

The Republic of the Imagination

In which the author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* dreams of a better world -- through literature.

By Azar Nafisi

Sunday, December 5, 2004; Page BW10

In this day and age when politics are paramount, belligerence the order of the day, and questions of culture take second seat to power, I'd like to propose that there is such a thing as the Republic of the Imagination. It is a country worth building, a state with a future, a place where we can truly know freedom.

Let's call it Nabokov's "somehow, somewhere" -- a world that runs parallel to the real one. The key is an open mind, the restless desire to know, the indefinable urge to leave the mundane behind. We write and read not because we already know, not in order to reassert habits and expectations, but because we are in search of what we don't know, of what is dangerously new, unpredictable.

Curiosity is essential. No amount of moral preaching or political correctness can replace what the imagination gives us when it places us in other people's experiences, opening our eyes to vistas and views we never knew existed. It is this process of dehabitualization, of discovering the magic in what another person might consider mundane, that presents the world anew, washed and clear, evoking that sense of ecstasy that only a great work of the imagination can provide.

Now, in this holiday season, I celebrate this country, a place I visited often in my imagination before I visited it in reality, among a people with whom I share much, including a universal language that defies all boundaries. This real and actual America on whose soil I stand will always be linked in my heart and mind to another magical America discovered through the sorcery of imagination, in fiction: F. Scott Fitzgerald, Toni Morrison, Cynthia Ozick, Saul Bellow, Mark Twain, Henry James, Zora Neale Hurston, Philip Roth, Emily Dickinson, William Carlos Williams, Nathanael West, Ralph Ellison. This land and its extraordinary literary heritage remind me once again how heavily real democracy depends on what we could call a democratic imagination.

I have written about how Nabokov's *Lolita* came to mean something in Iran, a country defined by its own literary masters: Hafiz, Rumi, Khayam, Ferdowsi. I would like to share with you how, through my experiences, I came to see ways that the imagination connects cultures and realities, how I learned that my Tehran can be linked to Washington.

Like many before me, I became obsessed with the idea of home once it was taken away from me. At the age of 13, I suddenly realized that the unique blue of the sky, the particular slant of the light on the snow-capped mountains and trees, the colors of earth and sky at different seasons and different times of the day, certain smells and, most important, the language called Persian, so evasive and yet so intimate -- made up that vague yet cherished entity I called home. All this was taken away from me when I was sent to a town in England named Lancaster, with its grey skies and constant rain, without mountains and without sun. That was when I realized how close and yet how elusive home is, and how easily lost. All that I had left of home were my memories and the language, the portable world I could carry.

Advertisement



Ever
checked
your bank
statement
and
smiled?

ING DIRECT
Save Your Money

Open Now

Member FDIC

I made peace with my new home in England and later in America through its generous and magical language. The first Shakespeare play I read was "Much Ado About Nothing," and I can still feel the thrill of his words in my spine. I cannot tell you much about the experience, except that it was real; indeed, it was transforming. Decades later, the same thrill visited me when my daughter, Negar -- almost the same age I was then, herself in her second year of exile -- came home excited, almost shouting, "Mom! Listen to these words!" She read me an obscure line from "Romeo and Juliet": "She's too fair, she's too wise, she's too wisely fair." And two thoughts ran through my mind almost simultaneously: Being too wise and too wisely fair, Rosalind was right to be forgotten, and Juliet, risking the madness of love, right to gain immortality. My second thought was: Thank God, my daughter is going to be okay. She has found her new home!

The second time I lost my home was when I returned to it after the Islamic revolution in 1979. I knew it as soon as I landed in the Tehran airport. I always try to remember the great critic Theodor Adorno's claim that the "highest form of morality is to not feel at home in one's own home." That, of course, is what great works of imagination do for us: They make us a little restless, destabilize us, question our preconceived notions and formulas. I have to be grateful, then, to the Islamic Republic of Iran for making me pose myself as a question mark, for *not* making home feel like home.

I also have to thank the Islamist regime for making me realize how fragile were the rights and values I had come to take for granted. Suddenly a new regime had established itself, taking hold of my country, my religion, my traditions, and claiming that the way I looked, the way I acted -- what I believed in and desired as a human being, as a woman, a writer and teacher -- were all alien. I was told that I did not belong, that I was a figment of Western imperialists' imaginations.

In the fall of 1979, I was teaching two great American works, *Huckleberry Finn* and *The Great Gatsby*, at the University of Tehran without realizing the irony that, in the yard below, Islamists were shouting "Death to America!" and that, a few streets away, the U.S. embassy was under siege by a group claiming to be following the path of the Imam. The new regime was leading a bloody crusade against Western imperialism, against the rights of women and minorities, against cultural and individual freedom. This time I had lost my connections to that other home, to the America in which I had learned to love Henry James, Richard Wright, William Faulkner, Peter Taylor and Eudora Welty.

The main targets of the new regime were anything that indicated difference and diversity. The regime claimed that the *sharia* laws it was imposing on Iranian society were justified in that they were restoring a woman's dignity and rescuing her from degrading and dangerous Western ideas. The war on women's rights, human rights and culture became central to the fight against the "Western conspiracy."

Let me remind you: By 1979, at the time of the revolution, women were active in all areas of life in Iran. The number of girls attending schools was on the rise. The number of female candidates for universities had risen sevenfold during the first half of the 1970s. Women were scholars, police officers, judges, pilots and engineers -- active in every field except the clergy. In 1978, 333 of 1,660 candidates for local councils were women. Twenty-two were elected to Parliament, two to the Senate. There was one female cabinet minister, one governor, one ambassador, five mayors. The majority of Iranians had come to the streets desiring more rights, never dreaming they would be told to give up rights they already had. And for a long time during that revolution, Iranian women poured into the streets of Tehran, protesting the implementation of the new laws.

Before then, women who wore the veil, like my own grandmother, had done so because of their personal beliefs; other faithful Muslims, like my mother, who had chosen not to wear the veil, were now branded as infidels. The veil ceased to represent religion and began to represent the state. Other freedoms were gradually curtailed, and the assaults continued: attacks on freedom of the press; the censorship of books; a ban on dancing, on female singers, on most forms of music, on films and other forms of art, followed by systematic attacks against intellectuals who protested these forms of oppression. Ophelia was cut from

"Hamlet." Olive Oyl was excised from "Popeye."

The result was that ordinary Iranian citizens -- men and women alike -- began to feel the state in their private, daily affairs. People were flogged and jailed for wearing nail polish, Reebok shoes, lipstick. The *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie was precisely aimed against the dangers of imagination. The message was that totalitarian mindsets cannot tolerate any form of irony, ambiguity or irreverence. As Carlos Fuentes declared, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini had issued a *fatwa* not just against one writer but against the democratic form of the novel, which frames a multiplicity of voices, opposing perspectives, active dialogue. What more dangerous subversion can there be than this democracy of voices?

Now perhaps you can understand why reading *Lolita* in Tehran took on so much significance.

Like any guardians of morality, the Powers That Be took umbrage at *Lolita* and *Madame Bovary*, calling them corrupting: These books set bad examples for readers, they said, inciting them to commit immoral acts. Like all totalitarians, they could not differentiate between reality and imagination, and they attempted to impose their own version of truth upon life and fiction. They couldn't see what should be absolutely clear to those who have free minds: We do not read *Lolita* to learn about pedophilia. We do not read *Moby-Dick* to learn how to hunt whales. We do not decide to live in trees after reading Italo Calvino's *The Baron in the Trees*. We do not learn about fishing from *The Old Man and the Sea*. We read for the pure, sensual and unadulterated pleasure of reading. Our reward is the discovery of the many layers within these works that do not merely reflect reality: They reveal the truth.

I have often asked myself: How is it that under the worst political and social conditions, during war and revolution, in jails and in concentration camps, most victims turn toward works of imagination? I remember, almost a decade ago, listening to a former student, who was newly released from jail, telling me that she and one of her cellmates, another former student, kept their spirits up by exchanging stories about their class discussions, about the books they read, about Henry James and Scott Fitzgerald. At the end of her story, my student informed me that she had been luckier than her friend, who had been executed shortly before her release. Since then I have been haunted by the idea of the places to which these beloved books have traveled -- from the warmth of their libraries, from the vivid conversations of classrooms, to the dark cells of executioners.

We know that fiction does not save us from torture or the brutality of tyrannical regimes, or from the banalities and cruelties of life itself. Henry James did not save my student's luckless friend from her untimely death. But we do know that, when confronted by utter degradation, by confiscation of all that gives life its individual worth and integrity, many instinctively go to the highest achievements of mankind, to works that appeal to our sense of beauty, memory, harmony -- those that celebrate what is humane, those that we consider original works of the imagination.

You might say that such works gain added significance in a country deprived of its basic freedoms, but they do not matter much here, not in a free and democratic country. How relevant are Fitzgerald, Twain and Flannery O'Connor, you might ask, to our lives in Washington, D.C.?

I would respond by reminding you of a passage in *Huckleberry Finn* in which Huck contemplates whether or not he should give up Jim. Huck knows that, had he gone to Sunday school, "they'd a learnt you there that people that acts as I'd been" -- letting a slave go free -- "goes to ever lasting fire." But his heart rebels against the threats of those "moral" authorities. He sees Jim before his mind's eye in "day and nighttime, sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms, and we a floating along, talking and singing and laughing. But somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind." When he remembers Jim's friendship and warmth, and imagines him not as a slave but as a human being, he decides: "All right, then, I'll go to hell." He never contemplates "reforming" and decides to free Jim from slavery

again.

In American fiction, Huck has many unlikely fellow travelers: the gentle and genteel women of Henry James, the restless and haunted women of Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison, the dreamers like Fitzgerald's Gatsby, and they all decide that they would rather give up heaven and risk hell in order to follow the dictates of their hearts and consciences. They combine a heartbreaking blend of courage and vulnerability that defies easy answers, smug formulas, simplistic solutions. How many of us today would give up Sunday school heaven for the kind of hell that Huck ultimately chose?

As Saul Bellow reminds us, a culture that has lost its poetry and its soul is a culture that faces death. And death does not always come in the image of totalitarian rulers who belong to distant countries; it lives among us, in different guises, not as enemy but as friend. To mistake sound bites for deep thought, politics for action, reality shows for creative entertainment; to forget the value of dreams; to lose the ability to imagine a violent death in Darfur, in Afghanistan, in Iraq; to look at this as passing news: Are these not indications that now -- more than ever -- we need the courage and integrity, the faith, vision and dreams that these books instilled in us? Is this not a good time to worry with Bellow's hero in *The Dean's December* about what will happen if a country loses its poetry and soul?

We need to write about this. We need to recount what happens to us and to others when we strive to save ourselves from despair, to remind ourselves that tyrants cannot confiscate what we value most. The zealots may come in many garbs; they may rail and kill and mutilate in the name of progress or of God. But they cannot rob us of our ideals. They cannot take away our essential humanity.

As Calvino once said, "We can liberate ourselves only if we liberate others, for this is the sine qua non of one's own liberation. There must be fidelity to a goal, and purity of heart, values fundamental to salvation and triumph." And then he added a simple sentence, which, for me, summarizes everything: "There must also be beauty."

It is in just such notions -- in a purely human insistence on beauty, in our reveling in ideas, in the storied details of who we are, what we fear, what we wish for -- that the human imagination thrives.

Too often we conclude that we are practical creatures, essentially political animals. But in us there is a far greater impulse -- a longing for the universal, a desire for a shared humanity. It is in that leap toward middle ground that we move toward what truly binds us: toward culture, toward stories, toward language. And it is here, in the republic of the imagination, that we are most humane. •

Azar Nafisi is a professor of international studies at Johns Hopkins University and author of "Reading Lolita in Tehran." She is also director of the Dialogue Project, an organization dedicated to bridging the divide between Muslims and non-Muslims.

© 2004 The Washington Post Company