

Contesting Bloomian Anxiety: An Intertextual Reading of Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran, A Memoir in Books*

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Abstract

Azar Nafisi's memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003), is noted for its subtitle, *A Memoir in Books*, since major literary works are interwoven into the very fabric of her account of her life story, thereby typifying Julia Kristeva's concept of intertextuality. The memoir is divided into four sections, each framed in relation to well-known novels and writers. In so structuring her book, Nafisi may be said to contest Harold Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence, which, as he postulates, results from a psychological struggle to gain aesthetic strength. While Bloom's perception of influence denigrates intertextual connections as the source of the author's/poet's uneasiness with his/her predecessors, Nafisi's recourse to canonical texts is a coping mechanism. It is the aim of this paper to examine Nafisi's memoir vis-à-vis Bloom's theory of influence, showing how she absolves herself of any impending anxiety through an array of Western classics that intersect with her writing, instead of having her talent belligerently pitted against them. In so doing, influence may be said to wield a liberating impact, rather than being the source of a writer's anxiety and incapacitation. In contradistinction to Bloom's theory of influence, Kristeva's notion of intertextuality may be said to offer an apt lens through which Nafisi's memoir can be read.

Keywords: Influence; intertextuality; anxiety; memoir; literature.

As a form of self-writing and a literary genre that "can be a repository for witnesses' accounts of historical events" (Couser 21), the memoir is aptly chosen by the Iranian writer Azar Nafisi (1948-) to recount the story of her return to Iran during the Islamic Revolution and the ensuing Islamic Republic. Nafisi's memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003), revolves around her decision to withdraw from university life and teach "great works" of Western literature (Nafisi, *Reading* 47), from her own home, to seven of her female students. The book is noted for its

subtitle, *A Memoir in Books*, since major literary works are interwoven into the very fabric of Nafisi's account of her life story, thereby typifying Julia Kristeva's concept of intertextuality. In its broadest sense, the memoir is divided into four sections, each framed in relation to well-known novels and writers: "Lolita", "Gatsby", "James" and "Austen". In so structuring her book, Nafisi may be said to contest Harold Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence, which, as he postulates, results from a psychological struggle to gain aesthetic strength. While Bloom's perception of influence denigrates intertextual connections as the source of the author's/poet's¹ uneasiness with his/her predecessors, Nafisi's recourse to canonical texts is a coping mechanism and a means of resistance to fundamentalist oppression. In the two decades after her return to Iran in 1977, reading the "great works" of literature endowed Nafisi with insights into her own situation, and enabled her to weave together many important episodes related to Iran's post-revolutionary politics; the fate of women under the strict Islamist regime; and the difficulty of teaching literature in a climate of political and religious turbulence. It is the aim of this paper to examine Nafisi's memoir vis-à-vis Bloom's theory of influence, showing how she absolves herself of any impending anxiety through an array of Western classics that intersect with her writing, instead of having her talent belligerently pitted against them. In so doing, influence may be said to wield a liberating impact, rather than being the source of a writer's anxiety and incapacitation. In contradistinction to Bloom's theory of influence, Kristeva's notion of intertextuality may be said to offer an apt lens through which Nafisi's memoir can be read.

The memoir chronicles Nafisi's life in Iran from the time of the 1979 revolution until the year 1997. Being the daughter of a well-established secular family, Nafisi left Iran when she was thirteen to study in Europe and the United States. In the wake of the overthrow of Mohammad Reza Shah, she returned to Iran as a professor of English language and literature, to leave again when she and her family emigrated to the United States in 1997 (Rastegar)². Through her classes, Nafisi takes us back to her teaching career at university during a time of turbulent revolutionary politics (Kamran). Teaching at university in the Islamic Republic, Nafisi explains, "like any other vocation, was subservient to politics and subject to arbitrary rules. Always the joy of teaching was marred by diversions and considerations forced on them by the regime" (*Reading* 10). Distraught at the repressive measures enforced by the government she wonders: "how well could one teach when the main concern of university officials was not the quality of one's work, but the colour of one's lips, the subversive potential of a single strand

of hair?" (11). Since Iran's history serves as an indispensable context for Nafisi's memoir, and in many ways is the spark that ignited her endeavour to denounce the totalitarianism of the Islamic government in her text, it becomes essential to highlight some decisive events in the history of Iran. A brief historical overview will ensue right after the following explanation of this paper's critical framework.

According to the Bloomian paradigm, "[i]nfluence-anxieties are embedded in the agonistic basis of all imaginative literature" (Bloom xxiv). In other words, Bloom sees the influence-induced anxiety as tantamount to the process of literary creation, eventually concluding that literary influence is necessarily an act of "misinterpretation" (30); which is far from what Nafisi does in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Bloom's influence theory, outlined in his *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973), explains his view of how major writers gain aesthetic power in a manner that renders them susceptible to an incurable state of anxiety. Bloom's book maintains that the anxiety of influence cannot be evaded, neither by poets/writers nor by readers and critics. In Bloom's viewpoint, literary influence always proceeds by "a misreading of the prior poet, an act ... that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation" (Bloom 30). According to Bloom, the "later poet[writer]" (5), or the "ephebe" (66), misreads and overwrites the text of his/her literary "precursor", in order to "clear [an] imaginative space" for himself/herself and attain aesthetic power (5). In this case, the anxiety of influence comes out of "a complex act of misreading, a creative interpretation" or what he calls "poetic misprision" (xxiii). To attain the stature of a successful writer, or a "major figure", Bloom theorizes that a poet/writer must be endowed with the "persistence to wrestle with a strong precursor, even to the death" (5). It thus takes the writer-to-be an arduous journey to cover this debt and eventually forge the targeted "imaginative space". Bloom gives the example of Oscar Wilde as a failed poet because he lacked strength to overcome his anxiety of influence (5). He even refers to the Victorian disciples of Keats such as Tennyson, Arnold, Hopkins and Rossetti as "misinterpreters" (12).

Based on this consensus, aesthetic power results from an agonizing battle against a literary "precursor", and literary influence becomes "a history of anxiety" (Bloom 30). This lends credence to the view that the "language Harold Bloom employs in his theory of literary influence promotes a reading of texts as enactments of a struggle for power" (Jensen 58). Bloom further defines influence as "a metaphor...that implicates a matrix of relationships –imagistic, temporal, spiritual, psychological" (xxiii). Anxiety is thus the byproduct of the act of misreading that the "later" poets/writers engage in when they are influenced by

their predecessors: "What writers may experience as anxiety, what their works are compelled to manifest, are the consequence of poetic misprision, rather than the cause of it" (xxiii). Any attempt to read a poem on its own is thus dismissed by Bloom as a fruitless endeavour, and accordingly he proposes the following: "Let us give up the failed enterprise of seeking to understand any single poem as an entity in itself. Let us pursue instead the quest of learning to read any poem as its poet's deliberate misrepresentation, as a poet, of a precursor poem or of poetry in general" (43).

To further explain what he means by anxiety, Bloom contends: "Anxiety of influence does not so much concern the forerunner but rather is an anxiety achieved in or by the story, novel, play, poem or essay...the strong poem is the achieved anxiety" (xxiii). If this means anything, it emphasizes that the poet/writer hardly ever overcomes his/her anxiety. Even after the poem or the literary work sees the light of day, it becomes an embodiment of this anxiety. This is clear in the Bloomian assertion that "[e]very poem is a misinterpretation of a parent poem. A poem is not an overcoming of anxiety, but is that anxiety (95).

Central to Bloom's theory of influence is also his hypothesis that when poets are influenced by others, they tend to follow certain patterns of development in relation to their predecessors. Bloom calls the six patterns "revisionary ratios" (14), and takes them as manifestations of the anxiety of influence and the strained relationship between the ephebe and the precursor. The book itself covers the six methods of poetic misprision, with a chapter devoted to each, besides a summary of them in the introduction. Briefly put, Clinamen is what he means by poetic misreading proper, but with a swerve in the ephebe's work, indicating that the precursor is correct only up to a certain point until the ephebe takes over and makes a swerve (Bloom 14). Tessera, "completion and antithesis", is the second revisionary ratio and is meant by Bloom to connote that an ephebe antithetically completes the precursor's work by retaining its meaning, but in a manner that indicates another sense (14). As for Kenosis, the third revisionary model, it connotes "a movement toward discontinuity with the precursor" as if the poet tries to empty out the poetic afflatus of the precursor (14-15). Following is Daemonization (or the Counter-Sublime) wherein "the later poet opens himself to what he believes to be a power in the parent poem that does not belong to the parent proper, but to a range of being just beyond the precursor" (15). Askesis, the fifth revisionary model, is a movement of self-purgation, whereby the ephebe's revisionary movement "curtains" both his own and the precursor's. Accordingly, "the later poet yields up part of his human and imaginative

endowment, so as to separate himself from others, including the precursor" (15). Finally, Apophrades, or "the return of the dead", is when the later poet makes the conscious effort of holding his own poem open to that of the precursor, creating the "uncanny effect" that the later poet seemed to have written the precursor's work, rather than vice versa (15-16).

These ratios, in simple terms, are meant by Bloom to reiterate that "tradition is a chain of identical, noninstinctual behaviours that have been repeated after the same antecedent conditions" (Drout 21)³. In others words, poets/writers tend to follow certain patterns of development in relation to their predecessors, rendering the relationship between literary texts rather strained since it is inescapably fraught with influence-anxiety. In a statement resonating with Freudian terms, Bloom states that "the anxiety of influence is so terrible because it is both a kind of separation anxiety and the beginning of a compulsion neurosis, or fear of a death" (58). In Freud's theory, separation from the mother, analogous to later castration anxiety, brings about tension that might escalate to trauma. Along similar lines, literary texts in the Bloomian paradigm are not produced by pleasure "but by the unpleasure of a dangerous situation, the situation of anxiety of which the grief of influence forms so large a part" (Jensen 58), and accordingly he sees the lifelong relation of ephebe to precursor as a case of neurosis (66).

In this belligerent context, not only is literary history turned into a battlefield, but tradition is also transformed into "a remorseless struggle for cultural survival, and the poem [or any literary text] into a mutilating act of self-defense" (Hortsmann 139). In short, Bloom's theory resonates with a ubiquitous sense of antagonism which renders the later poet's/writer's journey to artistic creation an arduous one. This is clearly evident in Bloom's assertion that "[e]very poet is a being caught up in a dialectical relationship (transference, repetition, error, communication) with another poet or poets" (Bloom 91); a relationship that is conducive to an incurable anxiety. Having done so, "the later poet is free to command his own voice, although the diligent reader may still be able to trace the precursor's influence upon the later figure's works" (Jensen 23). Not for once does the ephebe manage to break free from the impact wielded by the precursor, and this, in its turn, renders the precursor's work a perpetual source of anxiety and debilitation. Jensen accordingly explains Bloom's anxiety as "a tightrope walk between solipsism and artistic indebtedness [that] is so difficult to negotiate that it becomes a neurotic state..." (9-10).

In as much as the same way, and although they seek to rectify the inherent inequity of a patriarchal literary canon, Sandra Gilbert's and Susan Gubar's model

is fraught with a sense of anxiety that is even exacerbated in the case of a female writer. Anxiety in their seminal feminist text *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979), is one of authorship rather than of influence since the female writer is even bereft of a female precursor:

Thus the 'anxiety of influence' that a male poet experiences is felt by a female poet as an even more primary 'anxiety of authorship' — a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a 'precursor' the act of writing will isolate or destroy her.

This anxiety is, of course, exacerbated by her fear that not only can she not fight a male precursor on 'his' terms and win, she cannot 'beget' art upon the (female) body of the muse. (Gilbert and Gubar 48-49)

While the male writer's struggle against his precursor takes the form of what Bloom perceives as a misreading, "the female writer's battle for self-creation involves her in a revisionary process. Her battle, however, is not against her (male) precursor's reading of the world but against his reading of her" (49). On account of the patriarchal aspect of Bloom's model, Gilbert and Gubar dismiss it as incompatible with the female writer. Commenting on the inadequacy of the Bloomian paradigm they state:

Applying Freudian structures to literary genealogies, Bloom has postulated that the dynamics of literary history arise from the artist's 'anxiety of influence', his fear that he is not his own creator and that the works of his predecessors, existing before and beyond him, assume essential priority over his own writings. In fact, as we pointed out in our discussion of the metaphor of literary paternity, Bloom's paradigm of the sequential historical relationship between literary artists is the relationship of father and son, specifically that relationship as was defined by Freud. Thus Bloom explains that a 'strong poet' must engage in heroic warfare with his 'precursor' for, involved as he is in a literary Oedipal struggle, a man can only become a poet by somehow invalidating his poetic father. (46-47)

It thus becomes apparent that from the standpoint of the theory of influence posited by Bloom, and even by Gilbert and Gubar, hardly ever do writers overcome their anxieties.

In this vein, Nafisi's memoir may be more aptly viewed from the perspective of Kristeva's notion of intertextuality; that is, the way a text is comprised of "a permutation of texts, an intertextuality in the space of a given

text”, in which “several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another” (Kristeva, “Bounded” 36). Generally speaking, intertextuality envisages the text as an arena of disparate fragments of discourse. The term intertextuality was initially employed by poststructuralist theorists and critics in their attempt to disrupt notions of stable meaning and objective interpretation (Allen 3), but it is now more commonly associated with Kristeva who first used it in “The Word, Dialogue and the Novel” (1967), an article introducing the work of the theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. Although Bakhtin does not use the term intertextuality, it is, according to Kristeva, directly related to his theories. This largely goes back to the fact that he “sees prose fiction as a heterogeneous discourse, drawing on a multiplicity of different kinds of social speech” (Britton 144). Kristeva, taking Bakhtin’s theories as a springboard, defines the dynamic nature of the literary word in terms of two dimensions: the horizontal and the vertical. While in the former case “the word in the text belongs to both writing subject and addressee”; in the latter “the word in the text is oriented toward an anterior or synchronic literary corpus” (Kristeva, “Word” 66). In other words, the literary text is always permeated with resonances of other texts in a manner that vivifies it rather than being a source of anxiety for both the author and the readers. Based on this consensus, the relationship between the author and the reader, or to use Kristeva’s words borrowed from Bakhtin, the “writing subject” and the “addressee” (66), is always conjoined between the literary word in the text, and its prior existence in past literary texts. Accordingly, “[a]uthors communicate to readers at the same moment as their words or texts communicate the existence of past texts within them” (Allen 39). The locus of meeting between the horizontal and vertical axes of the text is the “work’s textual space...[which] leads on to a major redescription of Bakhtin’s theory of the dialogic text ...culminat[ing] in the new term, intertextuality” (39). The purpose of intertextual readings is thus “to discern textual intersections; to articulate creative and linguistic mediations” (Jensen 206).

An important point about intertextuality is that it is “a continuing process, and no one version has any absolute status” (Britton 151), since texts will continue to resonate with traces of other texts, and will simultaneously be used by other texts. It is in fact this “open-ended play between the text of the subject and the text of the addressee that underlies the Kristevan concept of intertextuality” (Moi 34). According to Kristeva, a text is an outcome of “a process of reading-writing; that [happens] through the practice of a signifying structure in relation or opposition to another structure” (“Word” 36). Kristeva also stresses the

importance of the potential dynamics that lay within the text since the text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations, “polyvalent and multidetermined” (36). In this regard, intertextuality presupposes that all texts are in a perpetual state of productivity, change and transformation; an emancipatory stance that serves as an apt structural girder for reading Nafisi’s memoir against the restrictive Iran of her own day.

For a very long time, monarchy and dynastic rule were the norm of political life in Iran. Of all the Iranian rulers, the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi is particularly remembered for his contribution to making Iran a modern nation-state. Proclaiming himself shah in 1926, he embarked on a well thought-out program to maintain domestic security, devoting particular attention to building up a professional army and to quelling any manifestation of tribal resistance or separatism⁴. In addition to curbing the power of the tribes, he sought to suppress the influence of the Shi’ite clergy, and to establish Westernized schools. As far as social change was concerned, Reza Shah’s greatest contribution was allowing women to infiltrate into the public sphere. In general, he believed that women should be educated; should have access to the workplace; and should have the same basic rights as men (Daniel 135-37; Foltz 97). It is worth mentioning that in 1934, a law was passed that forbade female students and teachers from wearing the chador⁵, to be later extended to many other public facilities until he banned the veil altogether in 1936. Needless to say, the liberation of women was opposed by the Shi’ite clergy, and most male politicians (Daniel 137)⁶.

Although his progressive measures rendered Iran a modern state, this came at the expense of an autocratic rule. Reza Shah was intolerant of dissenters and took great lengths to punish those who dared to exhibit any signs of defiance. “He was... a military dictator, and his approach to running the nation resembled not so much Atatürk’s as that of another of his contemporaries, Adolf Hitler, whom he frankly admired” (Foltz 97). In the 1930s, and the years leading up to the Second World War, Reza Shah adopted a pro-German policy and sought to cement extensive political and economic relations with Germany. Inevitably this put him at odds with both Britain and the Soviet Union, ultimately resulting in a joint invasion of Iran in 1941, after which he was deposed and exiled to South Africa where he died. In his lieu, his inexperienced son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi became shah when he was only twenty-one years old (Daniel 141; Foltz 98).

The reign of Mohammad Reza (1941–1979) witnessed a plethora of dramatic changes:

During the early postwar period young Mohammad Reza initially showed himself to be more cautious and more accommodating than his father, both at home and abroad. His attitude toward the clergy was markedly more open, while the educated classes, freed from the iron-fisted rule of Reza Shah, began to agitate for a more functional parliamentary democracy. (Foltz 100)

Much to his consternation, many of his father's accomplishments seemed to have gone awry: foreign troops encroached on Iranian territories; ethnic separatism was rekindled; tribalism became rampant; the economy was in shambles; and a host of suppressed politicians reasserted their mettle with an agenda for revenge, among many other setbacks. One impending threat came from the released communists, who with the help of the Soviet Union, formed the Tudeh Party (Daniel 143-44). On the other hand, the shah took some coercive measures, using an aborted attempt at his assassination as a pretext, to declare martial law and to circumscribe the power of religious militants, communists, and other opponents.

Pertinent to the burgeoning nationalist sentiments of the time was an ever-increasing demand to obtain a higher share of Iran's oil revenues, controlled back then by the British-owned Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. The Iranian Parliament voted to nationalize the oil industry, and the newly appointed prime minister Mohammad Mosaddeq, carried out the nationalization process (Afkhami 320). In the name of nationalism, Mosaddeq went as far as cutting off diplomatic relations with Britain on the grounds that it was interfering in Iran's internal affairs. During that time the National Front rallied supporters to call for abolishing the monarchy, and Tudeh demonstrators tore down statues of Reza Shah and demanded the creation of a republic. Throughout this decade, Iran adhered to a pro-Western and anti-communist policy, and a domestic security apparatus, SAVAK, was formed to circumvent any opposition. Generally speaking, the shah's policy was underlain by the support he got from the United States (Daniel 156).

In 1963, the shah introduced a series of reforms that came to be known as the White Revolution or the Revolution of the Shah and the People. Among the most significant of these reforms was a land redistribution plan, according to which the government purchased land from wealthy landlords and resold it at a reduced price to the peasants who farmed it. Other important issues on the shah's agenda for reform were: women's suffrage⁷, workers' rights, industrialization, and modernization (Afkhami 320). The establishment of women's suffrage in 1963 was a highly contentious issue that sparked an outcry, particularly from religious conservatives who saw it as an unacceptable precedent. In the meantime,

Ayatollah Khomeini, one of the high-ranking clerics, was rising in popularity for his willingness to denounce the shah's policy. Nonetheless, he was arrested as he was rallying demonstrations against the shah, to be sent to exile the following year, first to Turkey, and then to the holy Shi'ite city of Najaf in Iraq. Contrary to expectations, "[t]his decision proved to have the opposite effect from what was intended, however, since Khomeini was then free to denounce the shah's policies from a safe distance outside the country. This he did for the next fourteen years, with catastrophic consequences for the shah" (Foltz 103).

From the mid-1960s on, politics in Iran revolved completely around the will of the shah who declared an embargo on oil sales to the West, leading to an exponential rise in the price of oil overnight. Moreover, he created a single political party which people were forced to join and which was intended to rally mass support for him (Foltz 1 107). An important event that attracted public attention in 1967 was the formal coronation of the shah, which coincided with his forty-eighth birthday and took place twenty-six years into his reign. On the very same occasion, he crowned his wife Farah Diba as empress⁸.

During the mid-1970s the shah developed cancer, which he kept secret from the public. At the same time his popularity was constantly on the wane, ultimately leading to the revolution that ended his reign. This era was punctuated by massive demonstrations against the shah and his policy. Between 1975 and 1978 political unrest was exacerbated by an economic crisis that beset the country, and which was mismanaged by the shah, not to mention the ever-increasing criticism of his obliviousness to human rights (Daniel 165). Events escalated with the publication of an anonymous article in an official newspaper insulting the character of Khomeini. This led to riots that resulted in a number of deaths, setting in motion a cycle of demonstrations every forty days⁹.

Public ire reached its nadir when a terrorist attack targeted the Rex Cinema in a poor district of Abadan. The Islamists and the secret police were both suspected to be behind it. Even more atrocious was the breaking out of a fire, which was later shown to have been set by an Islamic militant, leading to the death of four hundred and twenty-two people when the doors of the cinema were locked from the outside (Daniel 165-69; Foltz 108). The shah's attempt at pacifying the people fanned the already burning flames of their anger, eventually culminating in what came to be known as Black Friday; a massive demonstration in defiance of the decree of martial law. It turned atrociously violent after marchers called for the ousting of the shah and the return of Khomeini (Daniel 169; Foltz 108)¹⁰. Ayatollah Khomeini, still in Iraq, seized this opportunity: "[H]e capitalized on the

public's growing outrage by making ever more incendiary speeches.... His messages found a widening audience among leftist and even secular members of the opposition, as well as some Western intellectuals such as the French philosopher Michel Foucault" (Foltz 108). Although the shah appointed a member of the opposition, Shapur Bakhtiar, to the post of prime minister, the situation was too chaotic to be amended. Seriously ill with cancer, the shah left the country on January 16, 1979, never to return¹¹. His death in 1980 marked the end of The Pahlavi Dynasty, along with Iran's tradition of monarchy stretching back more than twenty-five centuries.

The end of the Pahlavi Dynasty marked the beginning of a new era in the history of Iran: The Islamic Revolution and the beginning of the Islamic Republic. It is particularly this timeframe that Nafisi focuses on in charting her physical, mental and emotional odyssey in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. After fourteen years of exile, Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran in 1979. Khomeini was a highly enigmatic figure, which made it easier for him to rally supporters and consolidate his rule. Even before assuming power over Iran, his political and religious tendencies could be evinced in his first published work *Kashf al-Asrar (Unveiling of Secrets 1943)*, often regarded as an early indictment of the Pahlavi Dynasty. The importance of the book lies in the way it portends his vision for Iran¹², which is what Nafisi debunks in her memoir. Even after his arrest and exile, he continued to wield a pervasive impact on his supporters through his speeches and manifestos in which he expressed his opposition to everything the Pahlavi regime did.

In addition to his attack on the government, and his denigration of land reform and the franchise for women, "Khomeini took up the venerable juridical concept of *velayat-e faqih* ... and held that true Islamic government was the collective duty of the Islamic jurists (foqaha)" (Daniel 180). The revived Islamic law also put into practice some new restrictive measures such as the stoning to death of married men or women convicted of adultery; the allowance of unilateral divorce for men, but for women only by mutual consent or by court decision; and the treatment of women as of half the worth of men in court testimony and inheritance rights, among many others (Keddie). Not long afterwards, Khomeini set up a provisional administration led by Mehdi Bazargan. In order to curb any potential menaces to the revolution, the new government formed its own military body; the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps, known as the IRGC. A new constitution was subsequently drafted, but absolute power resided in the hands of Khomeini (Foltz 110-112).

Khomeini's rise to power happened against a backdrop of chaos, civil disorder, and kangaroo trials and executions of those who were suspected of allegiance to the Pahlavi regime. A blatant manifestation of the havoc that overran the country was what had happened following the admission of the shah to the United States for medical treatment in October 1979 and which came to be known as the "hostage crisis". This resulted in a barrage of demonstrations in Iran, encouraged and supported by Khomeini. On 4 November, a group of radical students affiliated with the Islamic Associations of the University of Tehran seized control of the American Embassy, taking fifty-two US diplomats hostage for four hundred and forty-four days. The students pledged not to relinquish the embassy or release the hostages until the shah was returned to Iran for trial (Daniel 190-91; Foltz 112). This "crisis" had far-reaching consequences as can be evinced in the way it "caused a permanent rift in Iran-US relations, with successive governments in each of the two countries casting the other as the quintessential enemy and source of evil in the world. The United States was labeled 'the Great Satan', and Iranians were encouraged to tread on American flags painted on the ground" (Foltz 112).

The United States finally made a formal break of diplomatic relations with Iran to be subsequently followed by an economic embargo. When it attempted to rescue the hostages through a clandestine military operation, it ended in a tragic disaster: "a key helicopter broke down, security was compromised when an Iranian bus passed by the landing site, and a transport plane collided with a helicopter, creating a huge explosion and killing eight American servicemen" (Daniel 198). This furnished Khomeini with a most apt opportunity to purge the military and government of any opponents and build up his own security apparatus (199). Khomeini also spared no effort to ban most of the country's political parties, with the exception of the Islamic Republic Party IRP he himself had formed, Bazargan's FMI, and the leftist Tudeh and Feda'i parties¹³. Eventually, Abo'l-Hasan Bani Sadr, the first president for the Islamic Republic, was elected in January 1980 (Foltz 112).

A prime concern for Khomeini was to export Iran's Islamic Revolution to countries that had a large Shi'ite population. Iraq, the country where he spent his fourteen-year exile, was also targeted by him, and Iraqi president Saddam Hussein was apprehensive that Iran would export its revolution by stirring up trouble among the Iraqi Shi'ite population (Daniel 203; Foltz 113). To stave off this menace, and using the pretext of an extant border dispute¹⁴, Saddam Hussein ordered the invasion of Iran on September 22, 1980. Much to his dismay, the Iraqi

invasion resulted not only in inciting support for Iran, but also in finding a plausible justification for the eradication of internal opposition (Foltz 113). On the other hand, this invasion was the spark that ignited the firestorm that would last for almost eight years and that would claim countless lives. An entire generation of young men were forced to take part in this bitter war. In addition, food staples were rationed, and people in Tehran and other Iranian cities lived under the daily threat of bombardments and blackouts (Daniel 202; Foltz 114).

When the UN Security Council called for a cease-fire, the Iraqis, realizing they had underestimated Iran's military power, exhibited a willingness to consider it, while Iran flatly rejected it¹⁵. As far as Iran's internal affairs were concerned, the clerics had by then taken full control of the war effort and the government. After 1984, economic setbacks increased by leaps and bounds. In addition to the costs of the war itself, the economy suffered from slumping oil prices. From 1980 to 1982, Iran witnessed a "cultural revolution"; that is, an organized tendency to Islamize society by "closing universities, putting more Islamic content in the school curriculum, replacing existing civil law with law based on Islamic jurisprudence, and creating a 'Bureau for Combating Corruption' to stamp out petty vices and enforce Islamic mores" (Daniel 212). This aspect of the revolution particularly took its toll on people like Nafisi and her students as this paper will endeavour to show. Khomeini's issuing of the "December Decree" in 1982 relatively alleviated some of these strictures, pledging to protect the individual. Accordingly, the universities were reopened, travelling abroad was facilitated, and Iranians who had fled the country were granted the freedom to return home. Nonetheless, this was only a prelude to a more restrictive era that witnessed a compelling emphasis on purging the country of foreign cultural influences (Daniel 212). Given the ambient turbulence, it was no surprise that the status of women became more contentious than ever before. To take one notorious example of many inequities, the Islamic Dress Law was passed in 1981, mandating veiling in public. Other restrictions imposed on women included:

Clerical support for polygamy, the practice of temporary marriage (*mota* or *sigheh*), child marriage, arranged marriage, easy divorce for men and difficult divorce for women, and so on. The state even intervened in matters of women's reproductive rights, first by limiting birth control in order to increase the population for the struggle against Iraq and 'imperialism', and then, faced with the consequences of a spiraling population, making birth control almost a mandatory duty. (Daniel 213)

Shortly before Khomeini's death, he had appointed Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as his successor¹⁶. Khomeini also transferred command of the armed forces to Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the leader of a pragmatist faction that foresaw the repercussions of the ongoing war and dwelt on the imperative of a cease-fire. The depletion in Iran's military equipment, coupled with the United States escalating its actions against Iran made the proposed cease-fire a necessity. The Iran-Iraq war finally came to a halt in 1988 and Khomeini died the following year to be succeeded by Rafsanjani as president (Daniel 215-16).

Rafsanjani's reign witnessed a plethora of cultural achievements and, surprisingly, the 1990s were marked by an unprecedented surge in Iranian cinema and film industry. The short-lived loosening of the iron grip in which Iran was held was attributed to the moderate cleric Mohammad Khatami, who served as Minister of Culture from 1982 to 1992, then became president in 1997. His election as president ushered in an era of progressive measures and led to drastic changes in Iran's social and political climate, marked by an accommodating acceptance of the West. Combatting intolerance also topped his agenda. Generally speaking, under Khatami's rule, from 1997 to 2005, women's organizations multiplied, including the formation of non-governmental organizations in many spheres¹⁷ (Keddie). Moreover, "independent newspapers began to flourish, modern art galleries thrived, and trendy cafés proliferated, while novels and films explored controversial subjects such as prostitution, government corruption, and drug abuse" (Foltz 117). Much to the detriment of the country, Khatami was met with opposition from conservative forces. Even worse, in early 2002 President George W. Bush "branded Iran a member of the axis of evil even as Iran was quietly assisting the United States against al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan...[which] undermined Khatami's support within the country" (118). The fact that many boycotted subsequent local and national elections, allowed Mahmud Ahmadinejad, to win the presidency in 2005 and to herald once again another restrictive era in Iranian history¹⁸.

In the case of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, contrary to the Bloomian model that enfeebles poets/writers when they turn to already extant literary works, Nafisi gains liberation from this oppressive milieu only by recourse to the works of her precursors, weaving them structurally and thematically, in a Kristevan manner, into the very fabric of her memoir. Nafisi does not seek aesthetic power by wrestling with her precursors; instead she is empowered by the act of reading their works. In her case, it is never an act of misinterpretation; rather it is an act of appropriation that offers her an intertextual haven. Instead of positing these texts

as catalysts that spark her anxiety, she proves to be utilizing them as a coping mechanism. Inspired by other writers' works and characters, the first and last sections, "Lolita" and "Austen", describe the secret book club Nafisi held from 1995 to 1997 with seven of her female students, focusing on how their freedom was quelled by the regime. The second section, "Gatsby", focuses on the aftermath of the revolution and the ideological battles that ensued in Nafisi's classroom and the universities in general. As for the third part, "James", it describes the period of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88) and the consolidation of the new regime. The seven young women who meet clandestinely at Nafisi's house set out to discuss Western literature that was considered counter-revolutionary by the Islamic Republic¹⁹:

The home space permits the re-appropriation of language and the production of self-representations, essential twin steps in the construction and affirmation of selfhood. In the interstitial space created by the interplay between the domestic locus and the reading of literature, Nafisi hints at the possibility of reaching self-awareness and intellectual freedom. (Corbella)

In selecting her students, Nafisi is totally indifferent to their ideological backgrounds; an "achievement", as she later on recognizes, to have "such a mixed group, with different and at times conflicting backgrounds, personal as well as religious and social" (Nafisi, *Reading* 11). Some come from conservative and religious families; others are progressive and secular; and several have even spent time in jail²⁰. Along the lines of intertextuality, their disparate ideologies may be said to reject the categorical unity Kristeva dismisses: the literary word [is] an intersection of textual surfaces, rather than a point (a fixed meaning)" (Kristeva, "Word" 36). In effect, Nafisi's subversive book club may be said to provide a pulpit through which they commemorate the liberating impact of the canonical literary texts they resort to; it is an accommodating milieu where Nafisi and her female students divest themselves of their government-mandated "black robes and head scarves" (Nafisi, *Reading* 5), to savour "harmless works of fiction" (3). Describing the literary works they read as "harmless" implicitly sheds light on the precarious state of affairs of the time, and shows how the mundane act of reading a literary text suffices to hazard a person's safety. In addition, the act of ridding themselves of an enforced garb represents not only a means of liberation, but more importantly a vehicle for self-actualization; "they took off more than their scarves and robes. Gradually, each one gained an outline and a shape, becoming her own inimitable self" (6). Taking off their veils becomes even a riotous act given the strictures of the time: "Modesty and chastity are conflated in the Islamic notion of

female virtue. Veiling is its instrument” (Khosravi 39). In her memoir, Nafisi expresses her dismay saying: “I was finally reminded that this was an Islamic country and windows needed to be dressed” (7). Against this backdrop, Nafisi’s recourse to reading pre-existing texts is palpably bereft of the Bloomian anxiety. It is rather a therapeutic undertaking that provides a hiatus from the coercive measures adopted by the government. This can be evidenced when she withdraws into the realm of literature proclaiming: “Reality has become so intolerable... so bleak, that all I can paint now are the colours of my dreams This class was the colour of my dreams” (*Reading* 11).

Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955) is the first book Nafisi chooses, after which the first part of the memoir is entitled, proclaiming it as “the work of fiction that would most resonate with [their] lives in the Islamic Republic of Iran” (*Reading* 3). The very same point is also expressed by Nafisi when once being interviewed:

Of all the novels we read, *Lolita* was the most metaphorical of the situation in Iran. 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*. (“Last”)

Right from the outset, and against the totalitarianism of the Islamic Republic, Nafisi may be viewed as structuring her memoir along Kristeva’s intertextual strategy, characterized as it is by an opposition to any unitary discourse that claims to possess an indisputable truth. Since Kristeva’s “intertextuality presents a plurality of meanings and embodies the constant change of meanings emerging in society” (Vargova 424), it can thus be viewed as vivifying Nafisi’s aim to write about “how *Lolita* gave a different colour to Tehran and how Tehran helped redefine Nabokov’s novel, turning it into this *Lolita*, [their] *Lolita*” (Nafisi, *Reading* 6). The fact that there are multiple facets to a precursor’s literary work undermines Bloom’s conviction that viewing a canonical text/figure from multifarious perspectives begets “redundant operations” (Bloom xxv). Taking Shakespeare as an example, he states: “Historizing, politicizing and even feminizing Shakespeare—all are redundant operations. Shakespeare always was there before us” (xxv). In Nafisi’s text, Nabokov, and all the other writers she resorts to, are “all there before [them]” to transform the memoir from a text into an intertext. In Kristevan terms, “literary structure does not simply exist, but is

generated in relation to another structure" ("Word" 35-36). This is what Nafisi does by linking her own experience in Tehran to Nabokov's *Lolita*, whereby it becomes "[their] Lolita", not just Nabokov's. Through intertextuality, *Lolita*, a novel about sexual obsession, is transmuted into an indictment of totalitarianism in revolutionary Tehran. In more general terms, "the politics of any book can change depending on the time and place...[of] a reader...which is why a canonical literary work that in one setting is deemed conservative can, in another setting, prove seditious" (De Paul). Canonical works can thus be embraced, emulated or even contested.

Instead of viewing Nafisi's recourse to Nabokov's novel as "misprision" or "misinterpretation" as Bloom would perceive it, it may be better viewed in terms of Kristeva's belief that authors do not write texts from their own original minds, but rather compile them from pre-existent texts, so that, a text becomes "a permutation of texts" (Kristeva, "Bounded" 36). Embracing literature as a coping mechanism, the living room where Nafisi meets with her students "becomes a place of transgression. What a wonderland it [is]!" (Nafisi, *Reading* 8). Nowhere is the liberating impact of others' literary works more fully expressed than in Nafisi's words: "We were, to borrow from Nabokov, to experience how the ordinary pebble of ordinary life could be transformed into a jewel through the magic eye of fiction" (8). Rather than positing the precursor and the ephebe as two antithetical entities operating in a hostile atmosphere as Bloom suggests, Nafisi's words lend credence to the transformative power of appropriating others' literary works. This power is enhanced when pitted against a highly repressive background: "Life in the Islamic Republic was as capricious as the month of April, when short periods of sunshine would suddenly give way to showers and storms. It was unpredictable" (9).

The drabness of life under the authoritarianism of the Islamic Republic is indicted by Manna, one of Nafisi's articulate students, in her proclamation: "The Islamic Republic coarsened my taste in colours" (14). Very much like Nafisi herself, she can only find consolation and be vivified through literature, as she proceeds to explain: "I feel too greedy for colours to see them in carefully chosen words of poetry" (14). Based on the consensus that "literature... can be studied in its capacity to contain, maintain, and create human experience (Alber et al. 15), Manna can only live vicariously through the colourful language of literature. Because of its liberating effect, this language is akin to Kristeva's assertion that "within the interior space of the text as well as within the space of texts, poetic language is double" ("Word" 40). The language of literature is thus an

accommodating language that runs counter to the bigoted and unitary discourse of the government. The government's repressive discourse forces people to perform their day-to-day activities stealthily, as Nassrin explains: "Can we tell the Revolutionary Guards the truth? We lie to them; we hide our satellite dishes. We tell them we don't have illegal books and alcohol in our houses" (Nafisi, *Reading* 17). Although Bloom suggests the idea of duality, but in his case it is a "miserable" one: "No modern poet is unitary.... Modern poets [and by implication writers] are necessarily miserable dualists" (Bloom 35).

Vis-à-vis this unaccommodating milieu, the realm of literature offers an alternative mode of existence predicated in the first place on being engaged with extant literary texts. Paying tribute to the liberating potential of literature Nafisi states that fiction becomes the sole reality amid "everyday living":

The everyday things--things that you think of as real or concrete--are taken away from you. The way you dress and the way you walk out of the door, all this becomes public.... And you do things indoors that in other places you would ordinarily do out of doors: you take off your makeup to go out, and you come inside to put your makeup on. Reality--everyday living--had become unreal. Fiction became real. ("Last")

The strained relationship between the precursor and the writer/poet-to-be is markedly lacking in this regard. Nafisi's explanation of the purpose of the class may be said to support this point: "to read, discuss, and respond to works of fiction" (*Reading* 18). To "respond" to these works of fiction serves a twofold purpose: Firstly, it proposes an alternative to Bloom's claim of misinterpretation and misprision of precursors' literary works. Secondly, the very act of "responding" conjures up the Bakhtinian notion of dialogue which Kristeva appropriates, and which suggests acceptance of opposition. According to Kristeva, "Bakhtin was one of the first to replace the static hewing out of texts with a model where literary structure does not simply exist but is generated in relation to another structure" ("Word" 35). This obviously introduces a liberating discourse in contradistinction to the uncompromising attitude of the Islamic Republic. What Nafisi does in this class with her students is that she appropriates literary texts and makes them relatable to their own experience in the Islamic Republic. Not only are these texts woven into the very structure of her memoir, but they intersect with their real life experiences. She accordingly asks her students to bring "a private diary, in which [they] would record [their] responses to the novels, as well as ways in which these works and their discussions related

to their personal and social experience" (*Reading* 18). Accordingly, Bloom's assertion that "the largest truth of literary influence is that it is an irresistible anxiety" (xviii), is undermined in Nafisi's project. In her case, literary influence inspires, propels forward and consoles. At the same time, the different and often conflicting experiences and ideologies documented by each of the students in their diaries render Nafisi's class a set of inter-related texts. In a broader sense, the memoir itself typifies the intertextual assumption that every text is related to other texts, and that these relations are indispensable for the generation of the text's meaning. Furthermore, it may be said to exemplify Kristeva's view of "the nondisjunctive nature of the novel" ("Bounded" 47). Kristeva explains this nature as "an agreement of deviations" according to which "opposing arguments" are "concatenated without any major imperative putting an end to their juxtaposition" ("Bounded" 51-52). Inevitably, accepting difference was one thing the Islamic Republic did not condone.

Before she delves deeper into Nabokov's novel, Nafisi brings to her class a copy of *A Thousand and One Nights*. In so doing, she not only enhances the intertextual nature of her memoir, but, as De Paul suggests: "seems to suggest a parallel between the virgins saved from the king through Scheherazade's storytelling and the young female readers whom Nafisi hopes to rescue through *Lolita* and other stories". A very different kind of influence from the one promulgated by Bloom can be discerned in bringing the character of Scheherazade to bear on the plight of Nafisi and her female students. According to Nafisi, she "breaks the cycle of violence by choosing to embrace different terms of engagement. She fashions her universe not through physical force, as does the king, but through imagination and reflection" (*Reading* 19). Therefore, in the context introduced by Nafisi, a preceding literary work serves to imbue the students with inspiration. Nafisi even links Scheherazade to the character of Cincinnatus in Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading* (1935), very much like the way intertextuality foregrounds connections between a literary text and a broader cultural continuum. This aspect of intertextuality is explained by Graham Allan in his famous book *Intertextuality* (2000) as follows: "The systems, codes and traditions of other art forms and of culture in general are also crucial to the meaning of a work of literature" (1). Unlike the Bloomian model, appropriating a precursor's work or being influenced by already existing characters are bereft of the enmity that underpins relations of influence.

In addition to *Lolita* and *Invitation to Beheading*, Nafisi brings to both her memoir and class Nabokov's *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941), *Bend*

Sister (1947), his memoir *Speak, Memory* (1951), *Ada* (1959), and *Look at the Harlequins* (1974), among many others. She also keeps referring to works by canonical figures such as Shakespeare, Flaubert, Joyce and Bellow, to name only a few. A wide array of canonical literary texts is also brought to bear on Nafisi's class such as *Hamlet* (1603), *Emma* (1815), *Madame Bovary* (1856), and *Anna Karenina* (1878), among many others. Even when she does not directly quote from these texts, she uses them as springboards. In so widening the intertextual contours of her memoir, Nafisi cements the ties between their own predicament in Iran and that of other victimized characters in different cultural contexts. Nafisi obviously does not "wrestle", in a Bloomian manner (Bloom 5), with Nabokov when she writes her memoir along the lines of this connection. On the contrary, it is a means of salvaging them from the totalitarian regime of post-revolutionary Iran:

Those of us living in the Islamic Republic of Iran grasped both the tragedy and absurdity of the cruelty to which we were subjected. We had to poke fun at our misery in order to survive....This was one reason that art and literature became so essential to our lives: they were not a luxury but a necessity. What Nabokov captured was the texture of life in a totalitarian society. (Nafisi, *Reading* 23)

Instead of Bloom's influence-induced anxiety, "a special bond with Nabokov" is established (23); one that even "went deeper than [their] identification with his themes" (24). This bond, a byproduct of intertextuality, definitely precludes Bloom's revisionary ratios.

Similar bonds are forged with other literary works and canonical texts in an attempt to "survive" the iron-hand of the Islamic Republic, and it is through those intertextual bonds that Nafisi manages to structure her memoir, rendering her text "a productivity" (Kristeva, "Bounded" 36), rather than a replica of the dominant discourse of absolutism. What makes it a daring undertaking is the fact that she had to grapple with the fetters of a dictatorial regime to able to, using Bloom's words, "clear [an] imaginative space for [herself]" (5):

We lived in a culture that denied any merit to literary works, considering them important only when they were handmaidens to something seemingly more urgent—namely ideology. This was a country where all gestures, even the most private, were interpreted in political terms. The colours of my head scarf or my father's tie were symbols of Western decadence and imperialist tendencies. Not wearing a beard, shaking hands with members of the opposite sex,

clapping or whistling in public meetings were likewise considered western and therefore decadent. (Nafisi, *Reading* 25)

Unlike the Bloomian model, it is not “wrestling” with literary precursors that is conducive to anxiety (Bloom 5), rather it is wrestling with a totalitarian regime that engenders anxiety, frustration and hopelessness.

Although the absolutism of the regime is unanimous, it takes its toll particularly on women. In expressing their predicament, Nafisi writes: “[T]he 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...” (*Reading* 27). A blatant example of how women are victimized is the appalling experience faced by Sanaz when she and five of her girlfriends go on vacation. Although they are all dressed in conformity with the strict dress code enforced by the government, “the morality squads” approach them with their guns, claiming to have received “a report of illegal activities” (Nafisi, *Reading* 72). Making fun of their “Western attitudes”, they are subjected to “virginity tests”, forced to sign “confessions” and sentenced to twenty-five lashes for unfounded accusations of breaching codes of morality (72-74). Their experience is only a specimen of the excesses of this despotic regime: “During the Revolution all emblems of Western popular culture were attacked as symptoms of impurity. Cinemas, nightclubs, discos, luxury restaurants, liquor stores, bars, music studios, malls were burned down or closed” (Khosravi 19).

Pitted against a tyrannical regime that tightens its grip on women, literature asserts its power as not only a liberating force, but even a life-saving one. “It is amazing how, when all possibilities seem to be taken away from you, the minutest opening can become a great freedom”, Nafisi proclaims (*Reading* 28). Freedom seeps through their lives only by dint of the literary texts they read and write about; that is, through the network of textual links that Nafisi brings to bear on both her memoir and her class. Bloom’s proclamation that “danger” comes from others’ poems/texts is thus subverted (59). In Nafisi’s case, “danger” is only evaded through the corpus of canonical figures/texts they resort to:

When a revolution happens, you lose control of reality. Everything you take for granted is taken away from you. Through fiction, you reassert your control over reality. You tell it your way. Everyone talks about the political repression of the Islamic Republic. But for me, the confiscation of ordinary life was what mattered. When they come into your bedroom, when they tell you how to hold hands, what to watch, what lipstick to wear, you become obsessed with the people intruding

into your life. You go back more and more to the sense of uniqueness and the individuality that's in each of us. Fiction reasserts that individuality. (Nafisi, "Last")

It is worth clarifying that although literature seems to offer a haven for them, this does not mean that it isolates them in an ivory tower, totally oblivious to the state of affairs in their country. Paradoxical as it may sound, it inexorably enhances their perception of reality, as Nafisi explains:

The novels were an escape from reality in the sense that we could marvel at their beauty and perfection, and leave aside our stories about the deans, and the university and the morality squads in the streets. There was a certain innocence with which we read these books; we read them apart from our own history and expectations.... This innocence paid off: I do not think that without it we could have understood our own inarticulateness. Curiously, the novels we escaped into led us finally to question and prod our own realities about which we felt to helplessly speechless. (*Reading* 38-39)

This leads Nafisi to reiterate the universality of the experiences they are exposed to: "I want to emphasize once more that we were not Lolita, the Ayatollah was not Humbert and this republic was not what Humbert called his principedom by the sea. Lolita was not a critique of the Islamic Republic, but it went against the grain of all totalitarian perspectives" (35). In another instance, she writes about the connection between Lolita and Iran: "The truth of Iran's past became as immaterial to those who appropriated it as the truth of Lolita's to Humbert. It became immaterial in the same way Lolita's truth...must lose color before Humbert one's obsession, his desire to turn a twelve-year-old unruly child into his mistress" (37). Lolita's tragedy then, is "not the rape of a twelve-year-old by a dirty old man but the confiscation of one individual's life by another" (33).

Unlike what Bloom refers to as the "antithetical relation" that "holds rival poems/[texts] together and yet keeps them apart" (61), a subtle affinity is forged between Nafisi's memoir and all the literary texts she mentions. Likewise, her discussions of *Lolita* with her students are always "coloured by [their] hidden personal sorrows and joys. Like tearstains on a letter, these forays into the hidden and the personal shade all [their] discussions of Nabokov" (37). Thus, one can suggest that Nafisi's memoir does not solely give expression to her own life story; rather it can be better perceived along Kristeva's intertextual paradigm which undercuts the privileged status of the individual author as the sole source of the text ("Word" 36). In contradistinction to the Bloomian model, where pre-existing

texts and canonical works act as impediments, Nafisi celebrates the liberating potential of “all great works of fiction”:

In all great works of fiction, regardless of the grim reality they present, there is an affirmation of life against the tragic transience of that life, an essential defiance. This affirmation lies in the way the author takes control of reality by retelling it in his own way, thus creating a new world. Every great work of art...is a celebration.... The perfection and beauty of form rebels against the ugliness and shabbiness of the subject matter. (*Reading* 47)

Thus, being influenced by existing literary texts and others' experiences is never a contentious undertaking as Bloom suggests; on the contrary, it is a means of consolation and inspiration. Even the setbacks they face to lay hold of literary texts are never a source of anxiety for them; “there is no easy access to these books—you cannot buy them in the bookstores anymore. First the censors banned all of them, then the government stopped them from being sold” (39).

Based on the assumption that “the scope of intertextuality is not restricted to the literary domain” (Britton 145), Nafisi's memoir may be viewed along the connections she makes between existing literary texts, her own life, her students' experiences, and the political and social state of affairs of Iran during that time, on the one hand, and the analogy she makes between literary texts and other forms of art, on the other. The way she likens Nabokov's *Lolita* to Joshua Reynolds's painting *The Age of Innocence* (1788) is a case in point (Nafisi, *Reading* 49). Films are also interspersed into Nafisi's memoir and brought to bear on their predicament: *A Night at the Opera* (1935), *Casablanca* (1942), *Johnny Guitar* (1954), and *The Pirate* (1982), are some examples (56).

Be it a literary text, a film, or a painting, not for once does appropriating a precursor's work instill in Nafisi a sense of anxiety, nor does it afflict her with a feeling of belatedness as Bloom states (xxv). Against a backdrop of fundamentalism, bigotry and intolerance, “the great works of fiction” they discuss (Nafisi, *Reading* 47), become the sole way to “protect [themselves] from the reality outside” (59). As Nafisi reiterates: “All this was discussed in my class Again we skipped back and forth between our lives and novels.... We were all victims of the arbitrary nature of a totalitarian regime that constantly intruded into the most private corners of our lives and imposed its relentless fiction on us” (67). As such, Nabokov's *Lolita* is read as a statement against the totalitarian mindset, manifested in both Humbert and the Islamic Republic.

In the second part of her memoir, entitled “Gatsby”, Nafisi moves back in time to recount her experience of going back to Iran in 1979 after living abroad for seventeen years. Conflicting feelings assault her once she arrives at Tehran Airport. Although she has always longed to be back home, the changes wrought by the Revolution impart to her a sense of uneasiness, if not estrangement:

The dream had finally come true. I was home, but the mood in the airport was not welcoming. It was somber and slightly menacing, like the unsmiling portraits of Ayatollah Khomeini and his anointed successor Ayatollah Montazeri that covered the walls. It seemed as if a bad witch with her broomstick had flown over the building and in one sweep had taken away the restaurants, the children and the women in colourful clothes that I remembered. This feeling was confirmed when I noticed the cagey anxiety in the eyes of my mother and friends, who had come to the airport to welcome us. (Nafisi, *Reading* 82)

Nafisi's description of the omnipresence of the regime reveals the way it wields a most stultifying impact on all aspects of life, particularly since her homecoming coincides with a time of relentless fundamentalism. Though used in a very different context from the anxiety of influence discussed by Bloom and addressed in this paper, the feeling of anxiety felt by her mother and friends sheds light on their helplessness. The beginning of her academic career at the University of Tehran is concurrent with a series of turbulent events, culminating in the rise of Khomeini, the American hostage crisis, the enforcement of veiling on women, and the summary trials and executions of religious and political leaders. Additionally, it is a time when her position at university is at stake since many of her co-workers with different ideological backgrounds have been purged from the university. The moment she arrives at the airport, it dawns on her that the books she has read, taught and treasured the most would put her at odds with the regime: “Then they attacked my backpack from which they extracted my diploma, my marriage license, my books—*Ada*, *Jews without Money*, *The Great Gatsby*.... The guard picked them up disdainfully as if handling someone else's dirty laundry. But he did not confiscate them—not then. That came sometime later” (*Reading* 82).

Recounting details of her personal life is always interspersed with memories of the books she reads; books that come to her rescue when everything else seems to be hitting rock-bottom. For example, her father's imprisonment; her first rushed marriage; her moving to Norman, Oklahoma; and her inevitable divorce—all these episodes are remembered in terms of her reading Melville, Poe,

Lenin, Tse Tung, Ovid and Shakespeare (Nafisi, *Reading* 83-84). Another phase of her life, what she refers to as “a schizophrenic period in my life” (85), is inextricably bound up with her reading of “counter-revolutionary writers--T.S. Eliot, Austen, Plath, Nabokov and Fitzgerald” (86). In another instance she recounts her second marriage to Bijan Naderi in connection with the Shah's last visit to the United States, and in terms of the books she has read and the writers she has chosen for her dissertation (86). In short, throughout her memoir, the personal is linked to the political and the literary. In a statement that may be said to unequivocally undermine the Bloomian perception of the anxiety of influence, Nafisi explains how she finds inspiration in established literary texts: “I spoke passionately...inspired by phrases I had read in novels and poems...I would weave words together into sounds of revolution. My oppressive yearning for home was shaped into excited speeches against the tyrants back home” (86). It thus becomes all the more apparent that intertextuality is not just manifested in writing her memoir, but also in her real life experiences.

The more the Islamic government adopts coercive measures, the more Nafisi gravitates towards literary texts, and the more she becomes influenced by them in a manner that is contrary to Bloom's assertion that “[t]he anxiety of influence is an anxiety in expectation of being *flooded*” (57). In Bloom's case, influence is linked with “unpleasure”(57); in Nafisi's, it is a motivational force by means of which she transcends the sordid reality enforced by the government:

I felt in those days that there was a turf war going on between different political groups and this struggle was fought out mainly at the university.... Looking back with my small collection of books, I was like an emissary from a land that did not exist, with a stock of dreams, coming to reclaim this land as my home. Amid the talk of treason and changes in government, events that now in my mind have become confused and timeless, I sat whenever I had a chance with books and notes scattered around me, trying to shape my classes. I taught a very large seminar in the first semester, called research, in which we focused on *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and a survey of twentieth-century fiction. (Nafisi, *Reading* 89).

In this regard, Nafisi's memoir aptly “symbolizes freedom, a place of transgression” (Wilson and Vaz). In addition to *The Great Gatsby*, she teaches works by Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Mark Gorky and Mike Gold, among many others. Not only are these texts used as teaching material, but they leave an imprint on Nafisi's life and accordingly resonate in her memoir in a

manner that echoes Kristeva's conviction that "each word (text) is an intersection of words (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read. ("Word" 37). Intertextuality is also pronounced in Nafisi's description of her class as "an eclectic mix of revolutionary writers" (*Reading* 93). Hardly ever does Nafisi's relationship to the literary texts she appropriates amount to Bloom's perception of the "lifelong relation of ephebe to precursor" as a case of "compulsion neurosis" (Bloom 66). On the contrary, in a most telling explanation, Nafisi celebrates the enlightening impact of her precursors' "great works of the imagination" (*Reading* 94):

The best fiction always forced us to question what we took for granted. It questioned traditions and expectations when they seemed too immutable. I told my students I wanted them in their readings to consider in what ways these works unsettled them, made them a little uneasy, made them look around and consider the world like Alice in Wonderland land through different eyes. (94)

Thus, more than merely being a comforting niche that accommodates their disparate ideologies against a totalitarian backdrop, the realm of fiction to which Nafisi and her students resort abounds with illuminating experiences. To read and be inspired by her precursors' "great works of the imagination" is thus far from being a "reductive" process as Bloom suggests: "It startles me to observe this pattern of reductiveness wherever ephebes comment upon precursors..." (Bloom 69). In Nafisi's case, it is an enriching, enlightening and vivifying process that renders her memoir a tapestry of different viewpoints and literary texts. Nafisi's memoir thus becomes a most apt example of how intertextuality broadens the contours of a literary text: "intertextuality contends that texts lack fixed authorships and meanings. Instead, they embody the notions of pluralism, openness and change" (Vargova 415), which is what Nafisi seeks to impart to both her memoir and class.

Although Nafisi's classes, just like everything else in Iran during that time, are interrupted by revolutionary events, violent demonstrations, political schisms and many atrocious deeds, she becomes all the more intent to proceed with teaching literary texts, and particularly *The Great Gatsby*: "*Gatsby* seems oddly irrelevant, a strange choice to teach at a university where almost all the students were burning with revolutionary zeal... I see that *Gatsby* was the right choice... the values shaping that novel were the exact opposite of those of the revolution" (Nafisi, *Reading* 108). She further explains that her choice of *Gatsby* is primarily based on the fact that it would give her students "a glimpse of that other world

that was receding from [them]" (108). Teaching her students to relish the aesthetic merit of a story about "a guy so much in love with his beautiful rich girl who betrays him" is so much antithetical to their perception of sacrifice in terms of "masses, revolution and Islam", as Nafisi explains (108). "Passion and betrayal were for them political emotions, and love far removed from the stirrings of Jay Gatsby for Mrs. Tom Buchanan. Adultery in Tehran was one of so many other crimes, and the law dealt with accordingly: public stoning" (109). In so doing, Nafisi seeks to channel her students away from a biased and unfounded condemnation of the characters' immorality, and to teach them to focus instead on Gatsby's dream. More importantly, she universalizes it very much like what she does in her reading of *Lolita*. Thus, the context in which a book is read, discussed or written, plays a highly influential role in viewing it from different perspectives. According to De Paul, "the setting in which Nafisi operates in her story, as a professor of English-language literature during a revolution in opposition to secular western values, exerts tremendous influence over the books she reads with her class" (De Paul)²¹. Although *The Great Gatsby's* theme is quintessentially American, and Nafisi underscores that "*The Great Gatsby* is an American classic, and in many ways the quintessential American novel" (*Reading* 109), she makes a link between his dream, and its ensuing devastation on the one hand, and the destruction of the revolutionary dream of many Iranians, on the other. A nonjudgmental perception of Gatsby "can only be achieved by someone who is engrossed in literature, has learned that every individual has different dimensions to his personality.... It is only through literature that one can put oneself in someone else's shoes and understand the other's different and contradictory sides and refrain from becoming too ruthless" (118).

In so hailing literature, it becomes not just a refuge for Nafisi from the excesses of the Islamic Republic, but it also plays a role in propagating the ideals of tolerance, acceptance and empathy. The way Nafisi brings pre-existing texts to bear on writing her memoir, and also on her teaching, is obviously unadulterated by the feeling of anxiety that Bloom proclaims germane to the process of literary creation against a precursor's work. Literature, in Nafisi's case, is innately intertextual, receiving impetus from other pre-existing texts and concurrently inspiring others. Transcending divisive boundaries, *Gatsby* is appropriated by Nafisi to broach issues pertaining to Iranian life: "What we in Iran had in common with Fitzgerald was this dream that became our obsession and took over our reality, this terrible beautiful dream, impossible in its actualization, for which any amount of violence might be justified or forgiven. This is what we had in

common" (*Reading* 144). The intertextual connection between *The Great Gatsby*, Iran, and Nafisi's own life is heightened in her proclamation:

How similar our own fate was becoming to Gatsby's. He wanted to fulfill his dream by repeating the past, and in the end discovered that the past was dead, the present a sham, and there was no future. Was this not similar to our revolution, which had come in the name of our collective past and wrecked our lives in the name of a dream? (144)

The Great Gatsby thus serves to illustrate the loss of a dream for those who had advocated revolutionary change to be eventually "trapped by the fulfillment of their aspirations. The regime's measures, brutally enforced by vigilante groups, shattered their dreams of increased rights and social change" (Corbella). Gatsby, who destroys himself by trying to re-imagine his past, is an apt metaphor for the Islamic Regime; "a cabal of Ayatollahs that sacrificed the present by enforcing their own dream of a collective past on Iran" (Kamran). In short, *The Great Gatsby* for Nafisi is about the loss of dreams, very much like the predicament of Iran and its people as their dream for a better future goes awry.

The fact that Nafisi resorts to a pre-existing text, quotes from it, and relates her own experience to it, does not in any way make her susceptible to redundancy. Accordingly, she may be said to evade what Bloom sees as "the central problem for the latecomer", which is according to him "repetition" (Bloom 80): "Repetition dialectically raised to re-creation is the ephebe's road of excess, leading away from the horror of finding himself to be only a copy or a replica" (80). Not for once does Nafisi seem to be a copy or a replica of any of the literary texts she appropriates. Her stance may be alternatively viewed as akin to Kristeva's perception of the novel as "a text ... in which the synthesized patterns of several utterances can be read" ("Bounded" 37). The final synthesis retains its individuality, while at the same time it resonates with the influence of other texts.

The pinnacle of the second section of the memoir is inarguably the "trial of Gatsby" which Nafisi organizes and her students stage: "And so began the case of the Islamic Republic of Iran versus *The Great Gatsby*" (Nafisi, *Reading* 126). The trial is initially triggered by one of Nafisi's students, Mr. Nyazi, proclaiming the novel and similar decadent ones from their narrow minded-perspective as "a rape of [their] culture" (126). Not long afterwards, Nafisi's class becomes the courtroom, with students assuming the roles of judge, prosecutor and defense attorney, while Nafisi herself is the defendant. Voicing the bigotry of the government, Mr. Niazi denounces the novel for the following reason: "The one thing good about this book is that it exposes the immorality and decadence of

American society, but we have fought to rid ourselves of this trash and it is high time that such books be banned” (127). In another instance, he expresses his disapproval of the themes of the novel: “This book is supposed to be about the American Dream, but what sort of dream is this? Does the author seem to suggest that we should all be adulterers and bandits?” (127). He accordingly asserts that the whole of America deserves the same fate. A barrage of accusations and defenses ensues between Gatsby’s detractors and supporters, whereupon Nafisi intervenes with a most insightful remark:

You don't read *Gatsby* to learn whether adultery is good or bad but to learn about how complicated issues such as adultery, infidelity and marriage are. A great novel heightens 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)

The way Nafisi relates *The Great Gatsby* and other important Western classics to life in the Islamic Republic never degenerates into a “misinterpretation” of them, as Bloom suggests, since for him “to imagine is to misinterpret” (Bloom 93). Rather, “literature for Nafisi is a universal language that bridges cultures and instills a form of democracy by teaching us empathy for the complexities of the human condition” (Kamran).

If Gatsby represents the loss of dreams, the outbreak of the war with Iraq in 1980 exacerbates the sense of loss and disillusionment that engulfs Nafisi: It “came out of nowhere... unexpected, unwelcome and utterly senseless” (Nafisi, *Reading* 157). From the standpoint of the Islamic regime, however, it is an inevitable retaliation since “the enemy had attacked not just Iran; it had attacked the Islamic Republic, and it had attacked Islam” (158). Worst of all, a quote by Khomeini on the wall reads: “THIS WAR IS A GREAT BLESSING (158)”. Against the backdrop of this senseless war, and with more coercive measures being adopted at university, literature once again asserts its power to take the edge off Nafisi’s sordid life. It is particularly at this point that she gravitates to Henry James; hence the third part of the memoir entitled “James”.

If the Revolutionary Guards succeed in raiding bookstores and closing them, they never manage to quell Nafisi’s and her like-minded students’ passion for literature. A list of literary works is mentioned by Nafisi in her memoir at this stage. To name only a few: *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1844), *Wuthering Heights* (1847), *Vanity Fair* (1848), *A Room with a View* (1908), *Howards End* (1910), and *Henderson the Rain King* (1959). James’ novels and six novels by Jane

Austen are also of particular interest to her. In contradistinction to the Bloomian model, these pre-existing texts propel Nafisi's memoir forward, rather than acting as a derailing impediment. They become part and parcel of the memoir's structural and literary makeup, rendering it an intertext: "intersecting fragments of other pre-existing texts Their original contexts are both recalled and simultaneously 'neutralised'" (Britton 145). Unlike Bloom's revisionary ratios, Nafisi never endeavours to misinterpret; provide an antithesis; break from; provide a counter model; curtail; or copycat these texts. Rather, she derives inspiration from them, embracing them as a refuge and appropriating them to bear on her own predicament.

A notable example is the way she discovers an affinity with James, who "psychologically...kept the war at bay by writing and reading" (*Reading* 213). Very much like James, Nafisi rejects her country's policies, dismissing the war as a most atrocious experience. Though loyal to her homeland, she is appalled by the regime's recourse to warfare. Through reading and quoting James she discovers an affiliation with him; a bond that not only enables her to survive the "senselessness of the war" (214), but it also endows her with literary inspiration. Influence in this context is a vivifying force that runs counter to Bloom's proclamation that "[i]nfluence is Influenza—an astral disease" (95). Influence is therapy, refuge and inspiration. This can be attested by the following incident that Nafisi recounts:

One night I awoke suddenly at three or four in the morning and discovered that the house was in complete darkness. I knew at once there had been another blackout.... I looked out of the window and saw the streetlights were also gone.... I heard an explosion. My heart heaved up and down.... My eyes pretended nothing had happened, and rested on a page of *Daisy Miller*. (*Reading* 186)

Against a tumultuous backdrop of raids, battles, conspiracies and carnage, Nafisi gravitates to literary works, deploying them as models for literary inspiration: "It was during this time that, while reading certain writers, I unconsciously took up pencil and paper again...oddly enough my concentration was high, fueled perhaps by the effort to ignore the all-engrossing threat of bombs and rockets" (186). Chief among the literary works she intertextually embraces during those "sleepless nights" are *Pride and Prejudice*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Madame Bovary* (186). The rewards of the intertextual connection between Nafisi and the pre-existing literary works can be evinced in the way she overcomes her fear of the war explosions through her reading of James' *Daisy Miller* (1878):

In a scene I will always remember...Daisy tells Winterbourne: 'You needn't be afraid. I am not afraid'....'You needn't be afraid', she repeated....There is so much courage in that sentence...For a moment I believe I really was diverted from the explosions, and I did manage to draw a line around the words *You needn't be afraid*.

Throughout these endless nights of reading I concentrated only on fiction.... (*Reading* 187)

Pre-existing literary texts are in Nafisi's case a means of empowerment, be it in real life experiences or in writing. In so perceiving them, she may be said to repudiate Bloom's designation of the "appalling energy of the precursor" as a "possessing force" (Bloom 101); one that, in his viewpoint, hampers, derails and truncates.

Very much like James, the miasma of the war leaves Nafisi dispirited and bereft of literary energy; and also very much like him, and partly thanks to him, she gets through there trying times by a recourse to literature. Sharing his very sentiments, she writes:

Now, at the end of his life, he complained about the impotence of words in the face of such humanity...he said 'The war has used up words; they have weakened; they have deteriorated...like millions of other things...We are now confronted with a depreciation of all our terms...with a loss of expression...' Despite his despair, he turned to words again.... (*Reading* 213-14)

If James chooses to "make his own counter-realities" (James qtd. in Nafisi, *Reading* 216), Nafisi may be said to follow in his footsteps in forging her own through literary texts. The imprint of James on her can thus be evinced in the way her writing assumes the compensatory function that she notices in [him], becoming a substitute for the active involvement in demands for political change. In this celebration of isolation and escape, she comes dangerously close to answering the question of how to preserve one's integrity by affirming that, under oppressive circumstances, one can only extricate oneself from reality and from history. (Corbella)

Bloom's influence-induced anxiety obviously has no place in such a context, particularly when he contends that "misprision is...a doing amiss of what the precursors did" (Bloom 83). If Nafisi is influenced by James, it is never a detrimental impact. On the contrary, his literary works, in addition to *Lolita*, *Gatsby*, and all the other classics of Western literature with which she intertextuality connects, enable her to survive her drab reality. Creating a counter-

reality becomes her conduit. Worth quoting in this context is the piece of advice imparted to her by her mentor, or as he is referred to in the memoir, the Magician²²: “You don't need to create a parallel fantasy of the West.... Give them the best of what the other world can offer: give them pure fiction--give them back their imagination” (*Reading* 281-82). In other words, by giving full rein to their imaginations and defying the repressive discourses of their day, writers can readily reclaim their innate right to freedom.

The inherent intertextuality of the memoir thus opens up vistas for Nafisi to accommodate a wide array of discourses. Running parallel to the biased discourse of fundamentalism is a world of magical beauty that she can gain access to through fiction, whereupon her memoir may be said to become a Kristevan “correlation of texts” (Kristeva, “Word” 58). In the very same section of her memoir where she pays tribute to James, she also mentions some non-Western texts that have an influence on her writing; an influence that is unadulterated by Bloomian anxiety, as she states: “Like a group of conspirators, we would gather around the dining room table and read poetry and prose from Rumi, Hafez, Sa’adi, Khayyam, Nezami, Ferdowsi, Attar, Beyyhagi (Nafisi, *Reading* 172).

In the final part of the memoir Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* acts as a touchstone through which Nafisi tackles issues related to women, love, marriage, choice, freedom, veiling, sexuality, and power relations, among many others. It starts out with one of Nafisi's students satirically adapting the first line of the novel to describe the deplorable situation in their own country: “It is a truth universally acknowledged that a Muslim man, regardless of his fortune, must be in want of a nine-year-old virgin wife” (257). In contradistinction to the authoritative discourse of the Islamic Republic, Nafisi carves out the opportunity for personal expression and freedom, unremittingly relating her world to Austen's. In so doing, Nafisi may be said to undermine Bloom's postulation that seeking to follow in the footsteps of a precursor would only beget an “impossible object” (Bloom 10). Though in a very different context, Nafisi creates her own independent world very much like what Austen did. Thus, her “object”, contrary to the Bloomian paradigm, is not only possible, but also liberating. The Magician's words are worth mentioning in this context:

You used to preach to us all that [Austen] ignored politics, not because she didn't know any better but because she didn't allow her work, her imagination, to be swallowed up by the society around her. At a time when the world was engulfed in the Napoleonic Wars, she created her own independent world, a world that you, two centuries later, in the

Islamic Republic of Iran, teach as the fictional ideal of democracy.
(Nafisi, *Reading* 282)

Significantly, Nafisi hails Austen's protagonists as "private individuals", whose "desire for privacy and reflection is continually being adjusted to their situation..." (267). She also uses the novel "to discuss power relations as she believes Jane Austen sees them, saying that negative characters never truly hear or are influenced by the people around them--they lack empathy and democratic values" (De Paul). Against all odds, Austen's characters are dynamic; an attribute that is blatantly lacking in Nafisi's world. Examining the novel in the context of the repressive Islamic regime thus confirms the conviction that "re-reading provides a location for the possible and the implausible to exist side by side" (Jensen 7). By looking up to Austen's world to endow hers with dynamism, Nafisi may be said to repudiate Bloom's conviction that emulating a precursor "exhausts...those who come in his [her] wake" (Bloom 51).

Throughout this section, Nafisi, in a Kristevan manner, highlights how Austen incorporates a plurality of voices which coexist within the novel, emphasizing all along how characters "risk ostracism and poverty to gain love and companionship and to embrace that elusive goal at the heart of democracy: the right to choose" (Nafisi, *Reading* 307). Obviously, Nafisi makes an implicit connection between Austen's characters and the Iranian women's struggle to regain the right to choose how to live their lives against the backdrop of an oppressive regime. She also uses the novel as impetus for her students to discuss the possibilities for happiness in their relationships with men in a highly gendered and oppressive society. Through the personal experiences recounted by her students, Nafisi brings to the fore a plethora of issues with which the Islamic Iran of her day was fraught. She also brings into her memoir a brief historical account of marriage rights and customs in Iran and particularly in her own family, thereby heightening the inherent intertextuality of the text. In a most blatant analogy Nafisi contends: "Living in the Islamic Republic is like having sex with a man you loathe" (329). If this signifies anything, it reflects how appalling it is for them to grapple with a regime that seeks to control every aspect of their lives, whereupon the only way out is to pretend "to be somewhere else", very much like being "forced into having sex with someone you dislike, you make your mind blank..." (329). It is worth clarifying in this context that Nafisi's antithetical stance is not directed towards the doctrines of Islam in any way; rather it is against how they are perverted to serve the demands of those in power:

In the Islamic Republic, they use religion as an ideology, and Islam is the first victim. These people use the issue of religion the same way that Marxists use Marxism: to legitimize their rule. My grandmother was forced not to wear the veil during the brief period that Reza Shah forced women to appear publicly unveiled. Then, under the Islamic Republic, I was forced to put it on. Now the veil has a political role: it's an issue of choice, not of being Islamic vs. being un-Islamic. (Nafisi, "Last")

Caught up in the throes of this repressive world, the pre-existing literary texts they embrace serve to console them with the fact that their predicament is a universal one since any repressive discourse operates through the same power relations. Austen's world is a valid niche in this regard. For instance, the issue of courtship that Austen assiduously addresses is reworked through the experiences of two of Nafisi's students, Sanaz and Yassi, both of whom give voice to their frustration at their disadvantaged position when it comes to marriage. Even President Rafsanjani, though hailed by many as a liberal reformer, serves only to exacerbate their dilemma by advocating "temporary marriage"; that is "an Islamic rule peculiar to Iran, according to which men could have four official wives and as many temporary wives as they wished" (Nafisi, *Reading* 259).

The plight of Azin, another of Nafisi's students, is likewise meant to denounce the discriminatory marriage, divorce, and child custody laws, leading Nafisi to conclude that "the law really was blind; in its mistreatment of women, it knew no religion, race or creed" (273). More than the physical violence she is exposed to, Azin's husband "shouted that no one would marry her, that she was 'used', like a secondhand car.... He would marry a fresh first-hand eighteen-year old girl any time" (272). Despite the glaring differences in their cultural contexts, Nafisi constantly appropriates Austen's world to bear not only on her memoir, but also on other personal anecdotes recounted by her students. De Paul's view is worth mentioning in this regard: "Just as Nafisi uses *Gatsby* to explore, among other things, the tension between art and ideology, she reads *Pride and Prejudice* with courtship in Iran amid diminishing women's rights in mind" (DePaul).

Therefore, appropriating literary texts is a potent vehicle employed by Nafisi in her endeavour to resist fundamentalist oppression. Her reading does not seek to emulate or rival the texts themselves, but rather to employ them in her denunciation of the Islamic Republic and its excesses. In Kristevan terms, her memoir becomes the locus where "several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another" (Kristeva, "Bounded" 36). More utterances

are woven into the text as each of Nafisi's students relates her own individual experiences to both the sordid reality of Islamic Iran and Austen's world. Nafisi herself states how "[t]hese forays into the personal were not supposed to be part of the class, but they infiltrated [their] discussions, bringing with them further incursions" (*Reading* 272). These "incursions" may be said to acquire greater significance when viewed from the standpoint of Kristeva's assertion that any text is the absorption and transformation of another whereupon it eventually becomes an amalgam of "intertextual relationships" (Kristeva, "Word" 40). Contrary to Bloom's theory, intertextual influence becomes a most constructive force. This largely conforms to the conviction that "[w]orks of literature... are built from systems, codes and traditions established by previous works of literature" (Allen 1). In the light of this assumption, the kernel of Nafisi's memoir may be said to exist between her own text, and all the other texts to which she refers and relates; that is by "moving out from the independent text into a network of textual relations" (1). Influence thus begets a dynamic relation between texts; one that runs counter to Bloom's view of it as an arduous if not a punitive process: "the poet/[writer] is condemned to learn his [/her] profoundest yearnings through an awareness of other selves" (Bloom 26). In Nafisi's case, these "other selves" are anything but a means of condemnation. Explaining how she went to class "armed with a copy of *Pride and Prejudice* in one hand and *Our Bodies, Ourselves*... in the other", suffices to underscore how she is empowered by her precursors' works (Nafisi, *Reading* 304).

Thus, Nafisi's description of how she would sit with her Magician "eternally weaving stories" (338) becomes a well-suited description of what Nafisi does throughout her memoir until she draws her narrative to a close in the epilogue. She ends her memoir by telling the readers about her departure from Iran in 1997, very much like what most of her students did. Although Nafisi's ultimate decision to leave Iran testifies to the pervasiveness of the regime's coercive measures, she, surprisingly, tells her Magician that she wants to write a book in which she would thank the Islamic Republic for all the things it had taught her: "to love Austen and James and ice-cream and freedom" (*Reading* 338). It is worth clarifying that fiction is not merely a panacea for Nafisi and her students; it is, to use her own words, a means of offering her "a critical way of appraising and grasping the world—not just [their] world but that other world that had become the object of [their] desires" (282). This proves that appropriating the wide array of literary texts to both her secret class and her memoir is not a means of keeping her at bay from the turmoil of her country or from her own culture; on the contrary

it serves to render her all the more involved. Even if she appears for some to offer a vindication of Western cultural superiority, it is more of a vindication of the ideals of democracy and individualism embedded in the works she resorts to, as she states: "A good novel is one that shows the complexity of individuals ... in this way a novel is called democratic-not that it advocates democracy but that by nature it is so" (*Reading* 132).

As much as the literary works Nafisi resorted to salvaged her from her oppressive milieu, as much as they subjected her, and still do, to a barrage of vituperative remarks. A strain of particularly unforgiving criticism of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* has emerged, denouncing the book for different reasons. Some critics, for example, take issue with Nafisi's depiction of Iranian women as "requiring rescue from outside forces, thus bolstering the rationale for US involvement in Iran" (De Paul); others denigrate the way she co-opts the Western canon as a redemptive ideology (Blumenthal). There are also those who debunk the way she makes generalizations about women's rejection of the Islamic dress code arguing that "however uncomfortable some Iranian women felt about the revolutionary dress code, many devout women welcomed it and, inadvertently, were liberated by it" (De Paul). Likewise, Nafisi's depiction of the emancipatory potential of Western fiction renders her vulnerable to charges of vindicating imperialism. In a similar vein, her indictment of some aspects of her native culture has resulted in accusing her of "showing disdain for all things Iranian, and indeed she writes dismissively of revolutionary men and suspiciously of Islam, which is arguably key to Iranian national identity as an Islamic republic" (De Paul). She is also accused of describing Islamism "as the equivalent of Marxism in its totalitarian intent, methods, and effects" (De Paul). Being oblivious to most of the crimes of the secular, Western-supported shah's regime is also taken against her, claiming that "[a]lthough [she] was critical of the Pahlavi regime as a student activist, she does not describe any substantive grievances she had with it" (Rastegar). She is also taken to task for the way she reiterates "the predominant Orientalist binary-of the 'West' as modern, rational, and dynamic and opposed to an 'East' that is static, irrational, and anti-modern..." (Rastegar). In this vein, Nafisi is denounced even as a New Orientalist:

[Like] the European Orientalists who became the first purveyors of the image of the Orient as the region exempt from the order of time and progress, the New Orientalists... have fortified barriers between cultures. If the Orientalists of the earlier periods were European and American travelers, the New Orientalists are native informers who,

speaking from a position of authority and authenticity, dehumanize their own compatriots and wall them off from the rest of humanity. (Rahimieh)

Against all odds, the memoir became an international bestseller, winning “nearly universal rave reviews from even the most feared of book critics and was translated into more than thirty languages” (De Paul). In defense of Nafisi, there are those who see her stance as an attempt to evade “the narrow, unimaginative political ideologies of one nation-state or another” and to “establish and defend what [she] describes as the more expansive ‘Republic of the Imagination’”; that is a place “beyond the fundamentalist ideological jurisdiction of the nation-state” (Bennett). Likewise, Nafisi’s literary and social output, and her assuming leadership in a forum held in 2002 to discuss the constraints and opportunities Muslim women face in expanding their political participation has aligned her with a host of figures who “challenged stereotypes associated with Muslim women and discussed strategies for strengthening the role of women in creating democratic and pluralistic societies in the Muslim world” (Jenkins 19)²³. Additionally, a more objective account of Nafisi’s work would see her memoir as less a celebration of Western classics than a homage to the liberating potential inherent in reading and writing literature in general. The memoir may also attest to “the powerful influence that contemporary politics can have on the circumstances of production and readership” (Motalagh). In fact, Nafisi’s stance towards both Iran and the West is shared by those who had first-hand experience with the changes wrought in Iran during this turbulent period:

Many memoirs by diasporic women in the generations after the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the founding of the Islamic Republic attracted international attention for their accounts of navigating the contradictions of Iran's strict fundamentalist regime. These transnational narratives of upheaval and its aftermath, usually narrated by subjects now living in the West, are often situated within a liberal-humanist framework. (Watson)

A closer look at Nafisi’s view of the West also lends credence to the suggestion that “she does not celebrate mindless infatuation with the West but rather seeks to explain its appeal” (De Paul). This may explain why she writes that students “have a rosy picture of the West, thanks to the Islamic Republic”, adding that “[a]ll that is good in their eyes comes from America or Europe, from chocolates and chewing gum to Austen and the Declaration of Independence (*Reading* 312). In other words, it is abhorrence of the excesses of the Islamic Republic that impel them to

look up to the West as another alternative, not a genuine love for it for its own intrinsic merit. Hers is not a mindless and idolatry idealization of the West, but rather a rebuffing of anything that is bigoted, and authoritarian; hence her demonization of a character like Humbert in Nabokov's novel, to cite one example among many others. In short, "these works of Western literature are redemptive and productive of the kinds of intellectual and physical freedoms denied to Iranian women" (Blumenthal).

If Nafisi's memoir has been besieged by her detractors' vituperative remarks, it has, on the other hand, kept her at bay from the battlefield of literary influence that is central to the Bloomian paradigm. The memoir, with its unique combination of the political and the personal, provides insight into universal problems that never fail to find resonances in the literary realm that Nafisi gravitates to. Through the intertextual connections she forges with canonical works and literary precursors, she manages to survive the fundamentalism of the Islamic Republic of her day. Nafisi's belief in the transcendent function of the "great works" of literature and in their intrinsic capacity to vivify the drabness of her reality enables her to overcome the sense of incapacitation that engulfs her homeland. Impetus, stimulus and inspiration are invariably culled from the corpus of literary works she resorts to. By bringing her precursors' work to bear on writing her memoir, Nafisi never seeks to put herself on a par with their literary talent; nor does she seek to rival them in any way. Contrary to Bloom's perception of the process of becoming a strong poet/author and securing a place in literary history in terms of a battle between the aspiring poet/writer and his/her predecessors, Nafisi's stance is anything but belligerent. Not for once is Nafisi perturbed or intimidated by the existing literary works. On the contrary, it is only by thematically and structurally relating to them that she manages to chart her life story, interspersing personal episodes with the turbulent climate of her day. In so structuring her memoir, Nafisi may be said to counter Bloom's theory of literary influence which perceives intertextual connection as conducive to an incurable sense of anxiety. On the other side of the spectrum, Kristeva's intertextuality may be said to offer an apt approach to the way Nafisi structures her memoir. Since the kernel of intertextuality is the assumption that a text is constructed out of already existent discourses, Nafisi's *Memoir in Books* is obviously a case in point. Nafisi does not allude to other texts, but she weaves them into the structural fabric of her narrative. These texts Nafisi become intrinsic to chronicling her life story, rather than being a superfluous addition to her text.

In short, by commemorating reading and writing as strategies of resistance to the actions of the fundamentalist government in Iran, and by dint of the intertextual girder of her memoir, Nafisi may be said to overcome Bloom's anxiety of influence, hailing literature and literary influence as bastions of defense against narrow fundamentalist ideologies. In so doing, she authenticates an alternative liberating world that finds its fullest expression in the intertextual connects she makes with existing literary works.

¹ Although Bloom focuses mostly on poets, his theory extends to include writers in general as he often uses the two terms "writer" and "poet" interchangeably. Thus, for the purpose of this research, the more general word "writer" will be used. As for the pronoun "his" that Bloom employs, it will be replaced by his/her when needed.

² Nafisi currently teaches at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, where she is also the director of the Dialogue Project, which seeks to "promote- in a primarily cultural context- the development of democracy and human rights in the Muslim world" (Rastegar).

³ Although the scope of the text is limited to Bloom's theory of influence, and Kristeva's notion of intertextuality as a more liberating lens through which one can examine Nafisi's memoir, mentioning tradition evokes T.S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919), in which he praises the literary tradition and states that the best writers are those who write with a sense of continuity with their precursors. The essay asserts that poets should use their knowledge of the writers of the past to influence their work:

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism. The necessity that he shall conform, that he shall cohere, is not one-sided; what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. (Eliot 37)

⁴ By the 1930s, he had built up an army equipped with mechanized transport and aircraft; improved communications; and allocated considerable funding for highways (Daniel 135).

⁵ The chador was the traditional full-length covering used by women when they went out in public.

⁶ Reza Shah's relationship with the clergy became particularly strained when he entered a holy shrine and beat a cleric who had protested the queen's removing her veil there the day before (Foltz 97).

⁷ The White Revolution helped foster a more accommodating milieu for women:

The High Council of Women's member organizations announced their readiness ... to take part in the upcoming election to the parliament....[T]hey organized a great march in Tehran, despite ongoing extremist threats and occasional violence....[A] Congress of Free Men and Free Women was convened in Tehran, chose candidates to stand for the Majlis, and pledged to support them in the elections. (Afkhani 244)

⁸ These celebrations also included measures such as the gratuitous introduction of a new calendar system which used the creation of the Persian Empire rather than the Islamic era as a beginning point, extensive gift-giving to foreign officials, and support for educational and cultural efforts to increase foreign awareness (Daniel 159).

⁹ The traditional mourning period in Shi'ite Islam is forty days.

¹⁰ However, as the strikes spread, "the demands increased and versified to include the repeal of martial law, the dissolution parliament and SAVAK, unconditional freedom for political prisoners, and the return of all exiles. As they became more vehement, the strikes brought some vital operations in the oil, communications, energy, and banking industries to a near standstill" (Afkhani 466).

¹¹ With most countries unwilling to receive him,

the shah wandered ... from Egypt to Morocco to the Bahamas and Mexico, before finally being admitted to the United States for medical treatment. Rather than give in to the demands of Iran's new revolutionary government that the shah be extradited home to face trial, the United States sent him on to Panama. After a short stay there, he returned to Egypt, where his cancer finally claimed him on July 27, 1980. (Foltz 108)

¹² Significantly, the book is a

defense of traditional Shi'ite practices...[and] a criticism of the government's secular policies.... It did, however, reveal his fear of foreign cultural influence and his basic commitment to traditional Islamic social values. He defended the veiling of women, attacked mixing girls and boys in coeducational schools, condemned the use of alcohol, insisted that music should be forbidden ...and called for the imposition of the legal penalties (hadd) required by Islamic law, such as cutting off the hands of thieves. (Daniel 178)

¹³ FMI is the Freedom Movement of Iran. Not long afterwards, Khomeini targeted the leftist parties as well.

¹⁴ As Daniel comments on the implicit reason for the invasion:

The boundary question was at best camouflage for other, much deeper, problems. In a sense the conflict was but one more expression of the complex relationship between Mesopotamia and the Iranian highlands that can be traced back to antiquity, but this too tends only to dignify a wasteful war that was fought and prolonged primarily because of fear, ideology, emotion, and crass political opportunism on both sides, as well as the cynical, almost inexplicable, meddling of outside powers. (202)

¹⁵ From his exile in Iraq, Khomeini had developed an intense personal hatred of Saddam Hussein. He did not see them as having provided him with sanctuary in exile but as willing collaborators of the shah in confining and oppressing him (Daniel 209).

¹⁶ An incident that had far-reaching consequences, and ultimately resulted in The United Kingdom suspending its diplomatic relations with Iran from 1989 to 1998 was the Salman Rushdie affair. Born a Muslim in British India, Rushdie had apostatized from Islam and published *The Satanic Verses* (1988); a novel that took the Islamic world by storm. According to Khomeini, Rushdie was liable to the death penalty; a decree that led to massive demonstrations worldwide (Foltz 114).

¹⁷ Generally speaking:

Repressive measures against Baha'is were relaxed, allowing them to register their marriages and conduct funerals. Iran became second only to Sweden as a destination for sex-change operations, which Khomeini had authorized as preferable to homosexuality. Enforcement of women's dress codes was eased, though not eliminated: fashionable urban girls pushed the limits of hejab by showing tufts of highlighted hair under flimsy headscarves and wearing tight-fitting manteaux in place of the chador. Nose jobs became so popular that wearing a bandage across one's septum became a fashion statement. Khatami appointed Iran's first female vice president, American-educated environmental activist Massume Ebtekar—a woman who, years earlier during the revolution, had acted as fiery spokesperson for the student hostage-takers at the US embassy. (Foltz 117)

¹⁸ "Strict enforcement of women's dress codes was resumed, newspapers were closed, arrests and executions increased, and the West was once again painted as an irremediable enemy... Ahmadinejad also alarmed and antagonized the West by ramping up Iran's nuclear enrichment program" (Foltz 118).

¹⁹ Nafisi's students are Nassrin, Nima, Yassi, Azin, Mitra, Sanaz and Zarrin.

²⁰ Although Nafisi does not represent the average Iranian woman on account of her lineage and education, "she is invested in describing the lives of various women under the Islamic Republic through their stories" as she "constructs an apparent common denominator for all Iranian women" (Rastegar).

²¹ This may well explain the significance of the title and the way it specifies Tehran as the place where such subversive books are read.

²² The Magician is a professor at the University of Tehran, who decides to resign and live a reclusive life. He acts as Nafisi's secret advisor and literary mentor with whom she shares her problems and apprehensions.

²³ In 2002, the Women's Learning Partnership for Rights, Development and Peace (WLP) in collaboration with the Dialogue Project of the School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) at Johns Hopkins University sponsored a forum entitled "Women and Leadership in Muslim Societies: Voices for Change" Azar Nafisi, Director of the SAIS Dialogue Project, organized the forum" (Jenkins 19).

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معارضة قلق بلوميان: قراءة تناصية لكتاب آزار نفيسي "قراءة لوليتا في طهران، مذكرات في الكتب"

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المستخلص:

مذكرات آزار نفيسي، قراءة لوليتا في طهران (2003)، مشهورة بعنوانها الفرعي، "مذكرات في الكتب"، حيث أن الأعمال الأدبية الرئيسية متشابكة في نسيج روايتها لقصة حياتها، وبالتالي تجسد مفهوم جوليا كريستيفا للتناص. تنقسم المذكرات إلى أربعة أقسام، كل منها متعلق بروايات وكتاب مشهورين. يمكن القول إن نفيسي تناقض نظرية هارولد بلوم عن القلق من التأثير، والتي، كما يفترض، ناتجة عن صراع نفسي لاكتساب القوة الجمالية. في حين أن تصور بلوم للتأثير يشوه الروابط بين النصوص باعتبارها مصدر عدم ارتياح المؤلف / الشاعر لأسلافه / أسلافها، فإن لجوء نفيسي إلى النصوص الأدبية هو آلية للتكيف. تهدف هذه الورقة إلى فحص مذكرات نفيسي في مقابل نظرية بلوم للتأثير، وإظهار كيف تبرا نفسها من أي قلق وشيك من خلال مجموعة من الأعمال الأدبية الغربية التي تتقاطع مع كتاباتها، وعند القيام بذلك، يمكن القول إن التأثير يمارس تأثيراً محرراً، بدلاً من أن يكون مصدر قلق الكاتب وعجزه. في تناقض مع نظرية التأثير لبلوم، يمكن أن يقال أن فكرة كريستيفا عن التناص تقدم عدسة مناسبة يمكن من خلالها قراءة مذكرات نفيسي.

الكلمات الدالة: التأثير؛ التناص؛ القلق؛ مذكرات؛ أعمال أدبية