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In a direct, frank, and intimate exploration of Iranian literature and society, scholar, teacher, and poet Fatemeh Keshavarz challenges popular perceptions of Iran as a society bereft of vitality and joy. Her fresh perspective on present-day Iran provides a rare insight into this rich culture alive with artistic expression but virtually unknown to most Americans.

Keshavarz introduces readers to two modern Iranian women writers whose strong and articulate voices belie the stereotypical perception of Iranian women as voiceless victims in a country of villains. She follows with a lively critique of the recent best-seller *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, which epitomizes what Keshavarz calls the "New Orientalist narrative," a view marred by stereotype and prejudice more often tied to current geopolitical conflicts than to an understanding of Iran.

Blending in firsthand glimpses of her own life--from childhood memories in 1960s Shiraz to her present life as a professor in America--Keshavarz paints a portrait of Iran depicting both cultural depth and intellectual complexity. With a scholar's expertise and a poet's hand, she helps amplify the powerful voices of contemporary Iranians and leads readers toward a deeper understanding of the country's past and present.

In a direct, frank, and intimate exploration of Iranian literature and society, scholar, teacher, and poet Fatemeh Keshavarz challenges popular perceptions of Iran as a society bereft of vitality and joy. Her fresh perspective on present day Iran provides a rare insight into this rich culture alive with artistic expression but virtually unknown to most Americans. She warns against the rise of what she calls the "New Orientalist narrative," which thrives on stereotype and prejudice and is often tied to current geopolitical conflict rather than an understanding of Iran. Keshavarz offers a lively critique of the best-seller *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, which she says epitomizes this New Orientalist attitude. Blending in firsthand glimpses of her own life, Keshavarz paints a portrait of Iran depicting both cultural depth and intellectual complexity.

Jasmine and Stars: Reading More Than Lolita in Tehran Details

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From Reader Review *Jasmine and Stars*: Reading More Than *Lolita in Tehran* for online ebook

Sheila says

A quick touch of Irani cultural history and what is currently happening there with books and culture. I enjoyed getting a different perspective on what is happening in Irani culture and literature. This was a positive look at what has happened centuries ago as well as the present. I liked being introduced to writers who lived centuries ago and those who write today. I enjoyed the look at Fatemeh Keshavarz's family and the vignettes she shared of her uncles. She brought light to the topic instead of the negative which we are usually given. Well written. It made me think. I would like to read some of the ancient authors and today's Irani authors.

Didier Vanoverbeke says

I stumbled upon this text rather unexpectedly, but the premise intrigued me enough to push it straight to the top of my reading list. After spending some time with this book, I cannot help but feel slightly let down by it. Other reviewers have already mentioned some of the potential issues here: a rather clumsy prologue sets us up for a scattershot approach to critiquing New Orientalism through memoir and literary criticism. While the prose improves significantly after the frankly bumbling introduction, and though the memories of various family members provide some beautiful and interesting portraits, they end up feeling rather limited, dare I say nostalgically rosy. And that, in fact, permeates the description of Iran as a whole.

Without a doubt, Keshavarz set out to provide a counternarrative to Nafisi's Iran, which is perfectly fine and, indeed, necessary. However, setting up a white fram next to a black one does not create a full picture. The most glaring example, for me, is the chapter on Parsipur's 'Women without men'. Keshavarz does an admirable job describing the novel's many characters and symbolic power, trumpeting it as a feminist tour-de-force of Iranian fiction. She does not, however, waste any words on the effect this had on Parsipur's life and livelihood, the persecution she had to endure, and the reason for her eventual exile. Indeed, the fact that this book was banned in Iran gets a most fleeting mention somewhere between two plot points. AS such, this book can at times feel intellectually dishonest, guilty of the same corruption as the very book it is critiquing.

That being said, I think *Jasmine and Stars* has its heart int he right place, and besides its almost 40-page beatdown of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, it features some wonderful discussions of Persian literature and Islamic tradition and culture that are well worth your time despite the rose-colored glasses. Indeed, it would've been nice to see Keshavarz flesh out these themes more; it seems like she is perpetually in a rush to move us to the next topic, making this book feel like a review of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* with a bunch of digressions put in to pad the book. That cannot have been the intent. At the very least, in my case, Keshavarz has achieved her objective, as I have found more candles to illuminate the elephant, and for that I am appreciative.

Leisl says

I am about done reading this book, and it is great! Yes, there is a quite a bit of literary criticism, but that is precisely why I like it. It is quite critcal about statements and assertions made in "Reading Lolita in Tehran",

and this is necessary as there were some things said in RLT that were quite incorrect in terms of "most Iranians". I highly recommend this book to anyone who wants to know more beyond the rather negative tone of RLT.

Nura Yusof says

One wonders if this book would have garnered much interest if it wasn't such an unabashed critique of Nafisi's more popular *Reading Lolita in Tehran*.

In a way, I do thank Azar Nafisi for writing RLT because if she didn't, Keshavarz would not have had such tantalizing fodder that inspired her to write her book.

I get what Ms. Keshavarz was trying to say. That there is danger in the way Iran and Iranians are being depicted by Nafisi in her book. But even in the reading of RLT, I knew that these men and women were not reflections of the majority. Even I as someone not from Iran, can tell the difference.

So will it be utterly catastrophic that so many RLT readers will form such woefully wrong impressions about Iran and Iranians? Does not the author trust that maybe some of the readers may not be so myopic?

I'm not saying that this book wasn't necessary. *Jasmine and Stars* is a fine counterbalance to RLT. But in reading the book, I felt as if I'm being chided for wrongfully liking the book RLT and that I had formed ill-conceived notions as to what and who Iran and Iranians really are.

Oh, and by the way, I thought that quote about "standing on shoulders of giants" on page 67, belonged to Isaac Newton. Not Darwin.

Zanna says

I was kind of gratified on reading the introduction of this book that I had spotted some of the issues with *Reading Lolita in Tehran* myself, despite being a white 'western' person accustomed to relying on native/insider voices when thinking about other cultures. Keshavarz sets out to provide something of an antidote to what she identifies as the New Orientalist narrative espoused by *Reading Lolita...*, *The Kite Runner* (which I felt no temptation to read after seeing the film) and other recent(ish) works. She provides a detailed critique of *Reading Lolita*, but this is actually given in the penultimate chapter. She prioritises material that she feels Azar Nafisi left out of her memoir – positive aspects of life in Iran.

She introduces her aims by telling about how her family would sleep on their roof terrace on summer nights in Shiraz, under the bright starry sky, and how her grandmother would leave a jasmine flower by the nose of each sleeper early in the morning. Occasionally, swarms of grasshoppers made sleeping outdoors uncomfortable for Fatemeh as well as causing problems for local farmers. If I only told you about the grasshoppers, she says, you would never have imagined the jasmine and the stars. So since Nafisi has given us grasshoppers, she sets out to offer the missing starlight and fragrant blossom, pointing out the problems of the New Orientalist narrative on the way.

New Orientalism is the old Orientalism except, Keshavarz says, it often has a native/seminative/insider voice, as is the case with *Reading Lolita*. This makes it more credible, especially to white people, who are rightly told to learn by listening to native voices and accepting what we hear. The native voice element attempts to neutralise Said's by now well known critique. New Orientalism "explains almost all undesirable incidents in the Middle East with reference to Muslim men's submission to God and Muslim women's submission to men" and "does not hide its preference for a western political and cultural takeover" also, it assigns valuable aspects of Muslim culture to a past golden age, sadly lost, and presents the locals as uncomplicated, incapable of innovation, stubborn, hateful, sexually repressed or perverse, and so on.

One of *Reading Lolita*'s assertions is that Iranian culture does not recognise or value literary merit. Even I could see that this is absurd and directly counter to the truth. My image of Iran is of a culture where virtually everyone, even teenage boys, recite poetry to each other for recreation. Keshavarz confirms that Iranians don't just value literature 'we live it'; for example when feeling low, she would visit the tomb of Hafez. She introduces us to two modern Iranian women writers – Forough Farrokhzad and Shahnush Parsipur – in detail. She also refers to other Iranian writers, especially poets, both classical and contemporary, but it's the work of these women she explores in depth. In the face of this it's impossible to maintain a fiction that contemporary Iranian literature does not exist or that its only value or validity comes from imitating the west. She mentions that when her high school physics teacher announced, with deep distress, that Forough Farrokhzad had died, the whole class was distraught. Everyone knew her.

Another topic is 'my uncle the painter', literally. Fatemeh shares some thoughts about her lovely uncle and father and other folks in her life who are nothing like the stereotypes presented by the New Orientalism. It's telling that such a simple strategy can be effective – the totalising vision presented by *Reading Lolita* and its ilk makes invisible the realities that Fatemeh is able to reconjure by simply sharing a few anecdotes. In addition though, she offers profound insights both about the functioning of New Orientalism (for example, how the extremist stance is boosted by its dominant image abroad), its mode of literary criticism, about Islam and Muslims. She draws on discussions with family members, poetry lovers and her own knowledge.

Increasingly I think the most useful form of academic work draws on personal sources, analysing moments that resonated in the author's own life. The loving activism Fatemeh Keshavarz has done in creating this book is a beautiful, lifesaving thing. It's completely accessible, and since it makes use of extended poetic metaphor to string its illuminating anecdotes and sharp ideas together, it's also a sensual delight.

Carolinemawer says

It was great to hear some good stuff about Iran. The Jasmine flowers of the title are very lovely, and I was happy to be reminded of the stars in Iran. They are especially gorgeous from the deserts around Kerman. But...

I felt this book was uneven - and more than a little confused about whatever it was doing.

Is it a dissertation she did on RLT that has some of her family memoirs mixed in? If so, I felt that the literary analysis was much blander than it might have been. I felt like she was a teacher repeating her point to a class of dullards. As to her (privileged) family: I felt the female members were somewhat glossed over.

Or is the book actually about New Orientalism? If so, why such a focus only on RLT? The big deal about Orientalism (of all sorts) is surely that it is so pervasive. There are lots of other books out there to demolish. Why didn't she say more about this? Some comparisons (including some positives) would have improved the literary analysis too.

Or perhaps the book is supposed to give some idea of what Iran is "really like"? If so, why so upper class? I

wished the "illiterate" man who knew all the poems had been gifted more of a voice. What did he actually think of the poems? How were his opinions different to hers? She silenced him more effectively than his lack of reading skills had deafened him. And although she spoke against the idea of Islam only being negative, she didn't flesh this out at all.

It's surely a challenge catering for an audience of variable knowledge and varied opinions.

So maybe I should be kinder.

Overall, though, I think it was a wasted opportunity.

Trish says

Author Keshavarz is absolutely spot-on with her review and criticisms of *Reading Lolita in Tehran (RLT)*. *RLT* came out with a firm point of view, suggesting that women in Iran were not allowed to develop mature thinking unmolested. This sparked a debate within the literary community in Iran which Keshavarz engages, opening for readers a look into other hearts and minds within the wider literary community in Iran. But the book has a scholarly and instructive feel, and one is put in mind of grading a bright student's master's thesis. She would have gotten a A- I think. An A for making the effort to refute the sloppy thinking in *RLT* and a minus for not making me *want* to read it.

Marieke says

I'm hoping I can pull a review together...but I have to return the book today. :/

Beverly Atkinson says

Although the scholarly premise intrigued me, I found the writing tedious and the content non-illuminating. Prof. Keshavarz's premise is that "Reading Lolita in Tehran," "The Kite Runner," and a few other novels popular among 20th U.S. readers misrepresent modern Iranian culture and its people. I can accept that as probable, but found that her approach to supporting it rather tedious to read. What support she gave seemed (to me) from a privileged class perspective; many of her examples are from her own family environment, her parents and grandparents. Still, I don't question her argument, partly because of having read other books and having learned from an Iranian friend.

Beth Asmaa says

The book accomplishes two objectives. One, gives an alternative picture of Iranian culture since the 1979 revolution; two, is a memoir of her family life during her early years in Shiraz. The author teaches medieval Persian literature in the U.S., so that subject informs this memoir, especially her childhood's learning of classical stories and poems in reading with her father Baba. Several chapters refute the "New Orientalist narrative" packaged for western consumption. Keshavarz's voice definitely needs to be heard and her memories of fragrant jasmine and of starry nights to be savored.

Louisewab says

This was an interesting book but I think it would have benefited from extensive editing. It was written by an Iranian woman who is a poet and professor at Washington University. She was offended by the portrayal of Iran in "Reading Lolita in Tehran" and some other books about Iran, because they reflect a Western prejudice which sees Iranian men as evil, women as submissive, and the modern culture lacking any contribution to the arts. She describes her childhood in Iran lovingly, the kind Iran men she has known in her life, and gives extensive examples of modern Iranian women poets. She also has an entire chapter devoted to a detailed description of the prejudice reflected in "Reading Lolita". I skimmed this chapter.

I had loved "Reading Lolita" so I was caught short by this author's perspective. I am glad to have had my mind broadened by this book, but while each chapter was fairly well organized, I thought the chapters didn't flow one from the other very well.

Yoonmee says

Thank you to Fatemeh Keshavarz for writing this book! She did a wonderful job not only analyzing and refuting many of the claims laid in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, but also introducing the reader to many inspiration, talented, and, sadly unmentioned in the previous book, Iranian figures and people worthy of note. She is on point when she says New Orientalist narratives, including but not limited to *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, only serve to reinforce in western readers' minds what they already "know" about Iran, the middle east, and Muslims when in fact these books are often "political commentary with a very personal bent" (21). These New Orientalist books (and movies) often have a native or semi-native insider tone to them and "replicate the totalizing -- and silencing -- tendencies of the old Orientalists by virtue of erasing, through unnuanced narration, the complexity and richness in the local culture" (3).

Please, if you have read *Reading Lolita in Tehran* or any of these other New Orientalist narratives, such as the wildly popular books by Khaled Husseini, please read this book as an accompaniment to them. I beseech you to do so. If your entire knowledge of the middle east, of Muslims, of Iran, etc. comes from what you read about in the newspapers (or online) and from these books, if you think you "know" what it's all about, please read this book. And don't just read this book, please read others about these same subjects because, as Keshavarz says, we need to see the elephant as a whole, we need more candles and more light.

Sarah says

I found most of her criticism of Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* didn't line up at all to what I saw from the book. She seemed to read it as an attack on the Iranian people, but Nafisi loved the Iranian people. What she hated was the political institution and the human rights violations it implemented after the revolution. The book was a mourning for what she knew Iran could be, and all the injustices being committed against the Iranian people by the oppressive regime.

I also didn't walk away thinking the west needed to "save" Iran, or that foreign powers should get involved. Iranians are the only ones who can change Iran outside of destruction and war - and the situation has been

slowly improving. It left me hoping that Iran will continue to open up and that their women will get more and more equality.

Nafisi's RLT read as a deeply personal and sincere memoir of her life, one that of course showed her biases, but it was not meant to be impartial. What kind of sincere memoir is impartial? It was meant to explore her thoughts and feelings and show what it is like to try to reconcile your beliefs in a place where everything seems to have turned against them. And I thought how much she cared and bonded with her students was beautiful.

Keshavarz uses examples of Nafisi's "discrimination" against the Iranian people by pointing out how she used the word "mob" to describe Iranians at a crowded concert, and how she didn't use that language to take about Westerners. The thing is, she NEVER talks about westerners - even the chapters that take place in the USA, it is mostly confined to the Iranian community at her university. OF COURSE both the negative and positive words will pertain to the people who are actually in the book - and there are many very positively portrayed characters.

I walked away from RLT with an interest in learning more Iranian culture and heritage, a lot of reflection on the value of literature, and reflecting on the discussions that were had with her students in their class - how they reflect on the complexities of life.

This book (Jasmine & Stars) reads like an academic essay, I couldn't get sucked in. Even when Keshavarz describes her own memories of Iran, it is written in the clear goal of proving her thesis, not in honest reflection. The thesis-evidence feel to the book make the stories feel dry and insincere, or at least not as heartfelt.

I was disappointed. I wanted something that would captivate me and make me both think and feel, and motivate me to read more books on Iran - like RLT did by leading me here.

Holly says

Sounds interesting! I want to read it since I just read Reading Lolita in Tehran. However, I don't think anything in this book will negate Nafisi's experiences or the truth that she speaks.

Grady McCallie says

I'm glad to have read this. I've only read free samples of Reading Lolita in Tehran (RLT), which Jasmine and Stars criticizes. But, it will probably be years before I get around to it, and so I'll capture my reactions to this book while they're fresh:

* Jasmine and Stars argues that RLT demonizes Iran and Islam; oversimplifies the complex individuals who make up modern Iran; ignores the country's proud Persian heritage and vibrant modern literary culture; and presents Western literature as a salvation for confused and benighted young Iranians. I'm sure that's not what Azar Nafisi, RLT's author, understood herself to be doing at all. I suspect RLT is better understood as the work of an author who has experienced painful oppression and is writing about how literature has helped her and her students understand their experiences and take greater control of their internal lives.

* Keshavarz's book includes some moving and very personal anecdotes; one of her overt purposes is to offer herself as an alternative window, for an American audience, of what it can mean to be Iranian. She grew up with loving, moderate male relatives, deep exposure to Persian poetry, and no apparent difficulty reconciling (Islamic) faith and modernity. That's great as far as it goes, but doesn't invalidate Nafisi's experience.

* Perhaps more problematically, all of Keshavarz' stories reflect well on herself, which I take as a bit of a red-flag when an author is using techniques of memoir to persuade a reader.

* Keshavarz doesn't address a couple of topics that I wished she had: the distinctions that set Persian culture and faith apart from pan-Islamic culture and religion; and the ways the 1979 Revolution has changed or obliterated aspects of modern Iranian culture and cultural institutions. These might illuminate a difference in frame between RLT and *Jasmine and Stars*. My hunch is that in RLT, Nafisi pours out her scorn on the Revolution in part because of the damage she has seen it do to the Persian cultural heritage and current artists. But Keshavarz appears to read RLT as an attack - or, at least, a dismissal - of not just the Revolution, but of everything Iranian, and I'm wondering how clearly Keshavarz sees the distinction.

* If one discounts Keshavarz' critique as failing to engage RLT on its own terms (and again, I haven't read RLT and so can't tell for certain), *Jasmine and Stars* still has several points to offer: a picture of Keshavarz' childhood; an introduction to a modern poet (Forough Farrokhzad) and a modern novelist (Shahnush Parsipar) that Keshavarz reveres; and a reminder of the importance of love as a force that transcends conflict and is very much at home in Persian culture.
