



Postcolonial Feminism, Subaltern Voices, and Literary Resistance in Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*

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Abstract

*This study examines *Lolita in Tehran* (2003) by Azar Nafisi from an interdisciplinary perspective, informed by postcolonial feminism, subaltern theory, and counter-narrative discourse. The central argument is that Nafisi's memoir practices a form of literary opposition, where reading the banned Western literature that humiliates Iranians turns into a feminist and subaltern tactic of defiance under Iran's authoritarian and patriarchal regime. Employing a qualitative hermeneutic approach and close textual analysis, the study examines how the memoir's structure, literary allusions, and classroom scenes serve as counter-discursive spaces of resistance. Through theoretical lenses such as Spivak's concept of subalternity, Mohanty's critique of Western feminism, and Scott's notion of hidden transcripts, the research reveals how silenced female voices are reinscribed into history through acts of literary interpretation. Findings indicate that the study disrupts the binary constructions of the Iranian woman as a victim/passive reactant that is submerged in the role of an intellectual agent. The memoir serves as both a cultural resistance and a feminist self-history. This study contributes to scholarship on contemporary Middle Eastern memoirs, women's resistance narratives, and the broader politics of reading under repression. Future studies should investigate literary reading as a means of resistance and identity formation.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the post-1945 era of literary production, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003) by Azar Nafisi emerges as a compelling memoir that intertwines personal narrative with political resistance.

Presenting itself as an intellectual act of defiance, Nafisi's text brings to the forefront the authority of reading the Western canonical literature as a feminist and postcolonial strategy. It constructs a liminal space where women, constrained by an

authoritarian regime, reclaim agency through literary engagement. The thematic pillars in this study include postcolonial feminist resistance, subaltern voices, and literary counter-discourse, all of which are core elements in understanding how Nafisi negotiates her gendered identities as a subject of overlapping dictatorships of religious patriarchy and cultural domination. Moreover, the multilayered narrative voice, which combines personal confession and academic evaluation, in the memoir demonstrates the hybrid status that the author holds, placing her in the position of both participant and inquirer within various ideological systems.

Despite the critical acclaim and numerous studies focusing on testimonial ethics, memoir as a genre, or Western feminist transplantation (Shehata,82; Zainy,217), There is, however, no study has addressed the fusion of postcolonial feminist theory and subalternity with literary resistance in Nafisi within the framework of a single analysis to describe the relationships between narrative and ideological opposition. This gap is significant because it overlooks how the act of reading, particularly in clandestine gatherings, functions as both epistemic defiance and counter-narrative production. This study fills this gap and makes the case for reading "*Reading Lolita in Tehran*" along the confluence of the twin forces of feminist literary resistance and postcolonial discourse. This type of analysis will lend credence not only to the understanding of the text's representation of transformative power but also to the wider studies on diaspora writings, women's memoirs, and the politics of reading. This contribution aligns with the current intellectual trend of reevaluating the memoir genre as a fundamentally political and resistant to knowledge (Khan, 835; Takapoui, 2021, 245; Shahibzadeh, 159).

The significance of this study lies in its capacity to unveil the subtle mechanisms through which Iranian women engage in intellectual dissent. By allowing the projection of history into the triangular nexus of postcolonial feminism, subaltern voices, and literary resistance, the study makes new critical contributions to the

current discourse on women in the Global South and their autobiographical writing (Barzegar, 36; Khanjani, 2003; Kadkhodae, 809). The scope of this inquiry encompasses *Reading Lolita in Tehran* as a case study, while situating its narrative strategies within the larger corpus of post-2000 Middle Eastern feminist memoirs (Takapoui, 2021, 245; Saeidi, 57; Shandil,164; Strydom,03) Also, the study allows integrating the tools of analysis within the literary studies on the one hand and the socio-political setting on the other, explaining how individual actions of literature can also be heard outside of the individualised space of resistance into popular levels of opposition (Aghili, 94; Donnarumma,40).

The two main aims of this study are as follows: (1) to explain why Nafisi employs literary reading as a form of epistemic resistance, which is empowering the subaltern female voice; and (2) to reveal how the structural design of the memoir can be a counter-discursive dimension that dislodges the ideological hegemony, as well as the western liberal feminist representational agenda. The main research question informing this study is thus: How does *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by Azar Nafisi narrate postcolonial feminist contestation in the form of subaltern politics and the formulation of literary resistance? In exploring this question, the study further examines how the memoir navigates the tension between complicity and dissent, as well as the balance between the global literary tradition and local ideological constraints.

The scope of this study is confined to a literary and theoretical analysis of Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, with a focus on the themes of postcolonial feminist resistance, subaltern agency, and counter-narrative strategies. It neither seeks to generalise all the experiences of Iranian women nor memoirs, nor is it an attempt to provide a comprehensive socio-political history of Iran. Instead, it is restricted to textual strategies and literary references in the memoir, along with its ideological framing, which is written around Nafisi as an educator and author of post-revolutionary Iran herself. Although the study is concerned with the larger, political, and

cultural milieu, the analytical scope still focuses on the narrative functions of resistance as summarised in the memoir itself. Furthermore, secondary texts and Western literary works mentioned within Nafisi's narrative are treated as intertextual tools rather than primary sources.

The theoretical framework underpinning this analysis draws from postcolonial feminist theory (Spivak, 1988; Mohanty, 1988), counter-narrative and literary resistance (hooks, 1990; Scott, 1990), and the conception of subalternity (Spivak, 1988). This is a pluralistic structure well established in the field of modern/contemporary literature, which deals with the production of texts created after 1945 and the self-writing of the marginalised female subject under the oppression of authoritarian and cultural prerogatives (Chau, 98). In addition, the application of these theories to the memoir genre helps to bring the hybrid positionality of the author to the forefront, which lies on a pendulum between Western academic narratives and Iranian social and political realities.

In methodology, the study takes a qualitative approach as a hermeneutic and close reading investigation of the text and how the textual solutions put forward by Nafisi to activate the sense of epistemic disobedience and redeem marginalised subjectivity are central to her text including her literary text, her choice of works of literature, her narrative voice, and her choice to write a memoir (Moqadam, 144). By focusing explicitly on these dimensions, the research's novelty and contribution lie in offering a systematised postcolonial feminist counter-reading of Nafisi's memoir, thereby enriching discourses in Comparative Literature, Middle Eastern Women's Studies, and Memoir Studies. This contribution is poised to open new avenues for analysing memoir as resistance in global contexts marked by authoritarian cultural control and literary censorship.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To analyse how *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003) constructs acts of literary resistance through

feminist agency and subaltern voice, this study adopts a composite theoretical framework grounded in postcolonial feminism, subaltern theory, and the concept of literary counter-narrative. This framework was not randomly selected; in fact, it was based precisely on the central research question: How does Nafisi's memoir serve as a postcolonial feminist site of resistance in the form of subaltern storytelling and narrative defiance?. According to recent theoretical findings, the combination of overlapping outlooks reinforces interpretative legitimacy and addresses the divisiveness of modern women's resistance discourse (Khan, 838). It also reflects the recent methodological trends in favour of hybridity in feminist postcolonial studies (Takapoui, 247).

1. Postcolonial Feminism

Postcolonial feminism critiques the Western-centric bias of mainstream feminist discourse, emphasising the need for context-specific frameworks that address the unique needs of women in the Global South. This theory enables us to understand Nafisi's narrative not as a Western liberal feminist tale, but as a situated resistance against both patriarchal religious authority and neocolonial epistemologies. It highlights the importance of considering intersectional forms of oppression, such as those based on class, culture, and religion, in conjunction with gender (Belle, 193; Sheikholesseini & Fatemeh, 901).

According to Spivak (1988), not only is the subaltern woman silenced through the power of imperialism, but the subaltern woman is further silenced by patriarchy (287). Mohanty (1988) goes further and criticises the generic category of the Third World woman, urging resistance based on local contexts (66). In the case study, Chau confirms the finding that feminist actions in oppressive regimes are usually misunderstood when they lack the context of the culture and politics (94). Based on these insights, we have the opportunity to consider Nafisi's pedagogical acts and literary choices as part of feminist interventions, rather than as an imitation of Western forms (Chau, 98). Additionally, Shandil

emphasises the difficulty in interpreting such literary resistance by Iranian women within the framework of Western universalism, necessitating a more nuanced interpretation of texts like those of Nafisi. It also refers to the work of Moqadam, who explains how narrative agency can be concerned with localised feminist resistance to authoritarian states (144). In the case of Nafisi, postcolonial feminism offers a critical framework for decoding her engagement with feminist pedagogy within a politically constrained environment.

Subaltern Theory

Subaltern theory provides the conceptual vocabulary to analyse how silenced voices operate within memoirs. Spivak also developed the theory and addresses the structural exclusion of marginalised groups on both discursive and knowledge-creation levels. In Nafisi's case, the suppressed voices of her female students resonate with Spivak's notion of "epistemic violence" (Spivak, 289), whereby dominant discourses erase the subaltern's ability to represent themselves.

According to Bose, memoir becomes an arena for reviving silenced voices. Silences, hesitations, and coded speech in Nafisi's text are performative acts of survival and defiance (36). These mechanisms fit into subaltern strategies of indirect agency (Bose, 36; Bezdoode & Mozghan, 1022). This is extended by Khanjani, who suggests that narrative silence, especially in authoritarian environments, can be a manifestation of a rich space of meaning and protest (10). In this frame, what comes into view are the subalterns not through confrontation, but through the practice of storytelling, which displaces the dominant narratives (15). According to Kadkhodaei, the fragmented narration and interior monologue are described as aspects of subaltern expression (819). In the case of Nafisi, subaltern theory sheds light on how the fragmented speech, as well as the tentative articulation of her students, finds a way into a greater political order of silencing and survival.

Literary Resistance and Counter-Narrative

The final component of the framework centres on literary resistance and counter-narrative. This orientation is built on the concepts of 'subversive storytelling in repressive systems' of hooks and Scott. Hooks uses the concept of counter-narrative as a means of reclaiming cultural voice and agency. This is further enhanced by the concept of hidden transcripts, developed by Scott, which explains how oppressed groups can dissent by constructing alternative discourses (19).

In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, the very act of discussing banned books constitutes a counter-narrative. As mentioned in Melikyan, literary framing enables the creation of safe spaces in which oppositional discourse can occur (29). This can be compared to Nafisi's text, which creates environments of symbolic resistance through literature classes. Her memoir can be seen as a hidden transcript where literary practice serves as a form of political criticism (29). According to Strydom, counter-narratives in diasporic memoirs present a solution by providing a standpoint that effectively disarticulates the dichotomies of East vs. West (03). As presented in the case of Nafisi, the counter-narrative offers the option of disparaging both the Iranian regime and reductive Western depictions simultaneously (5). According to Aghili, resistance within Iranian memoirs is frequently coded, metaphorical, intertextual, and searching, and in all these respects, it is very much the type of layered narration that Nafisi employs (94). Regarding Nafisi, the counter-narrative theory enables us to view the memoir as both a political and literary means through which the writer dismantles not only patriarchal domination but also Western cultural assumptions.

Conclusion of Framework

The combination of these three theories forms a strict prism through which Nafisi's memoir can be analysed. Postcolonial feminism reveals not only demonstrations of hybrid identity and localised anti-colonial strategies by her female students, but also the subaltern theory demonstrates the significance of the semiotic and structural means

through which silence can be manipulated as language, and counter-narrative theory provides the memoir itself as a strategic textual product. This threefold structure is, therefore, also relevant not only in the context of the research question but also in relation to the genre and context of the work, confirming the need for interdisciplinary approaches in the context of a modern or contemporary fictional text (Doonarumma, 39).

As Khanjani (15) argues, frameworks that blend feminist, postcolonial, and narratological perspectives are uniquely suited to decode the complex strategies of authors navigating authoritarian and diasporic contexts. Through this integrated lens, the study offers both methodological clarity and theoretical innovation for contemporary literary scholarship.

III. METHODOLOGY

This section describes the study design and analytical approach used to investigate *Reading Lolita in Tehran* via the lens of postcolonial feminism, subaltern theory, and literary counter-narrative. The methodology clarifies how the text is read, understood, and situated within its sociopolitical and scholarly settings. It discusses the rationale for selecting the memoir, the analytical techniques used, and the theoretical concepts that guide the interpretation. Each stage of the procedure is designed to maintain a tight connection between the analysis and the study's objectives and research question. By doing so, the methodology provides a methodical path for identifying how Nafisi's narrative resists in a repressive cultural milieu.

1. Methodological Orientation

This study employs a qualitative hermeneutic approach to *Reading Lolita in Tehran* by Azar Nafisi. Considering the hybrid character of the memoir as a form, which presents a literary commentary, autobiographical memory, and socio-political commentary, a hermeneutic approach to the text provides an interpretive depiction of the narrative's symbolic and ideological facets. Hermeneutics is particularly

well-suited for literary texts that deal with trauma, exile, and cultural resistance (Khan, 835). Furthermore, feminist hermeneutics offers the opportunity to read silences, metaphors, and textual gaps as sources of meaning within the context of oppressive political regimes (Takapoui, 247). The approach aligns with the theoretical framework of the study, which draws on postcolonial feminism, subaltern theory, and literary counter-narrative in all representations of women. This approach ensures that textual interpretation is achieved through the intersection of structures of gender, power, and discourse (Shahibzadeh, 163).

2. Textual Corpus and Selection Justification

The primary text analysed in the present study is *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003), which was selected due to its symbolic significance as a memoir that dramatises the intellectual opposition of women in Iran following the revolution. Considering the memoir as a work that stands at the edge between personal testimony and political speaking, one may discuss how the reading act becomes a form of survival as well as a subversive strategy. The values of such works are especially evident in the narrative provided by Nafisi, along with the literary and autobiographical elements, Nafisi creates a multidimensional story about disobedience through literature. Previous studies have examined the memoir through singular lenses, such as Agostino's, but none have integrated the triadic theoretical framework employed in this study (82). Thus, the selection of this text is both strategic and justified within the context of feminist postcolonial literary scholarship (Shehata, 84).

3. Analytical Tools and Procedures

The following three significant analysis tools are used in this research: close reading, thematic analysis, and intertextual interpretation. Close reading is used to discuss the micro-narratives of the memoir, dialogue, tone, metaphor, and silence. Motifs of resistance, repression, agency, and identity are identified as recurring themes through the thematic analysis. Intertextual

interpretation considers the refrains of Western literary texts that we examined in the memoir (e.g., *Lolita*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Daisy Miller*) within the Iranian socio-political context. Such allusions to literature are not merely a pedagogical source, but also symbolic tools of criticism (Moqdam, 152). For instance, the appropriation of Nabokov's *Lolita* as a metaphor for political domination and female objectification reflects a subversive recoding of canonical literature (Kadkhodaei, 819).

4. Theoretical Integration in Practice

All three strands of theory are directly applicable to the textual analysis. The aspect of the memoir that highlights criticism of Western feminism's universalism, as well as the local patriarchal system, is brought into focus by postcolonial feminism (Mohanty, 66). The silenced voices of Nafisi's students structure the interpretation of Nafisi's own silenced voices and the narrative strategies employed to represent them, which are informed by Subaltern theory, specifically Spivak's ideas on epistemic violence (Spivak, 289). Literary counter-narrative theory, drawing from hooks (1990) and Scott (1990), allows the study to read the act of clandestine literary discussion as a form of resistant discourse (Scott, 19). Literary counter-narrative theory, drawing from hooks (1990) and Scott (1990), allows the study to read the act of clandestine literary discussion as a form of resistant discourse (Scott, 19). These theories overlap with examining the way the memoir performs protest not by confronting it directly, but instead on a metaphoric, allusive, and interpretive pedagogical level (Tabaei, 33).

5. Ethical Considerations

Interpreting a text like *Reading Lolita in Tehran* necessitates careful ethical positioning. First, the study avoids essentialising Iranian women's experiences, focusing instead on the situated narrative Nafisi constructs. Second, the study acknowledges that it falls outside the socio-political environment described in the memoir. Third, the study refrains from treating the memoir as a transparent window into Iranian

reality; instead, it is approached as a constructed literary artefact, shaped by the author's selective memory, narrative agenda, and diasporic identity (Shandil, 165; Aghili, 96).

6. Limitations of the Study

The study narrows its focus to one primary text, although its material is deep and complex, and is not capable of describing the whole range of Iranian women's autobiographical writing. The study also fails to provide a political history of Iran and does not analyse reader reception. It is both literary and theoretically oriented, dwelling on the narrative processes of encoding resistance in the memoir. Secondary text, addressed by Nafisi, is taken into account in the context of the intertextual role rather than as the object of direct analysis. Such limits will provide richness of interpretation without sacrificing the analytical precision (Doonarumma, 42).

In sum, the approach is closely related to the theoretical commitments of the study, making sure that every stage of analysis corresponds to a feminist postcolonial perspective that can be summarised by paying attention to voice, power, and narrative strategy. This strategy not only upholds high standards of research but also presents a subtle case of how literary form mediates resistance in politically repressive settings.

IV. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND STRUCTURE

This section presents a critical literary analysis of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* utilising the previously established theoretical framework of postcolonial feminism, subaltern theory, and counter-narrative resistance. The study is structured into three thematic subsections, each focusing on a key aspect of the research question, rather than presenting a linear interpretation of the findings. First, the study discusses Nafisi's methods for creating a classroom setting as the locus of postcolonial feminist opposition, in which reading is used, in Nafisi's case, as an ideological subversion. Second, it examines how subaltern voices are articulated in the memoir, particularly

in terms of how silence, coded speech, and fragmented narrative serve as strategic tools employed by the subaltern. Lastly, the study examines how the memoir serves as a literary counter-narrative, challenging the prevailing ideologies both domestically and internationally. Each subsection is grounded in close textual readings, supported by direct citations, and designed to demonstrate how the memoir operates as a complex intervention in discourses of gender, power, and literary dissent.

1. Postcolonial Feminist Resistance in the Classroom Space

In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, the classroom has been used as a metaphorical and tangible space of postcolonial feminist opposition. This part utilises the concept of Western feminist universalism being criticised by Mohanty (77) and the idea of silencing developed by Spivak (294) to consider how agency is recuperated by Nafisi and the students she educates through reading Western literature in a religious and ideologically repressive environment. The private literary circle that Nafisi forms with her students becomes a radical pedagogical space where the boundaries between political resistance and feminist consciousness blur. This subversive appropriation of Western texts represents a situated feminist intervention that challenges both local patriarchal structures and global Orientalist narratives.

A salient moment occurs when Nafisi introduces *The Great Gatsby*, prompting one student, Yassi, to remark, "*It's as if we're reading about our own lives in another language*" (Nafisi, 132). This quote suggests more than empathy; it is an affirmation that literature provides these women with a model to work out their own experiences of being oppressed. Here, *Gatsby's* illusion mirrors their struggle for imagined freedom. According to Mohanty (66), the process of constructing women's agency should be interpreted in a way that encompasses the local histories and ideologies of women. There is no escapism in reality, but rather a way to cultivate feminist awareness by redefining independence and desire

through reading *Gatsby* through the prism of experience.

In another scene, Nafisi recalls the pupils' insistence on reading *Madame Bovary*, despite societal taboos against it. She notes, "*They said it was the first time they had talked about desire without shame*" (Nafisi, 190). Through Flaubert, these women engaged with previously suppressed dimensions of their identities, challenging not only traditional sexual conventions but also the broader limitations on female self-expression. Spivak's notion of the subaltern woman, who is silenced by both patriarchy and coloniality, is pertinent in this context, as these students employ Western narratives to redefine their desires, thereby manifesting resistance through processes of identification and reinterpretation (Spivak, 287).

The reading of *Daisy Miller* likewise becomes a subtle act of rebellion. Nafisi writes, "*It was not Daisy who scandalised them, but the notion that a girl could go out alone and speak freely*" (Nafisi, 98). In a society that firmly polices women's movement and speech, Daisy's idea of independence becomes a dangerous ideal. Chau (98) argues that feminist resistance often occurs in symbolic ways within constrained spaces. This discourse of Daisy, therefore, becomes a feminist discourse of repossessing voice and agency that resonates with the idea of speaking under structural constraint, as mentioned by Spivak.

These classroom activities illustrate how literary reading, as examined through postcolonial feminist theory, can be a transformative act. The pedagogical practices of Nafisi do not internationalise Western ideology, but instead produce an interpretive space where Iranian women can negotiate their identity through their vernacular. The heterogeneous conversations and texts materialising between Western writings and local realities give birth to a new feminist grammar, resistant, located, and heterogeneous. As such, the classroom becomes both the subject and site of feminist resistance, addressing the research question and contributing a nuanced understanding of how literature enables agency within oppressive systems.

2. Subaltern Voices and Narrative Silence

Building on postcolonial feminist theory, this section will utilise subaltern theory to examine how silenced or marginalised voices are represented in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Spivak's seminal question, "*Can the subaltern speak?*", resonates throughout the memoir, particularly in the fragmented and hesitant expressions of Nafisi's students. These women, situated at the intersection of gendered repression and ideological control, often articulate their dissent not through open rebellion but via coded speech, silence, or literary metaphor. A further effect of the memoir is a realisation of what Spivak (275) calls the structural silencing of marginal voices from legitimate discourse, or what is commonly referred to as 'epistemic violence' (289).

Nassrin, a former student who rejects mandatory veiling but never publicly opposes it, is shown by Nafisi as an example. Her actions remain private, symbolic gestures: "*She had a habit of painting her nails blood red... as though the bright colour could speak louder than words*" (Nafisi, 167). Here, visual self-expression takes the place of spoken protest, making the body the centre of subaltern resistance. According to Spivak, whose idea that the subaltern voice is unable to be heard in the dominant discourse is applicable, this represents the silencing of the subaltern. Still, Nafisi takes this argument to its logical extreme by narrating Nassrin's resistance, claiming to be silenced, and thereby vindicating her very predicament of marginality as a subject.

A further example can be found in Nafisi's narrative concerning Mitra, a student who faced imprisonment for penning a story that the authorities classified as immoral: "*She was told that her words were a betrayal of the Revolution. So she stopped writing. But she never stopped imagining*" (Nafisi, 230). This moment exemplifies Khanjani's claim that silence in authoritarian contexts can become "a powerful narrative technique for displaced expression" (12). Mitra's retreat into imagination does not mark a defeat, but rather a redirection of agency, aligning with Bose's insight that "memoir recovers suppressed voices through literary mediation" (36).

In a third moment, Nafisi reflects on the pain her students don't express: "*Their silence was not empty. It was filled with unsaid things, anger, hope, and a longing for stories that could make sense of their lives*" (Nafisi, 248). The layering of silence with affective weight supports Kadkhodae's argument that "fragmented narration and inner monologue serve as tools of subaltern expression" (809). By demonstrating that silence holds meaning, Nafisi challenges simplistic notions about the distinction between speech and silence. She achieves this by showing that the subaltern can "speak," albeit not in hegemonic ways.

In the case of Nafisi, subaltern theory highlights how the speech of the oppressed exists on the periphery of her narrative but ultimately determines the actual definition of her narrative. The memoir is not a replacement for their experiences. Still, it develops a platform for indirect resistance, thereby strengthening the theoretical assertion that storytelling can be viewed as a subaltern style of agency. The reading will enhance the research question by explaining how the narration in literature as discourse reclaims voice against mutedness and a narrative text delivers voice against epistemic domination. It also contributes to filling the diagnosed research gap by providing evidence on how the narrative silence may be used as a form of resistance, viewed as such in itself.

3. Counter-Narrative and Literary Resistance

The last axis of analysis employs counter-narrative and literary resistance, drawing on the theories of bell hooks, James C. Scott, and Michel Foucault. These theorists theorise the notion of storytelling as an act of political intervention that can be disruptive to the existing ideology and a means to generate counter-spaces. In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, epistemic insurrection is made possible through literature, and women reclaim the intellectual space controlled by a regime that regulates both the body and thought. The very activity of reading turns into a subversive act after all, prohibited books form a symbolic resistance tool.

A vivid example of this emerges when Nafisi shares the experience of the forbidden book club: "*We were not reading only Lolita; we were reading it against the backdrop of our lives... We were also reading ourselves into being*" (Nafisi, 133). The scene epitomises the concept of counter-narrative, as articulated by hooks, to regain voice and agency (57). The students engage with Western literary texts not to emulate them, but to articulate their own experiences, thereby constructing an alternative discourse that defies both state censorship and reductive Western feminist perspectives.

Another captivating moment occurs during the reading of *The Great Gatsby*. Nafisi discusses how the novel's themes of illusion, disappointment, and moral deterioration connected strongly with her students: "*They saw in Gatsby a mirror of their own shattered dreams... the green light across the bay was not just his-it was theirs too*" (Nafisi, 144). This intertextual identification aligns with Scott's (1990) theory of "hidden transcripts," which posits that oppressed groups often use coded cultural forms to express dissent (59). The literature class becomes a rehearsal space for unspoken resistance, where Western texts are appropriated as instruments of local subversion.

An additional example occurs when Nafisi recounts a student referencing *Madame Bovary* in a conversation about marital limitations: "Like Emma, I wanted something more, something beyond the veil and the walls. But I only had books" (Nafisi, 207). This aligns with Foucault's (1977) theory of discourse as power, wherein the state seeks to regulate knowledge by controlling what is permissible to read or articulate. In this instance, literature disrupts the cycle of surveillance, facilitating what Aghili refers to as "coded, metaphorical resistance through intertextuality" (94). Nafisi's pedagogy represents a form of counter-conduct as conceptualised by Foucault, serving as an alternative mode of thought within systems of control.

In Nafisi's case, the memoir becomes a meta-textual counter-narrative, documenting the precise mechanisms of literary resistance that it enacts. Nafisi reclaims narrative authority from

authoritarian and Orientalist frameworks by presenting forbidden writings as instruments for self-remaking. This analytical strand strengthens the central research argument by illustrating how counter-narrative operates not only in content but in form, turning *Reading Lolita in Tehran* into a textual site of insurgent meaning-making. It also reinforces the study's contribution by situating memoir as an active agent in the broader politics of resistance literature.

4. Conclusion of the Analysis

Collectively, the three analytical prisms, postcolonial feminist resistance, subaltern voice, and counter-narrative, afford an understanding of how the work of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* functions not simply as a testimonial but rather as a multifaceted literary protest. Nafisi performs a nuanced struggle in her narration: first, by prioritising the intellectual potential of Iranian women in the context of religious authoritarianism; second, by redefining and reinterpreting the role of such canonical texts as Western ones within a local and subaltern feminist framework. Each thematic focus demonstrates how literature in the memoir functions as both refuge and rebellion, turning silence into speech and marginalisation into visibility.

The postcolonial feminist approach demystifies how Nafisi and her students navigate between hybrid identities and challenge patriarchal-nationalist ideologies without conforming to Western feminist models. The subaltern theory lens highlights how narrative silence, hesitation, and coded storytelling act as tools for voicing the otherwise unvoiced. Ultimately, the counter-narrative approach demonstrates how reading and teaching become political practices that foster alternative modes of knowing and being.

These findings directly address the research question: *How does Azar Nafisi's Reading Lolita in Tehran enact postcolonial feminist resistance through the articulation of subaltern voices and the creation of a literary counter-narrative?* And offer a solid textual foundation for how each theoretical axis is tangibly written into narrative form in Azar

Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, thereby bringing about a feminist postcolonial resistance. Furthermore, they have helped bridge a gap in the scholarship by offering a multidisciplinary framework through which it is possible to articulate the ideological and aesthetic contradictions inherent in memoirs developed under authoritarian controls. Through this integrated analysis, the study reinforces the importance of memoir as an inherently political genre within contemporary postcolonial feminist literature and invites further inquiry into the intersection of literary form, pedagogy, and resistance.

V. DISCUSSION

This study aimed to examine how *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003) by Azar Nafisi serves as a site of postcolonial feminist resistance through the articulation of subaltern voices and the construction of counter-narratives. The multilayered application of the interpretive approach, facilitated by the three-pronged theoretical framework of postcolonial feminism, counter-narrative, and subaltern theory, enabled the interpretation of Nafisi's memoir to be conducted on multiple levels. The close reading revealed that the encounter with literature is an act of political insurrection, especially in an authoritarian environment where women are structurally relegated to a position of inaction.

Unlike previous studies that primarily viewed *Reading Lolita in Tehran* as a testimonial or autobiographical narrative (Agostino, 82; Riaz, 45), this present study emphasises its aesthetic methods and ideological roles. Although Johnson (82) underscored the memoir's structure as a confessional narrative and Riaz (51) focused on global memory, neither examined how Nafisi's pedagogical and literary framework constitutes a purposeful form of epistemic resistance. This study argues that literary conversation within the memoir serves not only as a cultural refuge but also as a means of assertive knowledge creation, particularly for women who have historically been positioned on the periphery of discourse.

Takapoui (245) and Khan (2025, 839) have recently explored broader themes of censorship and women's agency in Iranian memoirs, but did not analyse the role of Western literature in creating counter-public spheres. This present study made a contribution by illustrating how the selection of canonical texts (e.g., *Lolita*, *The Great Gatsby*) becomes central to the rearticulation of subjectivity and dissent. Similarly, Shandil (158) critiqued Western universalism in reading Iranian women's texts, a concern echoed and extended in this analysis through a more sustained engagement with postcolonial feminist theory (Spivak, 294; Mohanty, 77).

The study also aligned with and expanded upon findings by Bose (36) and Khanjani (10), who identified memoir as a form of subaltern voice. In contrast to their descriptive emphasis, this analysis provided a theoretical exploration of subaltern silence and fragmented voice as rhetorical instruments that challenge dominant narratives. Esfandiari (89) noted comparable techniques of fragmented narration in various Iranian women's writings; however, this study elucidated how these narrative strategies in Nafisi's memoir distinctly reclaim space for critical pedagogy and cultural agency.

As for counter-narratives, Melikyan (29) and Strydom (03) observed the subversive potential of literary framing. This study expanded on that knowledge by explaining how the classroom in a Nafisi novel can be read as a symbolic counter-public. In this environment, discontent can not only be experienced but also discussed and presented. In a study by Aghili (89), the exploration of metaphor and intertextuality as forms of resistance is expanded, advocating for a more comprehensive interpretation of reading as an inherently political act. Donnarumma (37) underscored the importance of interdisciplinary analysis as a methodological principle, which this study implemented by incorporating literary theory, feminist critique, and cultural studies into its interpretive model.

By engaging with these scholarly perspectives and extending them through a cohesive theoretical framework, this study has addressed a key gap in

the literature. It has also demonstrated that the kind of narrative that *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is not just a memoir of oppression, but a pedagogical narrative of resistance that resists binary framings, such as East versus West, tradition versus modernity, and religion versus feminism. This contribution repositions the text within global feminist discourse, affirming the memoir's relevance beyond its specific Iranian context.

Regarding the research objectives, the study has successfully fulfilled both objectives. To begin with, it has shown how literary reading in the memoir serves as an epistemic instrument of resistance, empowering subaltern discourse through textual performance. Second, it has demonstrated how the form and structure of the memoir, as plural, fractured, and dialogic, function as a counter-discursive sphere that evades ideological control not only by religious patriarchy but also by Western liberalism. These results support the research question: How does Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* perform postcolonial feminist resistance by voicing the subaltern and offering a literary counter-narrative?

Ultimately, it is challenging to deny that this study contributes to an ever-growing body of scholarship that views memoir in less passive terms, namely as an active, political, aesthetic, and epistemological intervention. It highlights the importance of studying literary works by people from the Global South through the lens of theory, with an emphasis on complexity, intersectionality, and resistance.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study presents a critical analysis of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003) by Azar Nafisi, utilising a three-storied theoretical framework: postcolonial feminism, subaltern theory, and counter-narrative discourse. The central argument was that not only was Nafisi's memoir a personal narrative of life under an authoritarian regime, but also a literary and ideological intervention that retrieved agency for subaltern women by

suggesting a reading. Through close textual analysis, the study demonstrates that the memoir's pedagogical strategies, intertextual layers, and narrative structure collectively function as tools of epistemic resistance and cultural dissent.

The findings confirm once again that postcolonial feminist resistance in the context of Nafisi is not discussed as an explicit political struggle, but rather through literary expression, which destabilises hegemonic discourses. Her students' silencing and marginalisation in the socio-political order give them a voice and subjectivity in the privacy of the literature classroom. Seemingly apolitical, it turns out to be a potent form of subversion that represents Spivak's idea of subaltern self-representations and Mohanty's criticism of feminist universalism. The subaltern's agency is thus redefined, not in terms of visibility within hegemonic structures, but through the capacity to read, interpret, and narrate their own experiences.

The narrative fragmentation, metaphor, and literary allusion that help encode dissent in a politically circumscribed setting are equally significant in memoir. Not only do these narrative tactics avoid censorship, but they also permit polyphonic acts of resistance, allowing for the expression of a multiplicity of perspectives as variously voiced and expressed by the teacher, the student, the narrator, and the reader to converge in the same interpretive horizon and readership. This counter-narrative role of the memoir confronts not only the ideological monopoly of the Iranian state but also the narrow-eyed perspective of Western liberal feminism, leaving the text in a critical middle ground that breaks with both the East/West binary and the secular/religious and non-modern/modern divides.

Such discussion frailty enriches the modern interpretation of memoirs from the Global South with the re-contextualisation of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* as a theoretical entity of resistance literature. It also supports the usefulness of interdisciplinary frameworks that traverse literary criticism, feminist theory, and cultural studies as

a method of explaining how narrating a story becomes equally a source of survival, criticism, and change. Instead of being depicted as a victimising and passive spectator, Nafisi's narrative remodels the Iranian woman as a reader, commentator, and agent with the ability to create meaning.

Altogether, the study has achieved a twofold objective: to demonstrate that literary reading in Nafisi's memoir serves as a form of epistemic and feminist resistance, and to reveal that the text's structure incorporates a counter-discursive initiative that empowers subaltern voices. The fact that the memoir is situated at the boundary between literatures of resistance and political commentary makes this study not only fill the gap in current scholarship but also be part of the movement that every piece of literature should be read as a form of intellectual struggle. Future studies can examine similar memoirs written by Iranian or Middle Eastern women through a comparative analysis. Also of interest to teachers in repressive situations is the strategic utility of literary reading as a form of resistance and reconceptualisation of identity.

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