Echoes of Tehran

A Geocritical Reading of Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*

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Abstract *The Islamic revolution of 1979 in Iran initiated a significant transformation of Iranians' urban life, with a drastic reduction in the public sphere of everyday life. Iranian-American writer Azar Nafisi depicts the post-revolution everyday life of Tehran in her book,* Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books. *In Nafisi's narratives, space and place serve not only as settings but as embodiments of her personal experiences, socio-cultural observations, and political commentaries. This paper addresses the recurring theme of the distinction between private and public life within Iranian society. Applying the theoretical framework of geocriticism, which includes space and place, literary cartography, and spatial relations in literature, allows for an understanding of how these spatial elements function within her narratives. This, in turn, influences the reader's interpretation and experience of the story. Nafisi infuses each location with life, highlighting its unique attributes and history. This not only enhances the reader's understanding of the context but also heightens the emotional intensity of the narratives. Nafisi's narrative strategy is characterized by a sophisticated interplay between the personal and political, the factual and the imaginative. She creates an "imagined homeland," a literary cartography that is not just about space, but also about the socio-cultural and emotional experiences of its people. By exploring the urban narratives in Nafisi's prose, this work uncovers the dynamic relationship between the transformation of the city of Tehran and its residents.*

Keywords *Azar Nafisi; Geocriticism; Space and Place; Thirdspace; Tehran*

Introduction

In geocriticism, space goes beyond being simple geographical settings and has a broader significance within the narrative. Space, whether represented as a physical location or a metaphorical construct, is not merely a passive setting but functions as an active element that both influences and is influenced by the characters and events within the narrative. They can also act as a reflection of the characters' inner states, social patterns, or cultural contexts. Nafisi's narrative exemplifies this, with the city playing a pivotal role that goes beyond a mere setting. The actions, experiences, and decisions of the characters directly impact the city's development, while the city itself shapes the unfolding of the story and the characters' experiences. Thus, in the context of this work, the use of geocriticism explores how Nafisi's representations of space and place are shaped by the social, cultural, and historical context of contemporary Iran. Geocriticism can offer insights into the construction of a sense of place in Nafisi's writing and how it reflects larger social and political issues. Therefore, the main question of this paper is: How does Nafisi create and utilize "spaces" within her narratives to portray the complexities of post-revolutionary Iranian society?

Nafisi is a prominent Iranian-American author best known for her memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*. Published in 2003, this work has since gained global recognition (Kakutani). As an iconic writer within the Iranian diaspora literature, Nafisi's works have received acclaim but also courted controversy. Despite initially receiving praise from a supportive community of Iranian American activists and scholars who saw it as a text that could positively impact Americans' perception of Iranians in the United States, Nafisi's memoir has faced critical and, in some cases, even harsh criticism from scholars of Iran, particularly those with Iranian origins (Motlagh 413). Some have questioned Nafisi's general representation of Iran and Iranians, notably Fatemeh Keshavarz in *Jasmine and Stars: Reading More than 'Lolita' in Tehran* (2007) and Hamid Dabashi in *Iran: A People Interrupted* (2007) (Motlagh). However, the focus of this paper is not to assess the accuracy or realism of the author's portrayals of Iran. Here, I discuss how Nafisi's strategy of creating a space transcending time and place not only blurs the boundaries between the past and present but also between reality and imagination.[1]

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1   The content of this article is extracted from a section in my doctoral dissertation, titled "The Literary Cartography of Tehran."

Following the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979, there was a substantial transformation in the everyday urban life of Iranians. Many public places (bars, clubs, and even coffee houses) disappeared; the hijab became compulsory; gender segregation regulations in certain public places were enforced; and the meaning and names of many symbolic landmarks and streets were changed, e.g., Tehran's Shahyad Tower was renamed Azadi Tower. By renaming the tower to Azadi Tower, which means "Freedom Tower" in Persian, the government sought to reinforce its ideological message of freedom and independence, aligning with the narrative of the Islamic Revolution. This renaming not only reflected a change in the physical landscape of the city but also represented a symbolic transformation of the city's identity and the values it symbolized. Thus, the influence of this new totalitarian Islamic government manifests in various ways. Firstly, it shapes the physical landscape of the city through urban planning and architectural choices that reflect the regime's ideological agenda. Mosques and religious institutions may take precedence in urban development, altering the visual and spatial fabric of the city. Additionally, the imposition of strict moral codes and regulations on dress and behavior can significantly impact the way public places are used and experienced. Moreover, the influence of a repressive regime extends beyond the physical realm into the social and cultural dimensions of urban life. The imposition of state-sanctioned ideologies shapes the mindset and behavior of the city's inhabitants. This leads to self-censorship, where individuals modify their actions and expressions to conform to the government's expectations, thus impacting the overall social dynamics of the city.

In her writing, Nafisi employs language and narrative techniques to construct a sense of place that is intertwined with her identity and experiences. The "spaces"—whether physical, such as her home and the city of Tehran, or conceptual, such as the space of her memories and thoughts—are integral to understanding her work. They provide insights into the socio-political realities of post-revolutionary Iran and how these realities influence individual lives and collective experiences. The general structure of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, which includes chapters named "Lolita," "Gatsby," "James," and "Austen," is rooted in Nafisi's experiences teaching these authors and their works at the university and discussing them in her reading club in Tehran. Nafisi relates these texts and their topics of revolution, public life, prison, love, confiscation, etc., to her reality living in the Islamic Republic of Iran. She utilizes space as a narrative tool, illustrating the dichotomy between oppressive and liberating spaces, public and private spaces, as well as physical spaces and spaces of the mind. Using

multiple flashbacks, the story is presented as a series of narratives in which "space" is the central theme.

In this paper, I clarify the distinction between space and place and introduce the concept of geocriticism to understand the representations of space and place in Nafisi's work. I then delve into the influence of the repressive government on everyday life in Tehran, exploring the physical, social, and cultural dimensions of urban life. Additionally, I examine how Nafisi constructs a sense of place. I introduce the notion of urban imaginaries to understand collective perceptions and representations of Tehran. Finally, I explore the concept of Thirdspace as a way to bridge the gap between physical and mental spaces. Throughout the paper, I highlight the significance of Nafisi's narratives in capturing the complexities of post-revolutionary Iranian society and the interplay of memory, imagination, and reality in constructing a sense of place.

Geocriticism, Thirdspace, and Urban Imaginaries

An important distinction in humanistic geography is that between space and place. Tuan explains what starts as an undifferentiated "space" becomes a "place" as we learn more about it and assign value to it (161). According to Tuan, "space" refers to a more abstract, undifferentiated area, a location which lacks specific meaning or value to a person. On the other hand, "place" is a specific space that has been given meaning through personal, cultural, or historical associations. It is a space in which one becomes invested, or to which one feels a belonging. He elucidates that what makes a place a place, what distinguishes it from undifferentiated space, is the pause, the rest of the eye, during which the observer suddenly grasps the discrete part of the space as something that is attracting attention (161). Place is associated with a certain way of seeing, which can be described as critical—in the sense that the interpretation, evaluation, and analysis of its meaning, functioning, and effects are assumed at the moment when a certain part of the space becomes distinguishable as a place (Tally, *Topophrenia* 32–33). When a space is recognized as a "place," it takes on additional layers of meaning as it is interpreted and analyzed for its meaning, functions, and effects. In other words, the moment we start seeing a space as a "place," we begin to analyze it, and it becomes rich with meaning for interpretation.

While the recognition of space and place in literary analysis is increasing, debates persist on the most effective approach to understanding their impor-

tance in literature. Geocriticism offers a new perspective on the relationship between space, place, and literature by emphasizing how a text fits into its geographical and cultural environment, and how this environment shapes the text itself. Tally states that "[t]he final word in Geocriticism is quite fittingly the verb *explore*" (62). For him, exploration captures the essence of the discipline, which is to discover, expose, and analyze the various ways in which space and place are intertwined with human experience. By exploring literary and cultural expressions, geocriticism seeks to understand how places are created, represented, and interpreted. Through the verb 'explore,' Tally highlights the active and ongoing nature of geocriticism, which is not just about analyzing the world around us, but actively engaging with it.

In this paper, I discuss what Nafisi calls the space beyond time and space, the real-and-imagined space, the space she finds in reading, such as the "democratic" space of universities. Tally discusses Soja's conception of "Thirdspace" as a way of not only bridging the gap between physical and mental spaces—the "real" geography out there and the representations of space we carry in our heads (first- and second-space, respectively)—but also transforming it (16). In *Thirdspace*, Soja explains that:

> [E]verything comes together in Thirdspace: subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history. (56–57)

Thirdspace is, therefore, a space of complexity and inclusivity where various elements coexist, interact with, and influence each other. It is a space of multiplicity that recognizes the many facets of human experience and rejects binary understandings of the world.

Moreover, the term urban imaginaries will be used to characterize the collective perceptions, representations, and narratives—both real and imaginary—that people hold about urban spaces. The urban imaginary highlights how the inhabitants of a place imagine their city, which is based on material facts and is part of the reality of the city and, therefore, part of the nation's history, traditions, and culture (Huyssen 3). Imaginaries are defined as "socially shared and transmitted (both within and between cultures) representational assemblages that interact with people's personal imaginings" (Salazar 576). These imaginaries may emerge from lived encounters with cityscapes, cul-

tural representations in media, literary works, and collective memories. As such, urban imaginaries become a repository of shared meanings, symbols, and emotions, reflecting the relationship between the external world and the internal world of the imagination. Examining urban imaginaries allows for a comprehensive exploration of how cities are not merely physical entities but also sites of complex socio-cultural constructions. Furthermore, understanding urban imaginaries provides a nuanced perspective on the transformative potential of cities, highlighting how they become catalysts for social change, innovation, and the negotiation of identities.

Socio-Spatial Dynamics of Everyday Life in Tehran

Reading Lolita in Tehran begins with how Nafisi creates a space for herself beyond the harsh realities of her life during the Islamic revolution and how gradually all her contact with the outside world is confined to a place where space and storytelling merge (9). Nafisi highlights her daily struggle against the arbitrary rules and restrictions of Islamic laws as she prepares to enter public life (9). She describes that in "a special class" in her private place, she does not have to go through the painful rituals associated with her experience of university teaching, which determined what she wore, how she behaved, and what gestures she had to remember to control. The situation was especially worse for female students, she continues, who were punished for running up the stairs when they were late for class, for laughing in the hallways, and for talking to the opposite sex (9). The narrator describes her living room, "that room," as a symbolic representation of her "nomadic, borrowed life" (7). From a geocritical perspective, following a stratigraphic logic, Nafisi shows how the present space of her living room contains a past that flows, as the narrator notes, "[v]agrant pieces of furniture from different times and places were thrown together … these incongruous ingredients created a symmetry that the other, more deliberately furnished rooms in the apartment lacked" (7). In describing this place, she reveals how this stratification of time in a space creates a symmetry in her life that other spaces lack. Nafisi explains that "[she] had met all of them in the magical space of [her] living room. They came to [her] house in a disembodied state of suspension, bringing to [her] living room their secrets, their pains and their gifts" (58). Thus, she underscores the living room's role as a safe space where the individuals could shed their societal masks and reveal their true selves.

Nafisi creates a space where each student takes off her robe and scarf, "shaking her head" and "pauses before entering" to forget the external reality and enter a space she imagines is theirs (7). It is what Soja calls a space of "real-and-imagined" (56–57). Nafisi goes on to say that "only there is no room, just the teasing void of memory" (7). Dibazar discusses the complexity of public and private spaces in Iranian society, asserting that the line separating these two spheres is often blurred, with numerous overlaps and "in-between zones" (8). He discusses the way *Reading Lolita in Tehran* portrays the formation of a public community (Nafisi's living room) that is bound together by its respect for elements of privacy (8). This "public-in-private" space offers a venue for intellectual and emotional expression that is semi-public yet shielded from the constraints of the public sphere.

Nafisi explains the societal changes that took place in Iran following the Islamic revolution:

> After the revolution, almost all the activities one associated with being out in public—seeing movies, listening to music, sharing drinks or a meal with friends—shifted to private homes. It was refreshing to go out once in a while, even to such a desultory event. (299)

The revolution introduced new rules and norms that curtailed activities in public, shifting them predominantly to the confines of private homes. This shift represents a significant transformation in the society's sociocultural fabric, with public spaces losing their vibrancy and becoming more restrictive, while private spaces emerged as new centers for social and cultural activities. At the core of Nafisi's narrative is an argument for the necessity of personal freedoms and the ability to engage in a dialogue between the public and private worlds. She illustrates the dehumanizing effects of societal restrictions on these essential aspects of life, emphasizing the importance of self-expression in affirming one's existence and experiences. She feels reduced to a mere "piece of cloth," devoid of personal characteristics, moving under the control of an "invisible force" (167). Similarly, she depicts a scene where everything is familiar yet alien, highlighting the disconnect between the past and the present (169). Nafisi recalls the transformation of her old house into something unrecognizable which signifies her loss of relevance and place in society (169). Her cherished personal spaces and items have been replaced, reflecting how societal changes have invalidated her past experiences and identity. Her feelings of irrelevance extend to the point where she feels unseen in her own house, symbolizing her feel-

ings of invisibility and insignificance in her society. Nafisi discusses the common responses to such feelings of irrelevance, noting that some people may physically escape, while others may assimilate the characteristics of their "conquerors" to regain relevance (169). Alternatively, she suggests that some individuals, like Claire in *The American* by Henry James, retreat inward and create a sanctuary in their own corner, taking the essential parts of their life underground (169). Thus, they preserve their identity and personal space by disconnecting from oppressive societal norms and retreating into a private world. In her depiction of becoming irrelevant, Nafisi underscores the devastating impact of societal changes on personal identity and the importance of personal space and freedom in maintaining one's sense of relevance and belonging.

Nafisi's representation of her room as a mental space becomes valuable only when she discovers that this imaginary space gives her a sense of identity and belonging, which she refers to as a "precious memory" (7). She explains, "[t]hat room, which I never paid much attention to at that time, has gained a different status in my mind's eye now that it has become the precious object of memory" (7). Nafisi describes this unique space as a collection of various elements from her past, including "the fireplace, a fanciful creation of my husband," and "a love seat against one wall, over which I had thrown a lace cover, my mother's gift from long ago" (7). Additionally, she portrays this space with a window that looks out onto a *cul-de-sac* named Azar. This name is the same as the author's, providing a reflective connection between the author and the place. The window symbolizes the author's connection to her geographic origins, and how physical space shapes her sense of self. However, when she looks through the window, she sees only the highest branches of a massive tree and the Elburz Mountains above the buildings in the distance, while the street and its reality disappear from her sight. She has a place on the chair with her back to the window; she adds:

> I could not see my favorite mountains from where I sat, but opposite my chair, on the far wall of the dining room, was an antique oval mirror, a gift from my father, and in its reflection, I could see the mountains capped with snow, even in summer, and watch the trees change color. That censored view intensified my impression that the noise came not from the street below but from some far-off place, a place whose persistent hum was our only link to the world we refused, for those few hours, to acknowledge. (Nafisi 8)

Through the mirror's reflection, the narrator sees the Elburz Mountains, which become a source of comfort and inspiration for her. Beyond a mere physical object, the mirror in Nafisi's account becomes a metaphorical tool for self-reflection and introspection. Through its reflection, Nafisi transcends the limitations of her physical space and transports herself to a different realm of imagination, one unconstrained by the political and social realities of her surroundings. In addition, the mirror is also significant in how it highlights the tension between reality and imagination. Consequently, she creates an illusion of the outside world. This illusion serves to connect Nafisi with the outside world and her memories of Tehran while also remaining isolated in her self-created sanctuary. Hendelman-Baavur discusses how the process of self-alienation in Nafisi's autobiography leads the author into a self-imposed exile, confining herself to one room in the family home and creating a sanctuary for herself and her students that becomes an illusion—a reflection—as she can only see "her" Elburz Mountains from her seat through the reflection of the mirror (51). This new place is not only physical but also psychological, as the author can connect with her memories and experiences through her imagination and the literature she reads.

It is precisely this dynamic space—where imagination intertwines with memory—that illustrates how something transforms into a "place" underscoring the centrality of imagination in shaping her world. Nafisi deepens this exploration of imagination through her use of intertextuality. For instance, she not only refers to Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Lolita* (1955), a work with profound literary influence, but also uses the novel as a lens to view the political and social climate of post-revolution Iran. Nafisi's use of intertextuality serves several objectives. Firstly, it establishes a dialogue between her work and the works of renowned authors, emphasizing the immediate relevance and resonance of these texts within the current intellectual and cultural discourse. Secondly, it allows her to draw parallels between the experiences of characters in these influential works and of individuals living in Iran, shedding new light on both experiences. Finally, it allows Nafisi to make broader philosophical and political statements by referring to literary works that have already achieved iconic status. Thus, Nafisi's descriptions of place are layered with meaning and significance that go beyond the physical characteristics of the places themselves. Hendelman-Baavur points out that Nafisi becomes "a guardian of a new space by captivating her self-narrative through her own imagination and affections and reticulating it with her favorite Western literary protagonists, such as Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita and Scott Fitzgerald's Gatsby …" (51). Hence,

the city—here Tehran, a physical entity anchored in reality and populated by many visible and significant buildings and urban spaces—is distorted into an illusion, a memory, and a perception reconstructed in the author's imagination.

The narrator explains, "[o]ur world in that living room with its window framing my beloved Elburz Mountains became our sanctuary, our self-contained universe, mocking the reality of black-scarved, timid faces in the city that sprawled below" (Nafisi 5–6). Her poetic description reinforces the authentic space she and her students have created. The mountains, visible from the classroom window, serve as a constant reminder of their struggle and the importance of their work. This contrasts with the harsh reality they are avoiding. The majestic Elburz Mountains occupy a prominent position in Iranian history and mythology, being a distant outpost of heroes and mythical gods.[2] They are woven into the fabric of Tehran's identity, with local folklore and legends cherishing their majestic allure, and spark the imagination of its inhabitants. These mountains hold a central place in Tehran's emotional geography and have become an inseparable part of the city's collective identity and cultural landscape, thereby symbolizing the harmonious connection between nature and urban life in Tehran. The name Elburz itself is derived from Hara Berezaiti, the legendary mountain in the Avesta, which is the main text of Zoroastrianism. Thus, by referring to "my beloved Elburz" which glorifies the setting of "that room," Nafisi is connecting to her cultural heritage and glorifying her country's past. For Nafisi, this connection is important as it allows her to celebrate and appreciate the richness of her heritage. It also provides Nafisi with a sense of belonging and a connection to her roots, which is especially valuable given her life in exile, away from her homeland. The mountains serve as a bridge between her past and present, drawing on the collective memory of Iran and intertwining it with her experiences in the diaspora. Nafisi's use of "my beloved" adds an emotional depth to the text and serves to emphasize the importance of the mountains to Nafisi's sense of self and identity.

Furthermore, Nafisi uses her imagination to bridge two different periods and locations. While in "another room," she recreates the space of "that room"

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2   For instance, in the renowned Persian epic, the Shahnameh, composed by Ferdowsi, the Elburz Mountains are depicted as far more than a mere geographical entity; they are portrayed as a mystical and symbolic landscape, where the Simurgh, a mythical bird known for its wisdom and benevolence, shelters the abandoned infant Zal and raises him.

she left behind, establishing a connection between her past and present environments. She explains how she imagined this other room she is now sitting in and describes her room in "this other world" and writes, "[h]ere and now in that other world that cropped up so many times in our discussions, I sit and reimagine myself and my students, my girls as I came to call them, reading *Lolita* in a deceptively sunny room in Tehran" (6). Nafisi describes how her students brought so much color to that room as they took off their scarves and showed their authentic characters. She creates a unique character for "that room" by telling the readers how "that room, for all of [them], became a place of transgression. What a wonderland it was!" (8).

In her speech at a 2017 literary event, Aspen Words, Nafisi emphasized that "*through imagination, through works of art, through works of literature, we find a common space in which to communicate and reassert and reaffirm our humanity*". In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, she asks the reader to imagine them so that she and her students can live in the reader's imagination:

> Against the tyranny of time and politics, imagine us the way we sometimes didn't dare to imagine ourselves: in our most private and secret moments, in the most extraordinarily ordinary instances of life, listening to music, falling in love, walking down the shady streets or reading Lolita in Tehran. And then imagine us again with all this confiscated, driven underground, taken away from us. (6)

In this way, Nafisi highlights the power of imagination and fiction over a repressive reality. She notes that "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). She creates a literary space that resists the dominant ideological and religious biases enforced after the revolution in Iran. Furthermore, the narrator mentions how *Lolita*'s story is connected to her memories of Tehran, so she believes that *Lolita*'s fictional world provides a new color to Tehran, just as Tehran redefines and transforms *Lolita*'s story into something familiar which ultimately becomes "our Lolita."

Nafisi encourages the readers to contemplate the ways in which our senses engage with the city and invites them to explore the subtle interplay between the visible and the concealed, enriching our comprehension of Tehran's urban landscape. Nafisi's narratives disrupt the boundaries imposed by the external environment. The book club in her living room, serving as a private sanctuary for forbidden texts, offers participants a means to transcend the constraints

of the public sphere. It becomes a site of resistance and emancipation, echoing how individuals maneuver and challenge the city's limitations. Here, Nafisi delves into discussions of literature, illuminating the relationship between text and context. The narrator describes how one of her students, "lived in so many parallel worlds: the so-called real world of her family, work and society; the secret world of our class and her young man; and the world she had created out of her lies" (297). This reveals how the woman is living in and juggling multiple "worlds" or realities, each with its own set of rules, expectations, and experiences. It shows how her lived experience—her personal context—influences her interpretation of the text and vice versa.

Thus, Nafisi's narrative in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* offers a profound exploration of the socio-spatial dynamics of everyday life in Tehran. Through her vivid depictions of private and public spaces and the tensions and overlaps between them, we gain a nuanced understanding of the impact of political and societal restrictions on individual freedoms and identities. Even as she navigates the challenges of displacement, Nafisi maintains a strong bond with her cultural heritage and geographical origins. Consequently, her portrayal of Tehran transcends the physicality of the city, delving into its emotional and cultural landscapes, which ultimately shapes her identity and sense of belonging.

Poetics of Place: Nafisi's Tehran

Classifying a literary work such as *Reading Lolita in Tehran* as either autofiction or autobiography is subjective and relies heavily on the interpretations and perspectives of readers and scholars. This ambiguity arises from the complex nature of genre classification when examining works that blur the boundaries between fact and fiction. As readers approach the text with their personal reading experiences, their views on its categorization may differ. While there are established criteria for distinguishing different genres, these boundaries often remain fluid and open to interpretation. In the case of autofiction and autobiography, the distinction becomes less clear when a work intertwines personal experiences with fictional elements. Readers bring their backgrounds, knowledge, and perspectives, which significantly influence how they perceive and categorize a text. For instance, one reader might focus on the autobiographical aspects of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, realize the author's reflections on her experiences in Iran, and consider it primarily an autobiography. In contrast, another might focus on the fictionalized elements present in the narrative, high-

lighting the imaginative reconstruction of events and character portrayals, and consider it autofiction.

In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Nafisi uses pseudonyms for the students depicted in her memoir to protect their identities and mitigate potential consequences. By incorporating fictional names, Nafisi addresses the ethical considerations inherent in writing about real individuals within a memoir. In the author's note, Nafisi states, "[t]he facts in this story are true insofar as any memory is ever truthful, but I have made every effort to protect friends and students, baptizing them with new names and disguising them perhaps even from themselves". Consequently, within the scope of this work, I will use the term "autobiographical writing" to capture the essence of Nafisi's literary works. This terminology is deliberately chosen, considering the multi-faceted nature of her narratives and the fluid boundaries between reality and imagination that are often found in Nafisi's storytelling. This approach allows for a holistic examination that considers the interplay between the author's personal experiences, the broader context of her narratives, and the creative fictional elements.

The importance of urban imaginaries in this research is highlighted by the experience of displacement, as places are revealed in relation to changes apparent in movement and agency. Nafisi captures the essence of Tehran's streets, neighborhoods, and social interactions, inviting readers to immerse themselves in the city's intricacies. By drawing on universal themes and human experiences, Nafisi's prose resonates with a diverse audience, transcending geographical and cultural boundaries. For instance, she explores themes such as freedom, oppression, and the power of literature in her work, praised by readers worldwide. Examining Nafisi's literary cartography enriches the diverse narratives that collectively contribute to forming Tehran's urban identity. Her prose goes beyond the mere depiction of cityscapes and architecture, delving into the intricacies of everyday life, social interactions, and the emotional experiences of its inhabitants. Nafisi intertwines personal histories with the broader historical context of Tehran, creating a sense of continuity between past and present. Through this historical perspective, readers become immersed in the city's evolution over time, understanding how cultural and political transformations have shaped its urban fabric. In Nafisi's narrative, Tehran emerges not merely as a physical space but as a living and breathing organism where individual lives intersect and weave the complex fabric of urban existence. Nafisi's literary cartography becomes not

just a depiction of Tehran but a window into the essence of the city's soul, inviting us to explore its collective imagination and cultural consciousness.

The specific historical and cultural context of Tehran during the Islamic Revolution becomes a crucial element that shapes the narrative and themes of the book. The setting of Tehran during this tumultuous period is depicted as a space that exists within and apart from the established social order. The complex layers of existence and experience within that location play a crucial role in shaping the narrative's complexity. The restrictions on speech and expression during the Islamic Revolution created tension between the public and private spheres, allowing for a multitude of narratives and realities to coexist within the city.

The story unfolds within a fluid environment, which allows readers to project their experiences, contexts, and cultural backgrounds onto the narrative. This dynamic quality of the setting encourages readers to engage actively with the text, interpreting and reimagining the story's events in various ways. Different readers may envision the events taking place in diverse cultural, historical, or geographical contexts, leading to a rich tapestry of interpretations. This richness and diversity of perspectives mirror the broader themes of the book, including the exploration of individual agency, the impact of cultural and societal constraints, and the complex interplay between literature and real-life experiences. The act of reading itself becomes a transformative experience, transporting characters and readers to realms that coexist alongside the familiar. Hence, Nafisi's narrative can exist in a state of paradox, where it is simultaneously real and unreal.

This duality challenges our conventional understanding of what is real. Dennis emphasizes that literature can be viewed as a "heterotopic space" (175); this suggests that literature has a dual existence. On one hand, it resides in the tangible and social aspects of our world. On the other, it maintains a level of abstraction that allows it to question and potentially disrupt established norms (175). Dennis continues her argument emphasizing that "the space of literature, then, both removed from our world and strangely proximate, like heterotopia, taps reserves of imagination to unsettle what is" (176). In other words, literature has the power to unsettle our conventional understanding of reality by presenting alternative perspectives, narratives, and possibilities. Dennis concludes that just as certain heterotopias reveal the illusory nature of real spaces, literature also functions as a space of illusion that exposes the partitioned sites of human life as even more illusory (176). She writes, "[t]his space, removed from but related to all other spaces, at its best causes us to

inhabit our own world somewhat differently, changing its hue and resourcing the imagination" (176). However, it is important to note that literature is incredibly diverse, covering a wide range of genres, themes, and purposes; it goes beyond mere illusion and serves to connect different worlds, inviting us to explore diverse cultures, periods, and viewpoints. It allows us to experience the genuine emotions and experiences of characters.

Nafisi's work provides a compelling illustration of Soja's concept of Thirdspace, wherein various dimensions of reality, imagination, and representation converge. The narrator explains:

> I attempted to shape other places according to my concept of Iran. I tried to Persianize the landscape and even transferred for a term to a small college in New Mexico, mainly because it reminded me of home. You see, Frank and Nancy, this little stream surrounded by trees, meandering its way through a parched land, is just like Iran. Just like Iran, just like home. What impressed me most about Tehran, I told whoever cared to listen, were the mountains and its dry yet generous climate, the trees and flowers that bloomed and thrived on its parched soil and seemed to suck the light out of the sun. (82–83)

The narrator's attempt to "shape other places according to [her] concept of Iran" serves as a manifestation of the interplay between the real and the imagined, the abstract and the concrete, the subjective and the objective, and the knowable and the unimaginable, as described by Soja. Additionally, the narrator's efforts to 'Persianize' her surroundings and find elements reminiscent of Iran in a foreign landscape reflect the blending of her subjective experiences and objective reality. This is also an example of the Thirdspace, where personal memories and experiences interact with the physical, tangible world. The "small college in New Mexico" becomes a space where her memories and experiences of Iran interact with her present reality, demonstrating the convergence of first- and second-space in Soja's concept of Thirdspace (82). Nafisi's descriptions of Tehran and her attempts to find elements of Iran in other places illustrate how imagination helps us understand complex spatial relationships and gives meaning to spatial abstractions. Her narrative effectively transforms abstract concepts of space into concrete, relatable experiences. Nafisi's narrative is imbued with collective perceptions, representations, and narratives about Tehran, both real and imaginary. Her detailed descriptions shape a mutual comprehension of the city, symbolizing

the dynamic relationship between the observable world and the realm of imaginative thought. This shared understanding is not confined to the narrative alone—it extends to Nafisi as the author, the characters in her story, and the readers, who contribute their personal perspectives and interpretations, thus becoming active participants in the creation of this shared vision of Tehran.

Nafisi portrays the university as a site of political and ideological struggle, a contested space where her students can explore alternative visions of reality and engage in critical thinking despite the repressive social and political climate of Iran. Foucault's concept of heterotopia suggests that certain spaces are inherently different from the surrounding world and can serve as places of otherness or escape from the norms and expectations of society (19). Nafisi depicts the university as a heterotopic space, where the boundaries between inside and outside are blurred, and where the normal rules and conventions of society are suspended. By doing so, she creates a space of possibility where her students can engage with and subvert the dominant literary canon.

One of the main characters in *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is a narrator's friend, referred to as the "Magician." Nafisi's use of the term is symbolic as the Magician seems to hold significance in her life, inspiring wonder and igniting her imagination. This is evident in the way Nafisi describes their interactions and the influence this character has on her perceptions and experiences. The narrator says:

> [d]oes every magician, every genuine one, like my own, evoke the hidden conjurer in us all, bringing out the magical possibilities and potentials we did not know existed? Here he is on this chair, the chair I am in the process of inventing. As I write, the chair is created: walnut, a brown cushion, a little uncomfortable, it keeps you alert. This is the chair, but he is not sitting on that chair; I am. He sits on the couch, the same brown cushions, softer perhaps, looking more at home than I do; it is his couch. He sits as he always does, right in the middle, leaving a vast empty space on either side. He does not lean back but sits up straight, his hands on his lap, his face lean and sharp. (Nafisi 337)

As the narrator describes the chair and the couch on which the Magician sits, she is "in the process of inventing"; she is simultaneously weaving a narrative that combines elements of reality and fiction (337). She imbues the scene with a sense of magic and wonder, particularly through the figure of the Magician. His posture and the way he occupies space—sitting upright in the middle

of the couch with vast empty spaces on either side—create an impression of dominance and importance. She uses her memories and experiences as a starting point and then embellishes them with elements of fiction to create a more engaging and immersive narrative. The 'place' here is simultaneously physical—a room with a chair and a couch—and symbolic, representing a space where memories and experiences are revisited and reimagined. Furthermore, the description of the chair "in the process of inventing" serves as a metaphor for the act of writing itself. As Nafisi creates the chair through her words, she is also creating a narrative, bringing to life the memories associated with the Magician. The detailed depiction of the chair and the couch—their color, texture, and comfort level—contributes to the "poetics of place" in this quote. These objects are not only physically present in the room, but they also hold symbolic significance, acting as tangible links to Nafisi's past. The chair is associated with her, while the couch is linked to the Magician, highlighting the dynamics of their relationship. Nafisi's narrative style here involves a meticulous observation of details, which not only adds depth to the characters but also enhances the reader's understanding of their relationship. This is a good example of Nafisi's ability to create a sense of place through her narrative. By blending elements of reality and fiction, she constructs a richly textured narrative that engages the reader on multiple levels. Her "poetics of place" enable the reader to visualize the setting, connect with the characters, and understand the complex dynamics of their relationship. Hence, the fusion of fiction and non-fiction makes Nafisi's narratives engaging, offering insights into the interplay of memory, imagination, and reality.

Conclusion

Nafisi depicts Tehran, not through its physical geography, but through shared experiences and emotional landscapes. This cartographic representation of Tehran goes beyond physical locales to encompass spaces of resistance, solidarity, and intellectual freedom within an oppressive regime. Through her engagement with literature, particularly her group discussions and analyses of various works, she outlines her positions within the oppressive structures of Iranian society and imagines possibilities beyond them. Nafisi's narratives weave together local and global stories, creating a multifaceted portrayal of Tehran that is interconnected with global narratives and experiences. Therefore, the sense of place becomes a significant part of her poetics. This analysis

provides a path towards a more nuanced understanding of the socio-cultural interplay that both shapes and is shaped by spatial dynamics in literature, thus adding depth to the broader field of geocriticism.

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