Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf? The ayatollahs are

Two dazzling new books take the reader into the hidden spaces of freedom carved out by courageous Iranian women.

By Michelle Goldberg

May. 05, 2003 | Marjane Satrapi's "Persepolis" and Azar Nafisi's "Reading Lolita in Tehran" are two very different sorts of masterpieces that tell similar stories about being young, gifted and female in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Both are memoirs that transcend the facile confessionalism that plagues the genre: "Persepolis" is a literary comic book in the tradition of Art Spiegelman's "Maus" and Joe Sacco's "Safe Area Gorazde," while "Reading Lolita in Tehran" is the story of a literature professor who held private classes where seven female students suffocating under Ayatollah Khomeini's religious fascism could escape into banned books. Each is a poignant, searing tale about the secret ways Iranian women defy the regime. In Iran, the rulers have thrown a chador over the public realm, and real life happens in private places, hidden from the ayatollah's thuggish morality squads and from outsiders. These books take you inside that life.

In some ways, "Reading Lolita in Tehran" and "Persepolis" are such dazzlingly singular achievements that it feels wrong to compare them or group them together simply because their authors are from the same part of the world. Though their milieus are nearly identical -- both Satrapi and Nafisi are daughters of Tehran's intellectual and political elite, and both Satrapi's family and Nafisi fought for the revolution that turned on them -- the books belong to different traditions and triumph in different ways.

Satrapi, beyond being an astute storyteller, is a fantastic comic artist. Her stark images appear disarmingly simple, but she has an amazing way of conveying sanctimony, fury or desolation in the spare lines of her characters' faces. Just glance at the glum, veiled girl on the book's cover and you can feel her disgust and the germ of her rebellion.

Satrapi's skill at capturing huge, tumultuous events in a few pen strokes allows her to weave a lot of background into her story without slowing it down. She outlines Iran's "2500 years of tyranny and submission" in one marvelous frame showing various despots and armies marching back and forth. On a few pages set during the Iran-Iraq war, as one middle-class young man plans a party while poor conscripts prepare to hurl themselves onto minefields, she underlines the regime's hypocrisy as well as the surrealism of living an ordinary life during wartime. Striking a perfect balance between the fantasies and neighborhood conspiracies of childhood and the mounting lunacy of Khomeini's reign, she's like the Persian love child of Spiegelman and Lynda Barry.

"Reading Lolita in Tehran" is a tale of Islamist oppression and feminist defiance, but it's also a superb work of literary criticism, met a meditation on some of the great works of the Western canon, including Nabokov's "Lolita" and "Invitation to a Beheading," Jane Austen's "Pride and Prejudice," Henry James' "Daisy Miller" and "Washington Square," and F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great
Gatsby." Teaching, Nafisi says over and over, is her calling and her passion, and she's clearly a natural at it -- reading her makes you want to rush back to all these books to experience the hidden aspects she's elucidated.

Her zeal for these books is un tarnished by politics -- indeed, she often warns against looking for moral fables in literature -- yet she also presents literary humanism as a defense against totalitarianism. This theme is both explicit in her discussion of fiction and implicit in the risks she and her students took to meet secretly on Thursdays and immerse themselves in contraband genius.

These works are more than forbidden pleasures to them -- they're keys to understanding, and ultimately escaping, their own unhappy situation. Without trying to force any of the novels to symbolize her own experiences, Nafisi draws a parallel between books like "Lolita" and life in Iran, and it's a testament to her power that by the end of her book this improbable connection seems obvious.

For example, in her imagination, Lolita's Humbert becomes a metaphor for the ayatollahs' solipsistic indifference to women's individuality. "The desperate truth of Lolita's story is not the rape of a 12-year-old by a dirty old man but the confiscation of one individual's life by another," she writes at one point, while later she says, "Humbert, like most dictators, was interested only in his own vision of other people."

Later, reading about the hysterically self-righteous men who insist that women taunt them by showing an arousing strand of hair or patch of naked throat beneath their scarfs, her point strikes home. "I am going to tell you something very strange: it was she who seduced me," says Humbert, having kidnapped his orphaned obsession. He brutalizes Lolita both because he claims to love her and because, through her, he wants to recapture his childhood love, Annabel. The regime also brutalizes its women in the name of chivalry -- "A woman in a veil is protected like a pearl in an oyster shell," says one revolutionary slogan -- and in a doomed effort to recapture some lost medieval paradise.

In its insistence that art can offer both a courageous alternative to and escape from ideological tyranny, Nafisi's work recalls that of Milan Kundera and Salman Rushdie -- for whom the conflict between fiction and Iran's religious fascism is far more than theoretical. Her understanding of fiction as both a set of values and a rejection of all ideology echoes a passage from Kundera's book-length essay "Testaments Betrayed." He writes, "[F]or me being a novelist was more than just working in one 'literary genre,' rather than another; it was an outlook, a wisdom, a position; a position that would rule out identification with any politics, any religion, any ideology, any moral doctrine, any group; a considered, stubborn, furious nonidentification, conceived not as evasion or passivity but as resistance, defiance, rebellion." Nafisi shares with Kundera and other cynical humanists the belief that literature contains too many multitudes to fit within any political absolutes.

So these two authors, Satrapi and Nafisi, have different sets of peers, and different influences. Yet it's inescapable that the one influence they share -- the influence of the secret Tehran that rebels against religious despotism -- binds them together.

Neither book says how widespread this rebellion is, or to what extent it extends outside the intellectual circles in Tehran. Still, both books give hints that a defiant mood is spreading in that city. Nafisi writes of the growing obsession with Western culture in Tehran in the 1990s -- "James, Nabokov, Woolf, Bellow, Austen and Joyce were revered names, emissaries of that forbidden world which we would turn into something more pure and golden that it ever was or will be ... I would like to believe that all this eagerness meant something, that there was in the air, in Tehran, something not quite like spring but a breeze, an aura that promised spring was on its way ..."

"Reading Lolita in Tehran" and "Persepolis" might be augurs, then, of a larger social current.
Because of the intertwining themes of the two books, reading them together enriches the experience of each. In fact, they share more than just ideas: Both stories pivot on some of the same public incidents, so that similar scenes appear in each, told from different angles and in different styles, revealing different facets of a shared history.

In each book, being forced to wear the veil comes to symbolize all that women have lost in post-revolutionary Iran, so that in protests against the veil, the characters' very souls seem to be at stake. Nafisi writes, "Publicly, I was involved in what I considered to be a defense of myself as a person. This was very different from my political activities during my student days, made in behalf of an unknown entity called the 'oppressed masses.' This was more personal."

The scene recalls a stark frame in "Persepolis" in which four women in chadors face off against four women in modern dress. The women wearing chadors have their eyes shut and noses smugly upturned, and they chant, "The veil! The veil! The veil!" Their opponents, brows set angrily, retort with "Freedom! Freedom! Freedom!" Later, rereading "Persepolis," Nafisi's words about the emotional difference between fighting for ideals vs. fighting for your life helps explain Satrapi's mother's determination when, after keeping her daughter away from the demonstrations against the shah, she brings her to the equally dangerous protests against the veil. When her husband objects, she says, "She should start learning to defend her rights as a woman right now!"

In each book, defiance is expressed through art. For Nafisi, of course, that rebellion is literary. It's shared by the diverse group of women she teaches at her private, secret seminars, some of whom are quite religious but sickened by the regime. It's one of the devout girls who parodies the famous opening sentence of "Pride and Prejudice": "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a Muslim man, regardless of his fortune, must be in want of a nine-year-old virgin wife."

Satrapi, meanwhile, finds rebellion in new wave music -- a rebellion encouraged by her mother, who knits her a sweater full of holes and makes her a necklace of chains and nails. In one scene, after she's nearly imprisoned for wearing "punk" shoes, she dances in her room to a bootleg Kim Wilde tape, singing along to the lyrics "We're the kids in America," which is, needless to say, not the anthem the ayatollahs imagined for the children of the revolution.

Then again, it's not the anthem Satrapi's family would have imagined, either. Of all the melancholy themes that intertwine "Persepolis" and "Reading Lolita in Tehran," a sense of revolutionary betrayal is perhaps the strongest. After all, the revolution didn't simply descend on these families. Idealistic leftists, they struggled for it, joining with the Islamic fundamentalists in the name of anti-imperialism. There's an adorable frame in "Persepolis" in which Satrapi and two friends, pretending to be Fidel, Che and Trotsky, denounce the monarchy at a demonstration in the garden in front of her house. It was supposed to be their revolution.

Yet one of the ugly lessons of the last century is the ease with which the far left shades into the far right, a convergence that is especially stark in Iran. The Islamists might have hijacked the leftists' revolution, but the leftists helped them do it. Nafisi writes that during the protests against the veil, for example, Communists sided with the fundamentalists. The Iranian Marxists, she says, "had tacitly taken sides with the government, denouncing the protesters as deviant, divisive and ultimately acting in the service of the imperialists ... Focusing on women's rights was individualistic and bourgeois and played into [the imperialists'] hands."

Meanwhile, the fundamentalists co-opted the secular leftists' language to an astonishing degree. Attempting to talk Nafisi out of demonstrating against the veil, a fundamentalist student tells her, "What was more important, to fight against the satanic influence of Western imperialists or to obstinately hold on to a personal preference that created divisions among the ranks of the revolutionaries?" She remarks, "In those days, people really talked that way. One had a feeling, in revolutionary and intellectual circles, that they spoke from a script, playing characters from an
Islamized version of a Soviet novel."

Perhaps because they spoke a similar language, the Iranian leftists didn't take seriously the extent to which the Islamic fundamentalists opposed much of what they stood for (a naiveté of the same kind that Paul Berman castigates his erstwhile comrades for in his recent book "Terror and Liberalism.") Early in "Persepolis," Satrapi's idolized Uncle Antoosh raises his fist and proclaims, "The religious leaders don't know how to govern. They will return to their mosques. The proletariat shall rule!"

Antoosh is one of Satrapi's most moving characters, repeating the optimistic phrase "Everything will be alright," as his face grows more despairing from frame to frame. Thrown in jail, he makes Satrapi a tiny swan out of bread and tells her, "But you'll see! One day the proletariat will rule!" On the next page, he's executed as a Russian spy.

In recent months, commentators such as Berman and Christopher Hitchens have repeatedly drawn parallels between Islamic fundamentalism and other forms of totalitarianism. "Persepolis" and "Reading Lolita in Tehran" make you feel that similarity in your sinew. Antoosh's story could transfer seamlessly to China or, except for the "Russian" part, Eastern Europe. Nafisi writes, "[W]e were all victims of the arbitrary nature of a totalitarian regime that constantly intruded into the most private corners of our lives and imposed its relentless fictions on us."

Yet the brave people in both these books refuse, as much as possible, to yield to these fictions. Even as morality police roam the streets in their white 4x4s doling out whippings, fines and worse, Satrapi's family and Nafisi's circle insist on socializing, indulging in pop music and American movies, flirting and falling in love. In "Persepolis," a friend of the family is sentenced to 75 lashes after the police raid his house on a tip that he's planning a party. Still, on the next page Satrapi's whole family is dancing at her uncle's house and toasting with "gallons" of wine made in a basement lab, and when the power goes out because of a bombing raid, they light candles and her father plays a drum.

Nafisi's seminars in contraband novels, then, form a systemized resistance to the regime's own fictions. Nafisi doesn't acknowledge her own courage in holding these blasphemous classes. Nor does she speculate on the punishment she risks for teaching them. Only the stories of murdered friends and colleagues and imprisoned activists and writers in both books show us what's at stake. Yet as "Persepolis" and "Reading Lolita in Tehran" also reveal, complying with the regime carries its own existential dangers. To assert your humanity in a totalitarian regime is to risk having it snuffed out. To not assert it is to risk the same thing.

"For those few precious hours we felt free to discuss our pains and our joys, our personal hang-ups and weaknesses; for that suspended time we abdicated our responsibilities to our parents, relatives and friends, and to the Islamic Republic," Nafisi writes. "We articulated all that happened to us in our own words and saw ourselves, for once, in our own image."

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