

Azar Nafisi, *Things I Have Been Silent About: Memories* (William Heinemann, 2008)

Like Azar Nafisi's widely read earlier book *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003) this is also a kind of a memoir, but while the first one focused on books and reading, the present volume explores the intricate lineaments of a family and its secrets. The intense personal narratives of both the books intersect with the public events in Iran in the last half of the twentieth century – the autocratic rule of the Shah that suppressed all dissent, the imprisonment of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1963, his exile in 1964 and his triumphant return in 1979, heralding an Islamic revolution that changed Iran – transforming women's lives in particular.

While the author was growing up in Tehran in the nineteen sixties and seventies, she had almost all the freedom her European counterparts enjoyed, and so had her mother, during the 'modernising' regime of Reza Shah Pahlavi. But by 1990, when Azar Nafisi's daughter was old enough to go to school, every girl child had to wear a veil. There is a picture of this six-year old girl with twinkling eyes and a shy smile, with her first grade class friends, all heads decorously covered, that tells its own story. An incident almost casually described by Nafisi towards the end of the book leaves a chilling impact. It is about Azar being called a slut in front of her children by a self-appointed guardian of Islamic morality because she had let a few strands of hair escape her veil and her husband being shouted at for not being able to 'control his woman'. Such daily torments, her expulsion from Tehran University and various other factors led to their decision to leave Iran permanently in 1997 and migrate to USA. It is only after that Nafisi turned to writing. In Iran she taught Western Literature and her first book was an academic one on Nabokov; but now she began to use her own life as quarry, like many other diasporic Asian writers who have found rich material in their homeland only after they have left it.

But this book is not about the curtailment of women's rights in Iran. It is a finely wrought introspective account, more compelling than a novel, of a dysfunctional family, in which people created stories about themselves to keep reality at bay and then got trapped in their own fiction. At the centre of the book is Azar's dominating and beautiful mother who lived in a frozen past, idealizing the memory of a very short-lived marriage, while her present husband, despairing of finding companionship at home, turned to other women. Azar was emotionally close to her father who introduced her to Ferdowsi, the eleventh-century Persian poet. The stories that Azar wished to inhabit were derived from Ferdowsi's epic poem *Shahnameh*, but burdened as she was with other people's stories, she could never afford the luxury of living in the fiction of her own choice.

The Iran to which Nafisi's book introduces us is that of the educated, upper class elite. Her mother's first husband was the son of a prime minister, her second husband became the Mayor of Tehran and the mother herself was for some time a member of the Parliament. As a girl of thirteen Azar Nafisi was first sent to England for schooling and then to Switzerland. Her father owned, apart from a house in Tehran, a large apartment in one of the best locations of Paris, a villa in the Caspian, and had shared ownership of two islands. This is the stratum of society Nafisi knows and writes about. This class privilege also made her family politically vulnerable.

1

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Azar Nafisi' father was jailed on trumped up charges, to be acquitted after six long years. In the coffee sessions in her house over which Azar's mother presided, politics and the nature of 'real Iran' were endlessly debated: 'Which was more legitimate, the ancient traditions with which the Shah propped up his power or the strict Islamic principles of Ayatollah Khomeini ?' (118). As she writes this book, Nafisi adds a few of her own questions: 'What of Ferdowsi with his sensual women and his pre-Islamic heroes and kings? ... What of the great mystic poets Rumi and Hafez, who rebelled in their miraculous poetry against religious orthodoxy?' (118). Were these also not part of Iran's heritage?

A tyrannical state forces on its citizens an official identity, 'stealing their memories, rewriting their histories' (xxi). This book could have been about that because these larger political questions hover around the edges of the narrative. But the focus is on a similar process at the micro level: imposition of family mythologies on children by their parents, compelling them to be complicit in the lies. The title suggests a ruthless peeling off of layers of respectable untruth, but what makes the book rise above its 'tell all' title is its refusal to simplify. No one is an icon or a villain. The mother who was an adversary in her growing up years is the person to whom the adult daughter turns in a moment of acute pain. The father who gave Azar the precious gift of literary pleasure which no revolution could take away from her, also happened to be a man of weak will. He is presented as touchingly human in his anxiety to be approved by his children even when he is abandoning his wife.

The black and white photographs – often faded – with which the pages are interspersed (somewhat like Orhan Pamuk's *Istanbul*) tether the narrative to concrete images, providing a parallel subtext. Photographs generally capture only the surface, preserving moments of make-belief happiness induced by the camera, but once in a while the tilt of a chin or the curl of a lip can reveal attitudes that are not verbally articulated. Thus the photographs in the book are not only visual representations of the dramatis personae, they add an extra dimension. Azar's mother was obsessed with old photographs and she spent her last lonely years surrounded by them. After her death Azar inherited the collection, and along with her father's voluminous diaries, these became the signposts with which she began to chart out her past. She sees her enterprise as excavation: 'You sift through the rubble, pick up one fragment here, another there' (xviii), but there are always gaps that cannot be filled, silences that refuse to unravel mysteries. Despite an appearance of narrative closure with the death of her parents, a humbling awareness of the inconclusiveness of her project haunts the book.

Meenakshi Mukherjee