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English 110

Date

An Hourglass Already Run Out: the Danger of Repeating the Past

“We must not look back unless it’s to derive useful lessons from past errors.”

-George Washington (Library of Congress)

The Islamic Revolution in Iran began in order to free the people from the dictates of one monarch, the Shah. However, when the Shah was overthrown, dictatorship was quickly replaced by religious tyranny. In the following decades, women’s rights would be diminished and freedoms stripped as the Republic instituted a variety of reforms. Any social justice accomplishments forged the years before, in the name of women and education, would be rolled back. Azar Nafisi, the author and protagonist in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, begins as a willful female professor in Tehran, but eventually must teach the literature that she loves to a small group of former female students in a secret book club in her home. Together they read fiction while their lives become increasingly restricted and controlled, but their choice is not escapist. Nafisi uses the classic American novel *The Great Gatsby* in conjunction with the history and her experiences in the Islamic Republic of Tehran to demonstrate how reconstructing the past only dooms the future.

Nafisi introduces the fictional protagonist Jay Gatsby to show the dangers of romanticizing the past. We can see this fatal flaw in *The Great Gatsby* when Gatsby wants to return to an earlier time before the war, a time he sees of honor and virtue. Gatsby’s obsession with Daisy comes from his desperate desire to recapture this past. However, to

gain the power he needs to recreate the past, Gatsby must hide his own past. Nafisi describes, "Gatsby fakes everything, even his own name.... Gatsby is constantly being made and remade by others" (Nafisi 140). Gatsby is rather unstable because he must remake himself to fit current challenges while trying to be a past version of himself. This volatility removes the possibility of building any successful future because there is no solid foundation, only shifting sands. The Islamic Republic made the same mistake as it forces the past onto the present. Not only have "textbooks been rewritten several times to incorporate Islam," a costly and time-consuming process but as one academic declares, "it is an unusual educational system that has passed through a process of de-modernisation" (Paivandi). The education no longer teaches, instead they "have become a place of political and ideological propaganda" (Paivandi). The pursuit of a censored education is meaningless, and robs young people of their future. Education should inspire critical thinking and improvements on the past, but the Islamic Republic is dooming its young minds to become trapped in a reconstructed past steeped in manipulated religious doctrine. The past is not a guideline to a stable future that faces new problems and experiences.

As Jay Gatsby and the Islamic Republic continue to fight wholeheartedly for their reproduction of the past, they are dooming themselves to a painful future. In the attempt to reignite this proud past in the Iranian people, the Republic lost sight of their future through the betrayal of their own children. After Nafisi discovers that students in protest were murdered at her university, and their bodies hidden, she writes, "the feelings I thought I had left behind returned when, almost nineteen years later, the Islamic regime would once again turn against its students" (Nafisi 156). The recreation of history turned violent and

cost innocent lives in almost unspeakable tragedies against the next generation. In Gatsby's attempt to recreate his version of the past, he was brought on his own dire consequence.

Nafisi attempts to teach her students about the implications and foreshadowing that Gatsby's murder presents, "He wanted to fulfill his dream by repeating the past, and in the end he discovered that the past was dead, the present a sham, and there was no future, was this not similar to our revolution, which had come in the name of our collective past and had wrecked our lives in the name of a dream" (Nafisi 144). Nafisi shows her students that the past is not a healthy map to the future. There simply is no promising future without growth.

Nostalgia can be poisonous and dwelling in the past crippling. We should look to the past to avoid replicating mistakes, but we should not dwell there as our potential is then diminished. Nafisi's novel parallels a familiar story of fiction with her real-life experiences to vividly illustrate this lesson of dangerous stagnation and a clinging to the past that is often fueled by a fear of change. This attempt to resurrect the past is not confined to the Middle East or to Muslims but can be seen in many political landscapes from Trump's promise to "make America great again" to Britain's decision to leave the European Union in response to fears over its changing and increasingly diverse citizenry. However, we must not let ourselves stand with our backs to the future. Adaptation to change and being able to evolve in thought and action are some of the most profound strengths we have as human beings.

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