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Liberal Education and the Republic of the Imagination

By Azar Nafisi

Some assume that the only way academics can engage the politics of the day is by coming out of their ivory tower and protesting in front of the White House. But in conveying knowledge, the academy has a far more important and subversive way of dealing with political issues. Knowledge provides us with a way to perceive the world. Imaginative knowledge provides us with a way to see ourselves in the world, to relate to the world, and thereby, to act in the world. The way we perceive ourselves is reflected in the way we interact, the way we take our positions, and the way we interpret politics.

Curiosity, the desire to know what one does not know, is essential to genuine knowledge. Especially in terms of literature, it is a sensual longing to know through experiencing others—not only the others in the world, but also the others within oneself. That is why, in almost every talk I give, I repeat what Vladimir Nabokov used to tell his students: curiosity is insubordination in its purest form. If we manage to teach our students to be curious—not to take up our political positions, but just to be curious—we will have managed to do a great deal.

Cultural relativism

No amount of political correctness can make us empathize with a woman who is taken to a football stadium in Kabul, has a gun put to her head, and is executed because she does not look the way the state wants her to look. No amount of political correctness can make us empathize with a child who is starving in Darfur. Unless we evoke the ability to imagine, unless we can find the connection between that woman or that child and ourselves, we cannot empathize with either of them. Although we cannot be in different parts of the world all of the time, we can experience the world through fiction, poetry, film, painting, music, through imaginative knowledge.

Cultural relativism was supposed to be a progressive idea. It was supposed to make us celebrate and learn from cultures that are different from our own. It was supposed to make us more tolerant of those with whom we disagree. But because we did not treat it as a focus for gaining knowledge, because it became immediately politicized even on college campuses, cultural relativism became a way to divide ourselves among little boxes. It made us worry about any form of critical exchange with others for the fear of imposing ourselves upon them.

To fear that you might impose yourself upon others by merely criticizing them is

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just as bad as the colonials actually imposing themselves on others. It derives from a condescending view of other people. When Ayatollah Khomeini said that all Western women are whores because of the way they look, for example, we did not get so insulted that we wanted to shut him up. Instead, we had so much confidence in ourselves that we did not think he could impose himself upon us. But if we say that Islam does not mean marrying girls at the age of nine, and a Saudi princess tell us, “do not dare criticize our culture, we like it this way,” then we are cowed. We become silent. Where does this crude political correctness, this particular form of cultural relativism, come from? If this is allowed in colleges and universities, how does it affect our policy makers, our businesspeople, and the American public in general?

One of the things cultural relativists miss is the connection. One cannot appreciate any form of difference without connecting. They also fail to recognize the availability of universal spaces that are not partisan. When people read Shakespeare, it is irrelevant whether they are Republicans or Democrats. When people go to the theater, they are not asked whether they are for or against the war. Republicans, Democrats, independents, radicals, conservatives, even neoconservatives all might love and benefit from *The Great Gatsby*.

This nonpartisan space where people can meet is created through the shock of recognition, through recognizing not how different we are but, rather, how alike we are. To paraphrase Shakespeare himself, if you prick us, we all bleed. If you kill somebody's son, whether it is in Baghdad or in New Orleans, his mother bleeds. We all fall in love; we all are jealous. Moreover, neither democracy and human rights nor terror and fascism are confined or determined geographically or culturally. After all, two of the twentieth century's worst expressions of totalitarianism—fascism and Stalinism—grew from the very heart of European civilization. None of us is exempt, and none of us is completely guilty.

I learned when I was very young that the only thing I can rely upon is my memory, and the best safeguard for memory is literature. When I left Iran at the age of thirteen, I took three books with me by three Persian poets: Rumi, Hafez, and Forugh Farrokhzad. I tried to regain my home through reading these poets; I tried to connect with my lost home through the best it had to offer. Similarly, the way I made peace with my new home in England, and later in America, was through Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, Mark Twain, Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Ellison, and Richard Wright—through great literature.

During all the years I spent living in the United States and England, I thought of home. Yet as soon as I went back to Iran, I discovered that home was not home. I am very thankful to the Islamic Republic for this, for we should never feel too comfortable. The reason knowledge is so important is that it makes us pose ourselves as question marks. The essential role of the academy is not to give our students certainties, but to make them both cherish and doubt both the world and themselves.

There was one aspect of the Islamic Republic that I did not appreciate, however. A group of people had come to my country and, in the name of that country and its traditions and its religion, claimed that thousands of people like me were irrelevant. They regarded us as alien because of the way we believed, the way we felt, the way we expressed ourselves, and the way we looked. Suddenly, the religion into which I had been born and the traditions I had always cherished were becoming alien too. When I returned to the United States and Europe, I was shocked to find that the fundamentalists' image of my country and my religion and my traditions was the image that was accepted by people in the West.

To talk of “the Muslim world” is to reduce countries, cultures, and histories as vastly different as Malaysia, Indonesia, Afghanistan, Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Morocco to a single aspect, namely religion, and then to reduce that

religion to a single aspect, namely fundamentalism. Yet, although Germany, France, England, Sweden, and the United States have far more in common than Malaysia, Tunisia, Iran, Afghanistan, and Turkey, we do not talk of “the Christian world.” Even as you hear every day on the airwaves that the United States was founded on Christianity, you are fighting against the fundamentalist interpretation of Christianity that someone like Pat Robertson might wish to give it. You do not reduce the United States, because of its Christian background to, say, the Southern Baptists. But we do it with Iran; we do it with Turkey.

In my country, the age of marriage for girls has been reduced from eighteen to nine. Over a hundred years ago, it had been raised first to thirteen and then to eighteen. Now it has been reduced again to nine. The Saudi princess tells Karen Hughes, the U.S. undersecretary of state for public affairs, not to intervene in our culture. She tells her that nine-year-old girls like to be married to polygamous men three times their age who can also rent as many women as they want for five minutes or for ninety-nine years. This is like Americans in seventeenth-century Salem saying that burning witches is a part of their culture, or Southern confederates saying that slavery is a part of theirs.

From a biography of Harriet Beecher Stowe, I learned that many preachers in her day said that slavery was approved by the Bible. I also discovered how many preachers—as well as politicians and even women—claimed that the Bible says a woman’s place is at home. In fact, when the best-selling author Harriet Beecher Stowe went to England, she could not talk publicly. Her husband had to talk and to read her writing for her.

If you believe there are things you do not know—things that, once you know them, will change you—then even if there are in Saudi Arabia today only two women (and there are many more than that) who do not want to be flogged every day because of the way they look, you must take the side of those two women. There were not many women in eighteenth-century England or in eighteenth-century America who wanted to look and act and be where women are in those countries today.

Women in Iran

In Iran, the issue of the veil created the most controversy. My grandmother never removed her veil. When the father of the former Shah of Iran made it mandatory for three months that women appear in public without their veils, my grandmother refused to leave her home for those three months. She was a devout, meek woman who never took off her veil but who also tolerated her grandchildren and her daughters-in-law looking the way we did.

When the Islamic Republic made the veil mandatory, hundreds of thousands of Iranian women went into the streets to protest. My grandmother took their side. She did this because she believed in the veil as a symbol of her faith. She believed that if the state were to take over that symbol and turn it into a political symbol of uniformity, then the veil would lose its meaning. In fact, many Muslim women in my country were against the imposition of the veil, not because they did not believe in it but because they believe in choice. My mother, who believed in Islam and who went on pilgrimage during the Shah’s time, never wore the veil. Who is to say she was not a Muslim?

You cannot argue with people’s religion. You cannot argue with the way people choose to show their faith, as long as it does not interfere with the freedoms of others. But you can argue against any state—be it the United States of America or the Islamic Republic of Iran—that imposes religious values on its citizens. Indeed, it is your duty to argue in such cases. We are not fighting against the veil; we are fighting against the lack of freedom of choice. If they genuinely believe in their religion, then the women who wear the veil have as much at stake in this fight as the women who do not.

That is the situation in my country after more than a hundred years of struggle by Iranian women, Iranian intellectuals, and progressive clerics to create an open society. Before the 1979 revolution, Iranian women participated in all spheres of public life. Because Iranian women had won that full participation for themselves, the laws and the flogging and the jail and the repression did not work on them. That is why, after thirty years and despite the crazy president now in power, their skirts are getting shorter and shorter; their scarves are becoming much more colorful; their lipstick is becoming much more brilliant. In Iran, the way women look has become a semiotic sign of their position on the state.

The triumph of art

There are no private spaces in a totalitarian society. The situation in Iran should remind you of the Soviet Union, where Hemingway and Faulkner and Sartre and Camus were banned because they represented decadent Western literature; where love was not to be shown in movies because love for the party and for the leader came first. In Iran, Othello's suicide was cut from the movie because it might depress the masses. The masses do not get depressed when they are stoned to death. That, they say, is our culture and cannot be helped. But the masses might get depressed when a British actor commits suicide on screen. This should also remind you of the Soviet Union, where the death of the swan in *Swan Lake* was cut because the masses might get depressed watching anything that is not optimistic. Remember those Soviet paintings that depicted everybody smiling as they did harrowing work in the fields? You should smile at all costs; you should be complicit in your oppression.

Iran has had its own past confiscated. If you want to know the truth about Iran, you do not go to Ayatollah Khomeini. You go instead to Firdusi who, a thousand years ago and in opposition to the orthodox Islam that was forced upon his culture, wrote about the 2,500-year-old mythical history of Iran. He wrote in the pure Persian language in order to remind Iranians that, although they had lost their land, they had not lost their language. You go to Hafez whose poetry explicitly criticizes hypocritical clerics who flogged people in public and drank wine in private seven hundred years ago. You go to Rumi, who says the place of prayer does not matter: it can be a mosque; it can be a synagogue; it can be a church. In Persian mystical poetry, the figure of the beloved is the metaphor for God. If you have not seen a Persian dancing, I recommend you find someone to do it for you properly. I promise you, no style of Western dancing is as erotic or as sensual.

The Iranian people do not resist their government through violence, by killing the officials or asking for a violent overthrow. The Iranian people resist by being themselves. The fight is existential, not political. It is about refusing to become what others want to shape you into.

Novels celebrate the integrity of the individual. *Lolita* is not about the celebration of a pedophile's life, as some critics would like to think. On the very first page of the novel, Humbert says that Lolita had a precedent. In his childhood, he fell in love with Annabel Lee, and that love was never consummated. Humbert is frozen in time, as most dictatorial mindsets are frozen in time, and he imposes his image of his dead love upon every living little girl that he sees. His crime, as he mentions at the end of the novel, is that he deprives Lolita of her childhood. He tries, he says, to keep Lolita in an island of frozen time. He imposes his image of what he wants her to be upon her and deprives her of her potential. We can never know what Lolita could have become.

Like the Ayatollahs, Humbert vulgarizes Lolita's small childish aspirations. Because he looked like a movie star, he says she tried to seduce him—as if the fact that she tried to seduce him would give him the license to rape her every single night, even when she has a high fever. He gleefully reminds us that, on the first night he rapes her, she runs out of the room crying but then comes back

to cry on his shoulder. She has nowhere else to go. This is one of the most poignant condemnations of solipsism, of trying to confiscate another human being's life and shape it according to one's own distorted dreams and desires.

If my students, even those who wore the veil and who came from traditional families, do not react to *Lolita* the way some critics or some of my feminist friends react to *Lolita*, it is because they immediately understand the structure. It is not about finding parallels ("ah, Lolita is me"). A work of art should not be used in that way. The way to get something out of a work of art is not by finding messages but by going inside of it and defending it, by enjoying it for the sensual pleasures of the writing. When a Nabokov or a Flaubert writes of the worst tragedies, we read on even as we cry. We celebrate the triumph of that imagination over the shabby reality that kills people like Lolita or Emma Bovary. That is the triumph of art. My students immediately understand what many high-minded critics in this country do not. *Lolita* reminded us of the men who try to impose an image upon us, turning us into figments of their own imaginations.

This is the worst crime of totalitarianism. It is not just committed against people who oppose it and are now in jails. It is committed against a whole population. Literature enables us to celebrate the courage of ordinary people who want to live with dignity. That is why a Primo Levi at death's door in a Nazi concentration camp, or an Osip Mandelstam at death's door in a Soviet concentration camp, remembers Flaubert or Dante and goes to death bravely.

At times when brutality is so hideous that people's gold teeth are removed before they are sent to ovens, we all lose our faith—not just in our executioners, but in ourselves also. We lose hope in human beings when we see pictures from Abu Ghraib or when we hear about hostages being beheaded. We are all stained. The only way to retrieve our dignity or to retain our pride as human beings is to celebrate the highest achievement of humanity: individual dignity. Every great novel, from Stearns and Smollett and Fielding to Bellow and Roth and Morrison, celebrates individual human dignity. The individual is at the heart of all great literature.

American values

What about America? We need *Lolita* in Iran and in the Soviet Union and in Nazi Germany, but here? Many people say that *Lolita* needs to be forbidden in order for it to be celebrated. If you can find it in most universities, then you stop thinking about it.

Every democracy was built by those who could imagine what did not exist, and that is especially true of this country. The most poetic of all declarations is the Declaration of Independence. Lincoln's Gettysburg Address was highly political; people were dying every day when he gave that address. But it is the poetry of Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King, and even the slave-owning Jefferson that breaks our hearts. These people had to make something out of nothing. They had to imagine the impossible the way a writer looks at a blank page and imagines that he or she can create the impossible.

In *More Die of Heart Break*, *Bellarosa Connection*, and *Deans' December*, Saul Bellow brings out the two worlds, the totalitarian world and the democratic world. He worries about his Chicago and about the America he loves so much. With totalitarian societies like Iran or Sudan or Cuba, some of us immediately see the brutality and condemn it. But, as Bellow knew, there is a different kind of problem in a country like the United States. We survived the ordeal of the Holocaust, but will we survive the ordeal of freedom? The sufferings of freedom have to be counted, he said; more die of heartbreak than of Chernobyl.

What Bellow meant was that, in the West, we are threatened with atrophy of feeling. A country that has lost its love for its poetry and for its soul is a country that faces death. That is what we face today in our culture of sleeping

consciousness, where religion and American values are discussed through sound bites.

I want to end with one image from one great book. During the 2004 presidential election, both parties talked about American values. It really broke my heart the way each was vying to become more like the other just to win the election. At the time, a scene came to my mind and I have been talking and writing about it ever since. It is the scene from *Huckleberry Finn* where Huck contemplates whether or not to give Jim up.

Huck had been told in Sunday school that if you do not give up a runaway slave, you go straight to hell. And he is genuinely worried; he thinks he will go to hell. So he writes a letter saying that Jim had escaped. But then he imagines Jim in the morning, and he imagines Jim in the evening, and he imagines Jim as Jim was with him. When he remembers his experiences with Jim, Huck and Jim become one. Huck realizes that his true ally is Jim—not the horrible brat Tom Sawyer, who imposes his dream of romance upon Jim’s reality. Huck says, “I don’t care if I go to hell.” He tears up the letter and never thinks about it again. When we talk about American values, we should go to F. Scott Fitzgerald or Zora Neal Hurston. We should go to Huck and say with him, “I don’t care if I go to hell.”

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