violence.

Women like Sanaz are subjected to random arrests, segregated classes, and virginity searches. They can be penalized for any number of perceived indiscretions such as “running up the stairs when they were late for classes, for laughing in the hallways, for
talking to members of the opposite sex,” wearing lipstick, showing a single strand of hair, eating a piece of fruit too seductively, growing their nails, listening to forbidden music, reading immoral books, and sometimes even for wearing pink socks (9, 26, 59, 76). The streets of Tehran and other Iranian roads are “patrolled by militia, who ride in white Toyota patrols, four gun-carrying men and women, sometimes followed by a minibus” (26). Nicknamed “the Blood of God,” these agents police the streets primarily to make sure that its female inhabitants “guard [their] veil” (26, 27)—“to make sure that women like Sanaz wear their veils properly, do not wear makeup, do not walk in public with men who are not their fathers, brothers, or husbands” (26). Iranian custom mandates that if a woman gets on a bus, she must enter through the rear door and sit in the back seats assigned to her. Mahshid, one of Nafisi’s students who had spent five years in prison because of her affiliation with an opposing religious organization, cuts to the reality of the insidious trauma: “everyday life does not have fewer horrors than prison” (13).

Critics Fatemeh Keshavarz, Seyed Mohammed Marandi, and Roksana Bahramitash were disturbed, if not outright angered, with how Nafisi portrays Iran’s treatment of women. Criticizing her biased Western, liberal-humanist perspective, they faulted her for providing a dangerously oversimplified depiction of Iranian women as nothing but victims of an inherently misogynistic Islamic tradition. They argued that her book worked within the dominant discursive practices in the West as it confirmed some of the stereotypes about Iran and Islam as a radical religious state of evil. Noting that a book about Iran is intrinsically political in an age of imperialism and militarism in which a “war on terror” was being fought against the “Axis of Evil,” many of Nafisi’s critics thought she should have been more careful in representing the complexity of the situation in Iran. Additionally, they felt she should have been more critical in her choice of texts since her inclusion of four Western authors can be viewed as conceding Western superiority and, by implication, legitimizing the need for outside military intervention.

The book enjoyed early accolades—it sold one million copies; it was translated into thirty-two languages; it won the 2004 Nonfiction Book of the Year Award from Booksense and the Persian
Golden Lioness Award for literature; and it advanced to the number one spot on the *New York Times Book Review* list, where it stayed for a year and a half. However, this international sensation through which Nafisi’s book club was brought into the homes of readers around the globe soon found itself under attack. The most outspoken of the critics was a fellow Iranian-born and U.S.-educated scholar, Hamid Dabashi. A current Columbia University professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature and staunch anti-war activist, Dabashi argued that Nafisi irresponsibly paints Islamic tradition as misogynistic and calls for foreign forces to rescue these damsels in distress. He claimed the memoir was “a key propaganda tool at the disposal of the Bush administration,” as it justified outside military intervention to “save Muslim women from the evil of their men” (Dabashi).

Moreover, Dabashi contends that Nafisi’s work features native orientalist discourse and illustrates the need for “white men to save brown women from brown men” (qtd. in “Native Informers”). To make this claim, he draws on the work of Edward Said and quotes the postcolonial feminist Gayatri Spivak (with whom Bahramitash notes Nafisi is unfamiliar as her memoir gives no indication that she has read any postcolonial feminist literary critics). He arrives at this conclusion after arguing that Nafisi reduces the complicated social history of Iran to a single portrait of oppressed women forced to wear the veil, voices a “hatred of everything Iranian,” unfairly edits the image taken for the cover of her memoir, disregards the struggle for cultural diversity in the U.S. academy, and hijacks and eroticizes the literary scene of *Lolita*, celebrating “the most notorious case of pedophilia in modern literary imagination” (Dabashi). He connects Nafisi to the U.S. government’s neoconservative movement to expand its military force. Comparing *Reading Lolita in Tehran* to “the most pestiferous colonial projects of the British in India,” Dabashi asserts that Nafisi functions as a colonialist.

Much less radical in their critiques than Dabashi, Amy DePaul, John Carlos Rowe, Anne Donadey, and Huma Ahmed-Ghosh recognize that Nafisi’s memoir does lend itself to conservative U.S. ideological rescripting. Asking if *Reading Lolita* serves “the Bush administration’s designs on the Middle East, and in particular, the neoconservative agenda for US foreign relations,” DePaul answers with a qualified yes (77). Also seeing how Nafisi’s
intention for publishing her memoir can be distorted, Rowe is skeptical of what he views as Nafisi’s “new” aesthetic reading of literature that purports to be disengaged from politics but is really a manifestation of macropolitical academic issues. In “Why Americans Love Azar Nafisi’s Reading Lolita in Tehran,” Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh write about the ironic and unfortunate use of the memoir to bolster U.S. military operations of globalized capital. Surveying the historical and political context of revolutionary Tehran, Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh challenge the monolithic portrait of Muslim women in Nafisi’s work, concluding,

the memoir comes dangerously close to confirming a set of stereotypes about Islam for readers who are already saturated with them: that it is a theocratic, evil religion that should be allowed no place in the public sphere; that it oppresses women; and finally, that it stands in stark contrast to the American way of life, thus justifying further foreign military intervention and U.S. political dominion over the world. (643–44)

The critics agreed that regardless of authorial intention, Nafisi’s work lends itself to being read as an appropriation of feminist rhetoric to fulfill the neoconservative agenda of a call to arms.

The Value of the Literary in Empowering Women

Focusing on what they perceived to be the book’s endorsement of U.S. military intervention, many critics misconstrued Nafisi’s feminist messages and her efforts to unveil the insidious trauma many women in Iran experience. Nowhere in the memoir does Nafisi promote warfare as the answer to her problems in revolutionary Iran. In fact, she’s been vocal about saying that she does “not advocate regime change by use of violence or foreign intervention”; instead, she wants “the progressive forces in the world to empathize with the plight of the Iranian people” (qtd. in Kulbaga 518). In place of supporting war, Reading Lolita charts the intimate lives of selected Iranian women during the devastating rise of Islamism in Iran and how these women engaged with literature to cope with the radical changes. In a land “that denied any merit to literary works,” Nafisi turns to reading literature and writing her memoir as means of self-preservation and as acts of survival (25).
Celebrating the transformative potential of fiction to illuminate the situation of herself and her female students, Nafisi credits Nabokov and other Western writers she deems as great for elucidating the human condition. She advocates an aesthetic appreciation of literature. For her, literature becomes a refuge from politics. (The irony, as we have already seen, is that her book became the topic of a highly politicized debate about neoconservatives and pro-war propaganda.) In pointing out the mistreatment of women in Iran and the hypocrisy of revolutionary Iranian ideology, her work was criticized for highlighting the divide between life in Iran and life in the United States, a democratic country that promises liberty and the pursuit of happiness. However, the systems of oppression that thwart the humanity of its female citizens and keep them in a pre-victim state are not just problems in Iran. Bahramitash correctly points out, “the West is dominated as much by patriarchy in ideology and government as is the East” (226). Crimes against females know no boundaries.

Raising cultural awareness about what she and her students endured during their darkest days of the Iranian revolution and how books sustained them, Nafisi states, “If I turned to books, it was because they were the only sanctuary I knew, one I needed in order to survive, to protect some aspect of myself that was now in constant retreat” (170). Fiction became a way for her to reassert control over reality as it allowed her to create counter-realities. “Reality,” as Nabokov explains in his afterword to Lolita, is “one of the few words which mean nothing without quotes” (312). Seeing the need to counter her current situation in Iran by escaping into the world of great novels, Nafisi insists that she and her students fashion their own counter-realities. Great novels, she reminds us, heighten “your senses and sensitivity to the complexities of life and of individuals, and prevents you from the self-righteousness that sees morality in fixed formulas about good and evil” (133). Undoubtedly, their reading of Lolita and other works was informed by their own personal sorrows. The act of reading literature had liberating powers, helping her and her students to imagine a world other than the one in which they lived and to psychologically keep “the war at bay” (213).

When studying Lolita, Nafisi and her students noted that the double-victim Lolita was “never given the chance to articulate [her] own story” (41). They told themselves they were in that class
to prevent themselves from falling victim to the crime of having their life stories taken from them. Through authoring her story, Nafisi achieves what Humbert and Nabokov deny Lolita—the right of self-representation, something that came with, and continues to be, a struggle in a patriarchal culture. In writing her memoir, she calls our attention to the trauma of Iranian people and offers an alternative solution to war—empathy. The social change that she champions does not come from violence, but from learning about the humanity of others, lessons, according to Nafisi, that are found in the great works of literature.

Calling our attention to the value of the literary and how books like Lolita can teach us more about the human condition, Nafisi includes towards the memoir’s end a powerful analogy between life in the Islamic Republic and the sexual domination and exploitation of females. I find this interesting because although she does not give as much attention to Lolita’s rape as I think it deserves, she employs the striking image of unwanted sex to convey total state domination and complete female victimhood. Attempting to explain to her husband how she felt living in such a repressed culture, Nafisi likens it to “having sex with a man you loathe”:

Well, it’s like this: if you’re forced into having sex with someone you dislike, you make your mind blank—you pretend to be somewhere else, you tend to forget your body, you hate your body. That’s what we do over here. We are constantly pretending to be somewhere else—we either plan it or dream it. (329)

Nafisi sexualizes the experience of state power, suggesting that men’s sexual control of women’s bodies is fundamental to Iranian governmental policies, in particular, and patriarchy, in general. Sex, although one part of this process, is a central act of aggression.

The confiscation of ordinary life, which is accomplished through the insidious trauma of females, matters most to Nafisi. Her memoir shows poignantly that the mistreatment of women is a human rights violation and a political crime in that, as Herman states, “they serve to perpetuate an unjust social order through terror” (“Crime” 136–37). The literary can aid us in developing an approach to the study of trauma and the posttraumatic that
contextualizes the social and political forces that, in this case, prevent many females from enjoying life’s simple pleasures. Nafisi acknowledges, “The Islamic Republic took away everything I’d taken for granted” (qtd. in Power 58). In turn, she now has a deeper appreciation for “the feel of the wind on [your] skin,” “How lovely the sun feels on your hair,” and “How free you feel when you can lick ice cream in the streets” (58). Strikingly, the two things she says she feels most grateful for at the end of the twentieth century are not nature and sweets, but being a woman and being a writer. Through her reading of Nabokov’s work, Nafisi testifies and bears witness to the insidious trauma endured by women in her home country and suggests that the act of sexual violation at the turn of the century was seen as just one manifestation of political and social ills.

Works Cited


