

Silenced Voices

Voces Silenciadas

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Abstract

From the time since Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* was written there have been multiple and contradictory voices analyzing this novel. Different perspectives presented different types of criticism, such as Formalism, Cultural Studies, Ideology and Structuralism, among others. Surprisingly enough, a voice from Tehran has come up writing the experience of a liberal and secular professor of English Literature –Azar Nafisi- who holds a secret book club with her female students who resist the revolutionary Islamic regime by studying banned literature. In her book *Reading Lolita in Tehran* Nafisi presents her intimate memoir highlighting the transformative power of fiction, the power of ideology and the banned freedom of young female students which involves their dreams, daily frustrations and entrapments, while analyzing Nabokov's text. Consequently, the aim of this presentation is to make a comparative analysis between *Lolita*'s story and the female students oppressed by the laws in the Islamic Republic of Iran which undermine their freedom. The theoretical framework which will support the analysis of this presentation is Gayatri Spivak's essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' together with Jacques Derrida's theory of Deconstruction.

Key Words: voices, freedom, ideology, gender, intertextuality

Resumen

Desde el momento en que Vladimir Nabokov escribió Lolita aparecieron voces múltiples y contradictorias analizando su novela. Las diferentes perspectivas presentaron diferentes tipos de crítica, tales como el Formalismo, los Estudios Culturales, Ideología y Estructuralismo, entre otros. Sorpresivamente, sin embargo, aparece una voz procedente de Tehran que relata la experiencia de una profesora liberal y secular de Literatura Inglesa -Azar Nafisi- que dirige con sus alumnas que resisten el régimen de la Revolución Islámica un club de lectura secreto estudiando literatura prohibida por el régimen. En su libro Leyendo Lolita en Tehran Nafisi presenta sus memorias íntimas destacando el poder transformador de la ficción, el poder de la ideología y la falta de libertad de las jóvenes estudiantes que afectan sus sueños, sus frustraciones diarias, sus atrapamientos mientras que proceden con el análisis del texto de Nabokov. Por consiguiente, el propósito de esta presentación es hacer un análisis comparativo entre la historia de Lolita ficcional y las jóvenes estudiantes oprimidas por las leyes impuestas por la República Islámica de Iran que anulan su libertad. El soporte teórico que permitirá el análisis de esta novela es el ensayo de Gayatri Spivak '¿Puede el Subalterno Hablar?' junto con la teoría de Deconstrucción de Jacques Derrida.

Palabras claves: voces, libertad, ideología, género, intertextualidad.

Introduction

In the contemporary world we live in there has been an increasing political, ideological, critical and artistic movement towards the empowerment of women.

Feminist criticism has a long-term origin, canonically starting with Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792 and going along with a great number of women critics and writers before and since then. Naming them would be unending and would deviate me from my point of interest.

The focus which will be analysed in this presentation is one of the main flash points among feminist critics by which is meant a politics of difference based on a fixed identity – women who are silenced, whose minds have been colonised and are very seldom represented in mainstream social agendas.

In her famous essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Gayatri Spivak claims that the subalterns exist outside power. They are not privileged, they do not speak in a vocabulary that will be heard in locations of power and they do not enter in official discourses. She takes up Michel Foucault's idea of discourse explaining that any system, any discourse, inevitably excludes something. She also refers to Foucault's idea of epistemic violence in which 'the asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of that Other in its precarious Subject-ivity' is found'. (Spivak, 2001, p. 2196).

The critic who tries to recover the subaltern's past, should sketch 'the itinerary of the trace that the silenced subaltern has left, should mark the sites where the subaltern was effaced, and should search for and find the discourses that made the effacing' (Spivak, 2001, p. 2197). Spivak wants the traces of these exclusions to haunt the reader. She urges him or her to hear the faint whisper of what could not be said, an 'attunement to the unheard' (Spivak, 2001, p. 2197).

Together with Spivak's representation of the Other I will analyse two texts following Jacques Derrida's idea of deconstruction to evoke 'the other of language' that is, the other as that which is 'beyond language and which summons language' (Royle, 2003, p. 33) through her silence.

The source of this analysis will be Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* which will give light to Azar Nafisi's account of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*

Source

The novel starts with the following words:

'Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta' (Nabokov, 1991, p. 7) This is the name of the nymphet, the title of the novel, the first word that appears in it together with the last one, 'and this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita' (Nabokov, 1991, p. 277). Humbert, the first-person narrator, is nymphomaniac.

Humbert immigrates in the USA from Europe, rents a room in Charlotte Haze's house. There he meets Lolita, Charlotte's daughter. He becomes obsessed with her and this leads him to marry Charlotte in order to be close to the nymphet. When Lolita's mother finds a diary written by Humbert and reads his intentions, she runs out to the street to post a letter accusing him of being a pervert; at that very moment a car runs over and kills Charlotte. This marks the beginning of Humbert's odyssey. It begins with the pursuit of Lolita, and the anxiety of overcoming sexual obstacles. Next, once Humbert and Lolita are lovers, there appears a story of jealousy and possessiveness, as Humbert is panic stricken by fears of rivals and by Lolita's own resistance. Finally, in Humbert's dealings with Quilty, Lolita's second follower, the double story or doppelgänger, he starts not only the persecution of Lolita but that of Quilty as well. Quilty is the embodiment of Humbert's limitations and his final failure. After 'three empty years' (Nabokov, 1991, p. 134) he meets Lolita again, married and pregnant but only to say goodbye to her forever. Humbert decides to take revenge on Quilty, considering him guilty for all the pain that he caused and kills him. Again here, Quilty is the mirror of Humbert's deeds. Between the two, Humbert decides to survive Quilty in order to make 'Lolita live in the minds of generations' (Nabokov, 1991, p. 309).

Women in Tehran

In another setting of time and place the writer Azar Nafisi writes her experience as she tells her story. It is the story of a liberal and secular professor of literature who holds a secret book club with her students who resist the Revolutionary Islamic Regime by studying banned literature.

In *Reading Lolita in Tehran* Azar Nafisi takes up four novels

to narrate her experience of analysing in hiding the feelings and perceptions of her students while reading these novels. By doing this, Nafisi defies and helps others 'to defy the radical Islam's war against women reflecting about the ravages of theocracy, about thoughtfulness and about the ordeals of freedom as well as the pleasures and deepening of consciousness' (Nafisi, 2008, p. 58) that result from an encounter with art, in this case literature, and with a particular teacher.

She carries the reader into the vivid lives of eight women who decide to explore the forbidden fiction of the west.

For nearly two years almost every Thursday these seven women come to her house and almost every time,

'I could not get over the shock of seeing them shed their mandatory veils and robes and burst into colour. When my students came into the room, they took off more than their scarves and robes. Gradually each one gained an outline and a shape, becoming her own inimitable self. Our world in that living room became our sanctuary, our self-contained universe, mocking the reality of black-scarved, timid faces in the city that sprawled below' (Nafisi, 2008, p. 5).

The issue of the veil cannot be evaded. It becomes the central metaphor for the discrimination and oppression of Iranian women. They disappear as free individuals and appear as copied versions of how all women should behave and act. According to Nafisi, a lot of women wear the veil not because they want to but because they are forbidden not to wearing it. Her point about the veil is about choice, women should choose to wear the veil because they want to. As to the Iranian code of behavior the body becomes a source of temptation and in order to protect men they have to cover it. If a woman genuinely and freely chooses to wear the veil because of her faith then she should do it (Nafisi, 2013).

She still keeps two photographs of her seven students. In the first they are standing against a white wall. Nafisi (2008) claims that according to the law of the land, they are dressed in black robes and head scarves, covered except for the oval of their faces and their hands. In the second photograph the same group appears standing against the wall. Only they have taken off their coverings. Splashes of colour separate one from the next. Each has become distinct through the colour and style of her clothes, the colour and the length of her hair (p. 4).

They have all recovered their individuality. Mahshid, whose father has been an ardent supporter of the Revolution and Sanaz, whose brother has taken to proving his masculinity by spying on her, come from conservative and religious families. Manna, whose house has been confiscated by the government, Azin, who is trying to make no pretense of covering her shoulders, Mitra and Nassrin, who seem to be trying to escape the confines of the thick black cloth, are progressive and secular; Mahshid who has spent time in jail mentions that her jail memories visit her from time to time and they are not very different from everyday life in Tehran.

Literature and Women

She starts her experience with Nabokov's novel *Lolita* and what appears is a new appreciation for this canonical novel. The question that might arise is why *Lolita*. Nafisi's reply is 'I had to choose a work of fiction that would most resonate with our lives in the Islamic Republic of Iran' (Nafisi, 2008, p. 3) and by doing this she produces an original account on the relationship between life and literature. Literature as a subversive power, a tool that turns anguish into a thing of enduring beauty. Art and language are put forward to these girls who have been silenced by a repressive society which forbids a woman to share certain deep ways of seeing and valuing. Literature, because it tells stories, because of its capacity to explore meaning in language is crucial to 'the deconstruction of logocentrism' (Sellers, 1986, p. 443).

In these clandestine classes Nafisi is her own self again as compared to the restrictions she has to go through in her literature classes in the University of Tehran where she has resigned. She can re-write together with this group of women the literary texts they analyse and by doing this, they can express what is inexpressible outdoors and speak their own minds. It is a room of their own and in that only room they start re-writing not only *Lolita's* but their own life stories.

'We were in that room to protect ourselves from the reality outside [...] this reality imposed itself on us. It created and shaped our intimacies, throwing us into unexpected complicity. Our relations became personal in many different ways. Not only did the most ordinary activity gained a new luminosity in the light of our secret, but everyday life sometimes took on the quality of make-believe or fiction'

(Nafisi, 2008, p. 59).

What is fiction? What is reality?

All literary texts, in other words, are rewritten if only unconsciously, by the individuals and societies which read them; indeed, there is no reading of a work which is not also a re-writing, a re-creation.

The students have not only created their own room but also a forbidden one in Tehran. The seven of them have the possibility of sharing confidences and by doing this they also share their secret lives with one another, defy the repressive reality outside that room, avenge themselves on those who controlled their lives and sympathize with their pains and joys.

'For that suspended time they abdicated their responsibilities to their families, friends and to the Islamic Republic [...]. They became addicted to the secure world they created through words, a conspiratorial world in which everything that was hostile and uncontrollable became soft and articulated' (Nafisi, 2008, p. 68).

Gayatri Spivak claims that 'a person's or group's identity is relational, a function of its place in a system of differences. There is no true or pure other; instead, the other always already exists in relation to the discourse that would name it as other' (Spivak, 2001, p. 2195).

Lolita in Tehran

Nabokov's novel *Lolita* paves the way for the students to raise other existential problems; issues such as gender and entrapment. Azin (Nafisi, 2008) questions, as women, 'do we have the same right as men to enjoy sex? How many of us would say yes, we do have a right, we have an equal right to enjoy sex, and if our husbands do not satisfy us, then we have a right to seek satisfaction elsewhere' (p.52).

Their silence speaks. It seems that the only voice that can be heard is the patriarchal one but the narrative shows the existence of the Other. She is allowed a voice that cannot be heard, which makes the narrative 'unavoidably dialogic' (Cobley, 2001, p. 132). The wound that produces the silence, brings about the impossibility of speaking, of screaming, of asking for help, of mending. This is the famous strategy of blaming the victim of her own tragedy.

Humbert is the first person narrator in the story so the reader only perceives his subjectivity and feelings. There is a point

in the novel where Humbert himself thinks that he is a victim of Lolita who possesses and manipulates him. When they reach the first hotel where they are going to spend the night the parodic narrator addresses the reader to reflect upon the feelings of the hero of his book and warns him not to skip the essential pages. It is now Humbert who addresses the reader by saying:

'Frigid gentlewomen of the jury [...] by six Dolores was wide awake, and by six fifteen we were technically lovers. I am going to tell you something very strange: it was she who seduced me [...] I feigned supreme stupidity and had her have her way [...] A greater endeavor lures me on: to fix once and for all the perilous magic of nymphets' (Nabokov, 1991, p. 134).

However, Humbert's narrative does not succeed his purpose. He understands that the 'singular and bestial cohabitation and the parody of incest' is more uncanny than 'the most miserable of family lives' (Nabokov, 1991, p. 287). Finally, the truth is exposed and it is Humbert who uncovers it.

Interestingly enough, the female students, living in the Islamic Republic of Iran in a state of affairs in which there is a hostility to women, hidden in an apartment in Tehran in order to read forbidden literature are presenting a kind of persecutor and oppressor in the same way as Humbert is admitting through his own subjectivity an image of a pervert who has abused an orphan – an appalling life of a girl in the hands of a nymphomaniac. The uncanniness in Nafisi's text results partly from the disparity between the women's inner self and the outer patriarchal and cultural code regarding how women should behave.

Lolita paves the way for the students to raise existential problems. Both Lolita, Humbert's victim and the girls trying to read banned literature lack freedom. Both of them are entrapped in a kind of prison bar. They are both manipulated and oppressed by patriarchy. They both need to escape from reality. They are both Others in their own worlds. Both of them are victims of a totalitarian mind-set. They both depict a complicated relationship between victim and oppressor. The students' room of their own is their place of transgression, to Lolita - her escape with Humbert is the transgression she suffers. Like Lolita, the girl students become an invention in someone else's dream. Not only do they suffer a loss but also a lack. Lolita has lost her father, her brother and finally

her mother.

According to Nafisi (2008),

'We must thank the Islamic Republic for making us rediscover and even covet all these things we took for granted: one could write a paper on the pleasure of eating a ham sandwich [...] And that memorable day was the beginning of our detailing our long list of debts to the Islamic Republic: parties, eating ice cream in public, falling in love, holding hands, wearing lipstick, laughing in public and reading *Lolita* in Tehran' (p. 54).

Humbert, on the other hand, like most dictators, is interested only in his own vision of other people. He has created the Lolita he desires. Humbert prostitutes Lolita and the reader is seduced by him. The students in Tehran are seduced by reading banned literature which allows them to gain moments of freedom and desire which can never be fulfilled in the world they live in.

Conclusion

'Discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy' (Hall, 2004, p. 93). The appalling life of the fictional Lolita together with the lives of these seven students in Tehran have been colonized by a patriarchal oppressor but their subjectivities have not. I would like to finish this presentation by quoting a tweet from Ladan Boroumand:

'before execution Zaniar wrote to his sister: Do not let all these tortures + injustices + inhuman sentences sow the seeds of hatred and revenge in your heart. Think of a better world wherein the value of a human being does not depend on skin colour, religion or gender' (@ladiKhanom: 2018).

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