ABSTRACT

Reading Lolita in Tehran brings Azar Nafisi’s bestselling memoir to the stage as a chamber opera, with a cast of eight singers, accompanied by flute, saxophone, piano, and cello. The libretto, co-written with Iranian-American poet Mitra Motlagh, retells Nafisi’s experiences teaching Western literature after the Iranian Revolution, first in the classroom, and then in secret to a group of young women students. By reflecting the challenges of her reading group through the prism of Lolita, Gatsby, James, and Austen, Nafisi both paints a picture of the grim realities of Revolutionary Iran and shows how literature provides universal insights into the human condition. Through their experiences of love and loss, belonging and exile, Nafisi and her students find solace in literature; and through imagination the women create spaces denied to them by circumstances.

The opera score draws inspiration from a variety of sources, including both the popular and folk music traditions of Iran, as well as music of the literature of
Reading Lolita in Tehran, from Jane Austen to The Great Gatsby. Like the blending of past and present literary work in the novel, the music melds sounds from diverse geography and history into the contemporary opera form. The opera focuses on the six students in particular as representatives of the countless kaleidoscope stories of Iranian women seeking freedom. Their songs remind us that the simple liberties of reading and thought, education and identity, are precious and worth fighting for. Though the events take place in Tehran, the truths transcend all boundaries of language and culture.
READING LOLITA IN TEHRAN:
AN OPERA BASED ON THE BOOK BY AZAR NAFISI

By

Elisabeth Ann Mehl Greene

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts 2011

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Associate Professor Mark Wilson, Chair
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Acknowledgements

Many gracious people made this project possible through their encouragement, wisdom, and collaboration. I would like to thank the author of Reading Lolita in Tehran, Azar Nafisi not only for her support of the opera but for book itself, a glorious contribution to the world of literature and my life in particular. Thank you to Leon Major, who frequently invites new works into the opera studio, and then brings them to life. To my friend, the talented poet Mitra Motlagh, I will always be grateful for our work together on this libretto, and the other collaborations that came afterward. Nick Olcott’s sound advice guided me through the treacherous waters of libretto construction and adaption. Dr. Mark Wilson’s musical counsel was invaluable for refining the music. Thanks to my dissertation committee for their support. My deep gratitude to those who made the reading possible: Laura Lee Everett, the singers and instrumentalists, Pepsi Enhancement Funds, and First Year Book. Finally, special thanks to my husband Sam, who lent me the book years ago, and then later thought of adapting it for opera.

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## Characters & Instrumentation

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Voice type</th>
<th>Costume</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lead:</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>AZAR, professor, early 40’s</td>
<td>Mezzo Soprano</td>
<td>White / chador</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AZIN, outspoken, vivacious, vain</td>
<td>Soprano</td>
<td>Red / chador</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAHSHID, conservative, lady-like</td>
<td>Soprano</td>
<td>Navy / chador</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Young women students:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MITRA, soft-spoken, painter, poet</td>
<td>Soprano</td>
<td>Lilac / chador</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NASSRIN, sarcastic, rebellious</td>
<td>Mezzo Soprano</td>
<td>Pink / chador</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SANAZ, independent, dancer</td>
<td>Mezzo Soprano</td>
<td>Orange / chador</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YASSI, youngest, comedic</td>
<td>Soprano (Coloratura)</td>
<td>Yellow / chador</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Male multiple role:</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>NYAZI, conservative student</td>
<td>Baritone</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>GUARD, obstinate keeper of the gate</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>BAHRI, arrogant administrator</td>
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</table>

*Reading Lolita in Tehran* is scored for:

- Flute
- Saxophone – Soprano & Alto
- Piano
- Cello
AZAR starts at her desk alone, writing and remembering.

Reading Lolita in Tehran
Reading Lolita in Tehran

AZAR: cap-tive-by sun-ny room we es-cap-e from
and ar-ti-fac-les in our own words, our

Fl.

S. Sx.

Vc.

Pno.

Reading Lolita in Tehran

AZAR: self-less list-ten-ing to mu-sic, fall-ing in love,

Fl.

S. Sx.

Vc.

Pno.
AZAR: walking down the shady streets.

Then imagine all of the
taken away.

Reading Lolita in Tehran
Reading Lolita in Tehran

AZAR:

Fl.:

S. Sx.:

Vc.:

Pno.:

---

\[2. \text{Before the class}\]

Fl.

A. Sx.

Vc.

Pno.

AZAR moves to the living room, arranging things and closing windows, preparing for her secret literature class.
AZAR:

I a-wake, too ex-cited to eat.

---

A. Sx.

---

Vc.

---

Pno.

---

Reading Lolita in Tehran
Reading Lolita in Tehran

AZAR: What if it works too well, and guards find out? Cello

AZAR freezes, the knock could be the police.

Each member of CHORUS enters tentatively, but gradually becomes more comfortable.

What if it works too well, and guards find out?

AZAR freezes, the knock could be the police.

I thought you said it here.

AZAR freezes, the knock could be the police.
Reading Lolita in Tehran

MITRA:

YASSI:

AZAR:

AZIN:

Or - chids from Mit ra and I.

Or - chids

Sa - laam!

I am here too!

Thank you, A - zin. Mit - ra.

Ia m he r et o o!

Yas si!

YASSI thrusts herself into the action without reservations.
AZAR hugs YASSI and ushers students inside.

SANAZ: Sorry I'm late, my brother won't let me drive.

AZAR: Welcome! Sa naz!
MAHSHID: I mentioned it to Father, and surprisingly he disapproved.

AZAR: ...worry about the trouble this class might cost you.

A. Sax. Change to Soprano Sax.

Vc. 3

Fl. 3

Pno. =

NASSRIN: Yes, had!

What else can I do, at this age? Father.

AZAR: How did she let you come?

Vc.

Pno.
The CHORUS starts to have a look at the place, 
decorated ecclectically with daring beautiful color. 

Everywhere, colors.

Look at this place! Beautiful.

Look at this place! Beautiful.
MAHSHID: MAHSHID reveals conservative navy coat.

NASSRIN: NASSRIN takes off outer dark chador to reveal brightly colored attire.

AZAR: I want to wear shocking pink, too—no, too red!

sessed with all kinds of colors.

You’re too gree dy for colors!
MITRA: I paint my nails the color of blood. It takes my mind off

AZIN: peasant blouse and large gold earrings.

AZIN stares at nails after revealing red peasant blouse and large gold earrings.
AZIN: things...

MAHSHID:

MITRA:

NASSIRIN:

SANAZ: Scheherazade's dress, the magic lamp, colors of paradise.

YASSI reveals yellow clothing.

SANAZ reveals orange clothing.

PARADE...

AZAR reveals orange clothing.

AZAR continues showing them around.

The magic lamp, colors of paradise.
Reading Lolita in Tehran
dream is at the bottom of that pool, like Gats by.
but now it’s just re-bel ious
MITRA: dreams are all I can paint are the colors of my dreams.

Scheherazade

YASSI: What will we study?

AZAR: The first work will be "A Thousand and One Nights."
Three kinds of women are victims of the king's rule:

Those who be...
Those killed believe they can be tray.

and are killed.

and are killed.

for the king

be tray.

They can be tray.

The
Shahrzad chooses different terms. She

virgin have no voice but their silence

Shahrzad

no voice

Shahrzad

no voice

Shahrzad

Shahrzad

Shahrzad

Shahrzad
Reading Lolita in Tehran
Reading Lolita in Tehran
Reading Lolita in Tehran
AZIN: mel-o-dy.

MITRA: A small sil-ver fish leap-ing in and out of a moon - lit lake.

SANAZ: A small Af ri can boy's se-cret name.

Fl.

S. Sx.

Vc.

Pno.
It's a dance, c'mon baby, do

The impossible joy of a suspended leap!
MAHSHID: Up si lam ba, up si lam ba, Up si lam ba!

SANAZ: Up si lam ba, up si lam ba! These girls jumping rope! Up si lam ba!

MITRA: Up si lam ba, up si lam ba, Up si lam ba, Up si lam ba!

YASSI: Up si lam ba, up si lam ba, Up si lam ba, Up si lam ba!

AZIN: Up si lam ba, up si lam ba, Up si lam ba, Up si lam ba!

AZAR: Up si lam ba, up si lam ba, Up si lam ba, Up si lam ba!

NA SSRIN: Up si lam ba, up si lam ba, Up si lam ba, Up si lam ba!

SANAZ: Up si lam ba, up si lam ba, Up si lam ba, Up si lam ba!

YASSE: Up si lam ba, up si lam ba, Up si lam ba, Up si lam ba!
Reading Lolita in Tehran
AZAR goes to a bookstore and meets the MAGICIAN.
If you're interested in those...


on ly months lat - er.

As the MAGICIAN

buy them

now,

They can't do any thing

MAN

MAN

buy them now, too much de - mands. They can't do any thing
AZAR: see in my girls? Read their writings, look at their drawings.

AZAR: They're geniuses. Will you meet with them?

MAN: They are fine people.

AZAR: They are geniuses. Will you meet with them?

MAN: They are fine people.

AZAR: They are geniuses. Will you meet with them?

MAN: They are fine people.

AZAR: They are geniuses. Will you meet with them?

MAN: They are fine people.

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MAN: They are fine people.

AZAR: They are geniuses. Will you meet with them?

MAN: They are fine people.

AZAR: They are geniuses. Will you meet with them?

MAN: They are fine people.
Why does reading Lolita in Tehran...
Reading Lolita in Tehran

should we make read-ers hap-py?

What bo-thers us most is her an-tic help-less-

What bo-thers us most help-

is not her utter help-

less-

less-ness,
Reading Lolita in Tehran
53 Reading Lolita in Tehran

8. Gatsby Trial

How could this happen? NYAZI reads the book list at the University.
MITRA, NASSRIN, SANAZ listen in on NYAZI's conversation.

MITRA: No, it's not!

NASSRIN: No, it's not!

SANAZ: No, it's not!

MAN: No, it's not normal. It's prosecuted in no sane minds who read it in...
SANAZ:

MITRA:

AZAR:

MAN:

A. Sx.

How can he say these things?

How can he say these things?

Do you know this is fiction, not how to?

m.s.

m.s.

May-be

p

p

p

p

m.s.
Dashy is fine for America, but not our youth.

Change to Soprano Sax.

Andante \( \approx 104 \)

The "Great" Dashy

Soprano Sax.
AZAR: All things America.

MAN: Temple all things America. We should fight against this immorality

AZAR: In those days of public executions, pass by on mad. You can be pro...
AZAR: I wish we could do this; it's too noisy.

AZAR: [motioning to individual members of class for each part]

Ver - sus "The Great Gatsby."
MAN: S. Sx. Pno. Vc. 444

---

As a Muslim, I cannot accept Gatsby... Every single page condemns it - self and The hero channel and...
Reading Lolita in Tehran

SANAZ

Novel must be longer distance. Fiction from reality.

Fl.

S. Sx.

Vc.

Pno.
Reading Lolita in Tehran

SANAZ

S. Sx.

Vc.

Pno.

is it bad if the characters stray? Is it

mor al when it makes us

This is the

stray?
Reading Lolita in Tehran 65

SANAZ.

first book to suc-

cess so brill-

i-ly.

Fl.

Gat-

sby that-

salv-

es, and an-

al-

cuc
to suc-

ceed so

brilliant

minds from

and aw-

ak-

ens

sleep.
Reading Lolita in Tehran

Reading Lolita in Tehran

Reading Lolita in Tehran

Reading Lolita in Tehran

Reading Lolita in Tehran

Reading Lolita in Tehran

SANAZ

S. Sx.

Vc.

Pno.

Fl.

SANAZ

Moderato

Judged by their honey, the rich fail. How can you claim the

Author would approve? They are careless, counting on others to be

Change to Alto Sax.
Reading Lolita in Tehran

Don't read Gatsby to learn good and evil. Both are complicated.
I don't approve of Gatsby but he would die for love.

This is an Islamic country and this is the law.
Reading Lolita in Tehran

SANAZ

Fl.

A. Sx.

Vc.

Pno.

The novel is its own de-frame. We all have things to learn from Gatsby. Not that a doll-key is right but we should care where they are. And take care where they go. Light.

60
A Gate

Without a headscarf, NASSRIN tries to walk past the 
GUARD who blocks her path to the University gate.

As GUARD stops her,

You there, You I. D. please!
NASSRIN: I've been going in like this for years.

MAN: You know you can't go in like this.

NASSRIN tries to get by.

MAN: No! Cease your head! Now or never.

GUARD stands in her way.
NASSRIN: My problem, not yours!

MAN: I'm too young for marriage.

GUARD blocks and gets in her face.

NASSRIN dashes for the gate.
I'm not ANY woman!

[NASSRIN advances on GUARD, GUARD gestures to NA-
SSRIN's hair, GUARD(Process) in your condition.

NA SSRIN:  

MAN:  

S. Sx.  

Vc.  

Pno.
NASSRIN:

MAN:

can't go through, I will be held re-

FL.

S. Sx.

Vc.

Pno.

Last time I checked, I was the one re-

NASSRIN looks at the gate, then the GUARD.

NASSRIN looks at the gate, then the GUARD.
NASSRIN breaks into a run.

As NASSRIN reaches inside the University, GUARD2 seizes her.
As NASSRIN is led away, she and
AZAR make eye contact.

MAN: Why did
NASSRIN wear the veil in the
post-riot, more traditional parts of
Tehran?

AZAR: It was out of respect for those people’s faith.

AZAR: We were poor, more traditional parts of
Islamic society...
AZAR:

MAN:

Fl.:

S. Sx.:

Vc.:

Pno.:

more is at stake.

It's just a piece of cloth, so much

The Im per i al West cor rupts us, while your "pref erence" di -

Reading Lolita in Tehran 80
Reading Lolita in Tehran

AZAR:

MAN:

S. Sx.

Vc.

Pno.

AZAR:

Fl.

S. Sx.

Vc.

Pno.

AZAR:
AZAR: it-sell but how it transforms women. How can I argue against the

AZAR takes off ID badge and gives it to BAHRI, quitting her job as a professor.
Exit BAHRI, AZAR moves away from University.

AZAR: I will pick up all the famous, all the famous by August.

S. Sx.: How ard's End,
AZAR runs into her friend, the MAGICIAN.

Don't worry, no one knows who they are anyway. And who wants to read them now, anyway?
AZAR: Who in - deed? People like me, is re - le vant.

MAN: —

Fl. —

A. Sx. —

Vc. —

Pno. —
she makes her way home through the streets.

New rules to enforce!

New rules to enforce!

New rules to enforce!

New rules to enforce!

AZIN.

MAHSHID.

MITRA.

NASSRIN.

SANAZ.
Reading Lolita in Tehran
AZIN
will be punished!

MAHSID
will be punished!  Seventy-six ladies!

MITRA
will be punished!  Seventy-six ladies!

NASSRIN
will be punished!

SANAZ
will be punished!

YASSE
will be punished!

Fl

A. Ss

Vc

Pno
Seventy-six lash es!
New rules to enforce! New rules to enforce! New rules to enforce!

---

roam the streets.

---

Reading Lolita in Tehran
After slamming the door on the CHORUS, AZAR dramatically throws scarf and long over-robes to the floor in anger, looking in the mirror.

A. Sx. Vc. Pno.

Fl. A. Sx. Vc. Pno.

Fl. A. Sx. Vc. Pno.

Reading Lolita in Tehran
Reading Lolita in Tehran

AZAR:
One day the female guards object. "Rub that mark off!" Though I wore no makeup, my skin burns from her

__Pno.__

---

AZAR:
scrubbing. Where to escape? We turn to our private sanctuaries.

__Fl__

---

AZAR:
Reading indiscriminately, every book I can find, is mine.

__S. Sx__

---

AZAR:

---

__Vc__

---

AZAR:

---

__Pno.__

---

Reading indiscriminately, every book I can find, is mine.

---
AZAR: I've been asked to teach a wavering.

MAN: What are you mean? Is this now?

AZAR: No, but this time I'm warning.

MAN: When you look long as as a-byen... The a...
MAN:

AZAR:

MAN:

AZAR:
Reading Lolita in Tehran

AZAR: What about my answer? What about taking a

MAN: Obviously, you need to teach.

Fl.

S. Sax.

Vc.

Pno.
prob-ly learn some-thing. Make your deals, but don't com-pro-mise your soul.

Make your deals,

but don't com-pro-mise your soul.
At ten tion! This is the dan ger sig-nal.

Red alert, go to shel-ter!
There are no shelters.
MITRA: YASSI: AZAR:
Pno. Fl.
861 861 861
/Din ner guests stay for sleepless nights of siesta.

Thanks for letting us stay.

Thank you for letting us stay.

Don’t guest stay for sleepless nights at some

Reading Lolita in Tehran

107
AZAR: In the hallway I stay up with books during the wall with my children.

AZAR: I'm reading out loud to just the bombs. In the darkness candle light I read.

AZAR: keep ing watch to just the bombs...
MAHSID

MITRA.

AZAR.

sud-she explosion rinds my rob's. My eyes pre-tend that no-thing hap-pened, and rest on a page of

S. Sx.

Vc.

Pno.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ZIN</th>
<th>MITRA</th>
<th>YASSI</th>
<th>AZAR</th>
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</table>

AZAR lectures to her students.
James changed his mind about the situation ships and duties. Dai sy line with com-
but do not claim to be radical.

Daisy is obviously a bad girl. She's furtive and making eyes at men. If you
Reading Lolita in Tehran

We are at war both home and abroad.
We are normal, we fight against evil.

If you remember, James lived through wars: the
MAHSID:

MITRA:

SANAZ:

MAN:

S. Sx.

Vc.

Pno.

Civil War, and the First World War.

Shh! He'll see you.

What I'd say if he'd let me!
Reading Lolita in Tehran

SANAZ:

YASSE:

MAN:

When is war righteous?

Fl.

S. Sx.

A woman in a veil is present.

Ve.

Pno.
We should all be less silent.
NASSRIN:
You were there when I was... 

AZAR:
You still owe me a paper on Gatsby...

FL.

S. Sax.

VC.

Pno.

NASSRIN:
I was lucky, they had to give me ten years...

AZAR:
Yes, but I thought... 

Nassim, all this time?
NASSRIN:

thought of you and our classes in a cell with fifteen others like Razieh. She talked about Razieh.

AZAR:

Fl.

S. Sx.

Vc.

Pno.
All my life I lived in poverty, had to steal books, sneak into theaters. But how these things brought me...
AZAR sits down.

You know she's dead?

Gatsby was so handsome, Gatsby and his love re-enters in the

rain after five long years.

Do you remember the twelve year old girl shot
AZAR and NASSRIN hug, exit NASSRIN.

AZAR: [sings]

NASSRIN: looking for her mom? But my father had high-ranking friends, so I'm finally here.

You still owe me a passport.

What strange places my students met. This is not where I imagined they'd take all my favorite

AZAR: [sings]

NASSRIN: [sings]

AZAR and NASSRIN hug, exit NASSRIN.
AZAR.

And Raz-i eh's dead.

no vels. The joy of Gar-ghy's new locked in a jail. Nas-mi was lucky. what kind of lucky?
It is a truth universally acknowledged that a man, re-

28. *Assia in Persia*  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fl.</th>
<th>S. Sx.</th>
<th>Vc.</th>
<th>Piano</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1.png" alt="Musical notation" /></td>
<td><img src="image2.png" alt="Musical notation" /></td>
<td><img src="image3.png" alt="Musical notation" /></td>
<td><img src="image4.png" alt="Musical notation" /></td>
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</table>

AZAR, MAHSHID, MITRA, NASSRIN, SANAZ, and YASSI pantomime proper British tea time.
Reading Lolita in Tehran
Girls

no one marries for love. Girls

back to Jane Austen here in Iran, no one marries for love.

MITRA:

NASSRIN:

SANAZ:

YASSI:

Fl.

S. Sx.

Vc.

Pno.
Like Dar-ya,

Sho-leh,

Par vin.

Many women live alone by their own

col leg ed u cat ed girls like us!
None of us are.
A man can have unlimited temporary wives, as many as he wishes, wishes.
Men have more needs! And it's still the girl's choice.

What fun it is for you to have a choice!
Reading Lolita in Tehran

MAHSID

MITRA

NASSRIN

SANAZ

YASSI

AZAR

Fl.

S. Sx.

Vc.

Pno.

"Pride and Prejudice" is like eighteenth-century dancing.
Reading Lolita in Tehran

136
NASSRIN: I’ll play Jane! She’s the most beautiful.

YASSI: No, that would be me.

AZAR: Come on, Mahshid.

Fl.

S. Sx.

Vc.

Pno.
We need Mister Collins. En-joy stepping on my toes.

I've never danced.
Reading Lolita in Tehran

MAHSID: For ward, back ward, pause. Turn, turn, turn.

MITRA: For ward, back ward, pause. Turn, turn, turn.

NASSRIN: For ward, back ward, pause. Turn, turn, turn.

SANAZ: For ward, back ward, pause. Turn, turn, turn.

YASSE: For ward, back ward, pause. Turn, turn, turn.

AZAR: For ward, back ward, pause. Harmonize your steps. Turn, turn, turn.

Fl.

S. Ss.

Vc.

Pno.
Who can dance Persian style?

Come on, Sana can dance.

Keep with the rest of the set.
Reading Lolita in Tehran
Reading Lolita in Tehran
SANAZ
S. Sx.
Vc.
Pno.

Reading Lolita in Tehran
AZIN enters, visibly bruised and beaten.

MITRA: What did he do?

AZIN: My husband hates my every joy, jades of my books, my company.
AZAR and the MAGICIAN meet for coffee discussing SANAZ’ broken engagement, while SANAZ, MITRA, and YASSI go shopping and talk about the same event.

SANAZ:

MAN: But they cause my girl’s trials and tribulations! SANAZ: My engagement is ...

SANAZ and the MAGICIAN discuss SANAZ’ broken engagement.
What did he say to you?

He was still a student. How could we be happy?
MITRA:

He would always love me.

SANAZ:

Does he know what love is? Coward! How can he leave her bloody coward?

YASSE:

Does he know what love is? Coward! his love?

AZAR:

He would always love her. Bloody coward!

MAN:

How does the jilting of a...
Reading Lolita in Tehran

SANAZ: Can't he be a beautiful girl for once?

YASSE: What does this mean to you?

AZAR: Every part of life is touched. The regime's not kind to us.

MAN: This is not fair. It's not fair to the Islamic Republic. We've paid a lot.

MITRA: It's not brave to be brave. This means every part of life is touched. The regime's not kind to us.

FL.

Vc.

Pno.
They need to learn to fight for happiness.
MITRA:

SANAZ:

AZAR:

She tells us stor—

---

Reading Lolita in Tehran
Exit MITRA, SANAZ, YASSI

AZAR: Rub your magic lamp.

MAN: We each create our own paradise.

Fl.

A. Sx.

Rub your magic lamp, make the revolutionary guard vanish, and long with A.s.x.'s bare hand and the revolutionary veil.

Pno.
24. Yassi’s Suitor

AZAR and CHORUS gather around YASSI for story time in the living room.

YASSI:

Moderato

My "Grandfather" Calmly

Before any decisions are made, we should go to

NASSRIN sidles up to YASSI as the suitor.

YASSI:

Molto Allegro

know each other, we’d be much about it. So, we go to a park, he and I.

Reading Lolita in Tehran
AZIN waves off AZAR.

A tempo

AZIN

flwrs off

AZAR.

YASSE

fol - lowed by par - ents, and sis - ters, and aunts and grand-par - ents. No, just one

Fl.

A. Sx.

p

Vc.

p

Pno.

grand par - ents. No, just one

I ask him a-bout his me-cha - nis - ing.
Reading Lolita in Tehran

---

Reading s-y thing nice walking
Doesn't have time to read

He starts to walk faster
YASSE

Fl.

A. Sx.

Vc.

Pno.

All laugh.

YASSE

Fl.

A. Sx.

Vc.

Pno.
AZAR and MAGICIAN meet in a cafe.

One of my girls asked how hasn't he a new matchstick?
MAN: I don’t wish to have no Islamic Republic to say ing they’re blame less.

MAGICIAN looks outside and sees police.

MAN: Not not saying they’re blame less.
Guards out-side! Since we're not related, I should go.

We're not doing anything wrong!

Don't be
Reading Lolita in Tehran

MAN

S. Sx.

Vc.

Pno.

AZAR hands MAGICIAN a Thousand and One Nights.

MAGICIAN places the book on the table as he leaves.
CHORUS gathers in the living room for one last meeting.

MAHSHID

S. Sx.

Vc.

Pno.

Nassrin left for the border. By next week, she should be singing a carol or...
SANAZ: You act like it's Miss Susanna's fault.

AZIN: But she isn't the one who got us trapped here.

SANAZ: Do you feel trapped, why should it be?
Reading Lolita in Tehran
I'm not like Mah - shat. I don't think that an - y - one

has the du - ty to stay, we have only one life to live.
MAHSHID:

MITRA:

SANAZ:

1358

You know the laws.

I'm angry for my lost portion of wind.

You know the laws.

You know the laws.
MAHSHID:  If

MITRA: It's your relu

SANAZ:

YASSE: least for you the veil is natural.

Fl.

Vc.

Pno.
During the Shah's time, I had to guard my faith. I was in the minority.

If one day I lose my faith, it will be like dying again in a world without guarantees.
MAHSHID:

S. Sx. 1384

Vc. 1380

Pno. 1380

-- --

MAHSHID hands AZAR a note from Nassrin.

Now that my rel ig ion

I still owe you a pa per on

27. Magician V

Andante $= 72$

AZAR:

Reading Lolita in Tehran

Thank you, L. lan - te Re -
AZAR:

MAN:

Ice cream and freedom.

The Austen we know is for

All the things you’ve taught me,

The Austen we know is for

I. tempo

III.

Austen and James, ice cream and freedom.
AZAR:

This land those trees, those long streets' warm embrace. Where the film censors' blind, where they hung girls in those streets, and hang curtains.

MAN:

This land those trees, those long streets' warm embrace. Where the film censors' blind, where they hung girls in those streets, and hang curtains.
SANAZ:

Pl.

A. Sx.

Vc.

Pno.

3. Fortune

Moderato

\textit{a tempo}

\textit{a tempo}

\textit{a tempo}

\textit{a tempo}
SANAZ: You are thinking of a thousand things at the same

A road that looks bright you are on the

First step.

You are on the road that looks bright,
Reading Lolita in Tehran

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Packed and ready to go, AZAR envisions herself as a bird about to take flight.
would you ever return to the land that will accept you where you were if you'll ever return to the land where you were free and happy, blessing the...
Reading Lolita in Tehran

AZAR:

Fl.

Vc.

Pno.

AZAR:

Fl.

Vc.

Pno.

AZAR:

Fl.

Vc.

Pno.

AZAR:

Fl.

Vc.

Pno.

AZAR:

Fl.

Vc.

Pno.

AZAR:

Fl.

Vc.

Pno.

AZAR:

Fl.

Vc.

Pno.

AZAR:

Fl.

Vc.

Pno.

AZAR:

Fl.

Vc.

Pno.

AZAR:

Fl.

Vc.

Pno.

AZAR:

Fl.

Vc.

Pno.

AZAR:

Fl.

Vc.

Pno.

AZAR:

Fl.

Vc.

Pno.

AZAR:

Fl.

Vc.

Pno.

AZAR:

Fl.

Vc.

Pno.

AZAR:

Fl.

Vc.

Pno.

AZAR:

Fl.

Vc.

Pno.
AZAR:

Reading Lolita in Tehran

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AZAR:

Reading Lolita in Tehran

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AZAR:

Listening to music, falling in love, walking down the shady avenue. The

no vel co lors Teh ran

Reading Lolita in Tehran
Appendix: Libretto

I. Lolita

The stage is dark. AZAR starts at her desk alone, remembering.

AZAR
I need you to imagine us
In a deceptively sunny room,
we escape Iran
and articulate in our own words
ourselves
listening to music,
falling in love,
walking down the shady streets.

Then imagine all of this—
taken away.

I write to celebrate reading.

AZAR moves to the living room, arranging things, closing windows, preparing
for her secret literature class

AZAR
I awake,
too excited to eat.
Every Thursday we’ll discuss literature,
my students and I,
secretly!

No interference
from the Islamic Republic!
We can do what we like
without penalties for wearing,
dare-I-say, make-up.
No one sees.
Freedoms I’ve been denied,
colors I’ve only dreamed!

What if it doesn’t work,
if they don’t come?
What if it works too well,
and guards find out?

A knock at the door. AZAR freezes; the knock could be the police. Members of the CHORUS enter in rapid succession, their chatter overlapping. In their greetings some remove head coverings, too busy to completely divest themselves of dark-colored outwear. The windows are closed.

MAHSHID
I thought you weren’t home.

AZAR
No men in the house,
you don’t need your veil.

MAHSHID
I’ll get the door!

AZIN
Orchids from Mitra and I.

AZAR
Thank you, Azin.

MITRA
Salām!

YASSI
I am here too!

MITRA
Yassi!

AZAR
Welcome!

Sanaz!

SANAZ
Sorry I’m late,
my brother won’t let me drive.

AZAR
I worry about the trouble
this class might cost you.
NASSRIN
I mentioned it to Father,
and surprise! he disapproved.

AZAR
How did he let you come?

MAHSHID
You lied!

NASSRIN
What else can I do at this age?
Father tries to control every move,
every wish!

SANAZ
What if he calls to check up on you?

NASSRIN
Shh!
We are translating Islamic texts into English.

Now the CHORUS becomes more comfortable. With the mention of colors,
they begin to reveal colorful modern clothing, t-shirts, jeans, etc.

MITRA / YASSI
Look at this place!
Beautiful.

SANAZ / NASSRIN
Everywhere, colors.

AZAR
I’ve always been obsessed with all kinds of colors.

NASSRIN
I want to wear shocking pink,
tomato red!

MAHSHID
You’re too greedy for colors!

AZIN
I paint my nails the color of blood.
MITRA
Why, Azin?

AZIN
It takes my mind off things…

AZAR
Scheherazade’s dress,
the magic lamp, colors of paradise.

CHORUS
Green lush leaves,
two red apples.
A golden pear and blue,
Persian blue.

NASSRIN
My paradise is swimming-pool blue!

SANAZ
My paradise is too!

CHORUS *(overlapping)*
Cerulean, aqua, turquoise, denim, periwinkle.
Cobalt, sky, sea, indigo.
Aabi, lapis, sapphire, azure.
Midnight, violet.

NASSRIN
Father was proud of his champion swimmer.
My dream is at the bottom of that pool,
like Gatsby.

MITRA
I once painted life,
but now it’s just rebellious color.

CHORUS
Tangerine, saffron, plum, pomegranate, lime.

MITRA
Dark patches, droplets of blue.
Reality is so bleak,
all I can paint are the colors of my dreams.

*CHORUS surrounds AZAR in the living room, picking up the varied books.*
YASSI
What will we study?

AZAR
The first work will be…
*A Thousand and One Nights.*

SANAZ
Scheherazade!

MITRA
Shahrzad!

NASSRIN
The king slays virgin wives
as revenge for a queen’s betrayal.
Stories stay his hand.

AZAR
Three kinds of women are victims of the king’s rule:

YASSI / MAHSHID
Those who betray…

AZIN / MITRA / NASSRIN
and are killed.

SANAZ
Those who die for the king.

MAHSHID
Those killed before they can betray.

MITRA
The virgins have no voice but their silence.

AZIN
Shahrzad chooses different terms.
She fashions her own universe,
making words.

SANAZ
Courage to risk her life

MAHSHID
sets her apart from the others.
AZAR passes out copies of Nabokov’s Invitation to a Beheading.

CHORUS
Upsilamba! Upsilamba!

AZAR
Nabokov writes of being trapped without fresh language. No upsilamba letters to catapult and take flight.

CHORUS
Upsilamba! Upsilamba!

YASSI
Upsilon and lambda, what does it mean?

CHORUS
Upsilamba! Upsilamba!

AZIN
A sound, a melody.

SANAZ
A small African boy’s secret name.

MITRA
A small silver fish leaping in and out of a moon-lit lake.

AZAR
The impossible joy of a suspended leap!

YASSI
It’s a dance, c’mon baby…

AZAR / YASSI
…do the upsilamba with me!

CHORUS
Upsilamba! Upsilamba!

MAHSHID
Three girls jumping rope,
shouting upsilamba!

MITRA
The paradox of a blissful sigh.

SANAZ
A little bird.

AZIN
An upsilamba to you, too!

NASSRIN
A magic code opens the door to a vast treasure…

AZAR
of remembrance.

*Bookshop. MAGICIAN organizes books as AZAR tries to find the titles she wants.*

AZAR
I searched for books,
books impossible to find only months later.

MAGICIAN
If you’re interested in those…

AZAR
I am.

MAGICIAN
…buy them now,
too much demand.
They can’t do anything about that,
can they?

*AZAR and MAGICIAN move to a café where she has brought her students’ pictures, papers, and projects.*

AZAR
What do you see in my girls?
Read their writing,
look at their drawings.

MAGICIAN
They are fine people.
AZAR
They’re geniuses!
Will you meet with them?

MAGICIAN
No, I’m trying not to add to my acquaintances,

AZAR / MAGICIAN
too many people to worry over.

AZAR
Did I choose them?
Or did they choose me?

Back at the house, all the women are present, Xerox copies of Lolita in hand,
tea cups all around.

AZAR
We are reading a novel
about a man in possession
of a twelve-year-old girl.

YASSI
Why does reading Lolita,
so tragic,
make us happy?

MITRA
If we write about life in Iran,
should we make readers happy?

NASSRIN / SANAZ
What bothers us most
is not her utter helplessness,
but the robbery of her childhood.

AZIN
The pinned butterfly.

NASSRIN / SANAZ
Humbert stole her innocence.

CHORUS
Lolita,
I see myself in you.
Lolita,
I see your captivity
in my own life.

II. Gatsby

Students redress for the outside world. Change to university setting. NYAZI stomps down the hall to AZAR’s office after seeing the assigned reading list posted. MITRA, NASSRIN, and SANAZ follow.

NYAZI
How could this happen?
Scott Fitzgerald!
The novel is immoral,
it’s poison,

MITRA / NASSRIN / SANAZ
No, it’s not!

NYAZI
corrupting innocent minds who read it as truth.

MITRA / NASSRIN / SANAZ
How can he say these things?

AZAR
Do you know this is fiction,
not how-to?

NYAZI
Maybe Gatsby is fine for America,
but not our youth.
The “Great” Gatsby represents all things America.
We should fight against this immorality,
this evil.

AZAR
In these days of public prosecutions,
put Gatsby on trial.
You can be prosecutor,
the class can be jury.
We need a judge, defendant,
defense attorney.
The Islamic Republic of Iran versus The Great Gatsby.
AZAR taps her pencil on the desk as a gavel. NYAZI makes his way to the front of the classroom for opening statements.

NYAZI
Our writers have a sacred mission.
Our poets battle against the Great Satan.
Faithful soldiers,

AZAR
The students?

NYAZI
Purge Western culture....

As a Muslim, I cannot accept *Gatsby*.
Every single page condemns itself.
The hero cheats! and destroys homes!
He earns money illegally,
buys a married woman’s love,
lies and shamelessly deceives.
What sort of American dream is this?

SANAZ moves to the front of the classroom.

SANAZ
Our prosecutor can no longer distinguish fiction from reality.
Novels must be read on their own terms.
Is a story good if the heroine is good?
Is it bad if the characters stray?
It is moral when it makes us confront our beliefs?

This is the first book to succeed so brilliantly.
*Gatsby* disturbs us,
and awakens minds from sleep.
Judged by their honesty,
the rich fail.
How can you claim the author would approve?
They are careless,
counting on others to be careful.
This book *condemns* the wealthy
more than your revolutionaries!

AZAR
Don’t read Gatsby to learn good and evil.
Both are complicated.
NYAZI
There is nothing complicated about an affair.
Gatsby, get your own wife!

MAHSHID
Write your own novel!

NASSRIN
I don’t approve of Gatsby,
but he would die for love.

NYAZI
This is an Islamic country and this is the law.

SANAZ regains the floor.

SANAZ
Why major in literature?
Does it mean anything?
The novel is its own defense.
We all have things to learn from Gatsby.
Not that adultery is good, or that to swindle is right,
but we should value our dreams,
and take care where they alight.
And the joy of reading,
that counts too, see?

III. James

Without a headscarf, NASSRIN tries to walk past the GUARD who blocks her path to the University gate.

GUARD
You there!
Your I.D. please!
You know you can’t go in like this.

NASSRIN
I’ve been going in like this for years!

GUARD
No! Cover your head!
New orders!

NASSRIN
My problem, not yours!
GUARD
I’m to stop any woman…

NASSRIN
I’m not ANY woman!

GUARD
Signed by the president:
No GIRL passes in your condition.

NASSRIN
In my condition?

GUARD
You can’t go through, I will be held responsible.

NASSRIN
Last time I checked,
I was the one responsible for my “condition”!

NASSRIN looks at the gate, then at the GUARD, and breaks into a run. As NASSRIN reaches inside the University, she is seized. AZAR and NASSRIN make eye contact as NASSRIN is led away. AZAR continues toward administrator BAHRI’s office for a meeting about the veil policy.

BAHRI
Before the revolution, why did Nassrin wear the veil in the poorer, more traditional parts of town?

AZAR
It was out of respect for those people’s faith!

BAHRI
It’s just a piece of cloth,
so much more is at stake.
The Imperial West corrupts us,
while your “preference” divides us.

AZAR
“Defender of the faith”
we have more respect for that “piece of cloth”
than to force it on anyone.
It is not the veil itself,
but how it transforms women.
How can I argue against the “agent of God”?
AZAR hands over ID, quitting her teaching job at the university. She moves toward the bookstore, running into her friend, the MAGICIAN.

AZAR
I will pick up all the Jameses,
all six novels by Austen,
Howard’s End, Vanity Fair,
some Nabokov,
Fanny Hill?
Not enough money.

MAGICIAN
Don’t worry,
no one knows who they are anymore.
And who wants to read them now, anyway?

AZAR
Who indeed?
People like me,
irrelevant.

Bearing signs with slogans, CHORUS pursues AZAR as she makes her way home through the streets.

CHORUS
New regulations!
Chador, long robe and scarf!
New rules to enforce!
Unveiled women will not be served!
Disobedience will be punished!
Seventy six lashes!
Jail!
Morality squads patrol the streets.

After slamming the door on the CHORUS, AZAR dramatically throws scarf and long over-ropes to the floor in anger, looking in the mirror.

AZAR
Now that I cannot call myself teacher, writer,
now that I can’t wear my own clothes,
walk to my own beat,
shout, pat a colleague on the back,
now that this is illegal,
I feel fictional and light,
walking on air,
as if I was written,
then erased.
Invisible.

I invent new games for myself.
In a robe to my ankles,
I withdraw my hands.
See? I have none.
My body disappears.
Only a piece of cloth moves here and there,
I’m something invisible.

One day the female guard objects,
“Rub that muck off!”
Though I wore no make-up, my skin burns from her scrubbing.

Where to escape?
We turn to our private sanctuaries.
Reading indiscriminately,
every book I can find,
is mine.

_In a café. Sign: Armenian Café RELIGIOUS MINORITY._

**AZAR**
Emergency!

**MAGICIAN**
Whatever can you mean?

**AZAR**
I’ve been asked to teach again.

**MAGICIAN**
Is this new?

**AZAR**
No, but this time I’m wavering.

**MAGICIAN**
“When you look long into an abyss,
the abyss also looks into you.”
Lady professor, you want to return.
What do you prove by refusing?
AZAR
I’m a traitor either way.

MAGICIAN
Aren’t you going to be late?

AZAR
What about my answer?

MAGICIAN
Obviously, you must teach.

AZAR
What about taking a stand?

MAGICIAN
None of us can drink water without the grace of the Republic.
You’ll enjoy teaching,
your students will enjoy you,
and probably learn something.
Make your deals,
but don’t compromise your soul.
Seriously, this won’t last forever.

_Hallway of Azar’s home. Lights low._

CHORUS
Sirens, sirens.
Attention, attention!
This is the danger signal.
Red alert, go to shelter!
Sirens, sirens.
Danger, danger.

Red siren: danger.
Yellow: possible danger.
White: danger has stopped,
you can come out.
Red siren sounds too late.
There are no shelters.

Dinner guests stay for sleepless nights of sirens.

MAHSHID / MITRA
Thanks for letting us stay.
AZAR
In the hallway I stay up with books,
sharing the wall with my children,
keeping watch to jinx the bombs.
In the blackout candle glow I read.
A sudden explosion rends my ribs!
My eyes pretend that nothing happened,
and rest on a page of Daisy Miller.

CHORUS
By Henry James.

Lights up. Classroom. All the women are veiled. NASSRIN is still absent until the next scene. AZAR lectures to her class at Allameh.

AZAR
Henry James changed attitudes about relationships and duties.
Daisy Miller defied conventions.
Elizabeth Bennett and Jane Eyre refuse to comply,
but do not claim to be radical.

NYAZI
Daisy is obviously a bad girl.
She’s flirtatious, making eyes at men.
If you want revolution, try being modest.
Daisy is evil and deserves to die!

MAHSHID
Tell me he’s not serious.

NYAZI
Why does she disagree?
We are at war both home and abroad.
We are moral, we fight against evil.

MAHSHID
If you remember, James lived through wars:
the Civil War, and the First World War.

SANAZ
What I’d say if he’d let me!

MITRA
Shh! He’ll report you!
NYAZI
Perhaps these wars were not the righteous ones.

YASSI
Not righteous?

SANAZ
When is war righteous?

NYAZI
“A woman in a veil is protected like a pearl in an oyster shell.”

AZIN / MITRA
We should all be less silent.

MAHSHID
I envy Daisy’s courage.

The CHORUS restrain each other from engaging NYAZI. AZAR moves to her office where NASSRIN appears.

AZAR
I’ve wondered about you!
Where on earth have you been?
You still owe me a paper on Gatsby.

NASSRIN
You were there when I was arrested.

AZAR
Yes, but I thought…

NASSRIN
I was lucky, they only gave me ten years.

AZAR
Nassrin, all this time?

NASSRIN
I thought of you and our classes in a cell with fifteen others, like Razieh.
She talked about Hemingway.

AZAR
Razieh, what was she doing there?
NASSRIN
And I shared the Gatsby trial.
We laughed a lot.

AZAR
Of course you did.

NASSRIN
She wrote this:

(Reading)
“All my life I lived in poverty,
had to steal books, sneak into theaters,
but how those times brought me joy.
Rich kids don’t cherish their Gone With the Wind.
James is so different from other writers,
I think I’m in love.”

AZAR
She really says that?

NASSRIN
You know that she’s dead?

Gatsby was so beautiful,
Gatsby and his love reunite in the rain,
after five long years.
Do you remember the twelve-year-old girl
shot looking for her mom?
But my father had high-ranking friends,
so I’m finally here.

AZAR
You still owe me a paper.

What strange places my students met.
This is not where I imagined they’d take all my favorite novels.
The joy of Gatsby’s now locked in a jail.
Nassrin was lucky, what kind of lucky?
And Razieh’s dead.
IV. Austen

Azar’s living room. The women have discarded their chadors and are dressed in colorful modern clothing. AZAR and CHORUS pantomime proper British tea time. AZIN is absent.

YASSI
It is a truth universally acknowledged that a Muslim man, regardless of fortune, must be in want of a virginal nine-year-old wife.

MITRA
Or not just one?

CHORUS
We’re back to Jane Austen here in Iran, no one marries for love. Girls marry for green cards, money, and their families, yet almost never with their heart.

MAHSHID
Here we go again…

YASSI
These are college educated girls like us!

CHORUS
Like Darya, Sholeh, Parvin.

MAHSHID
Many women live alone by their own choice.

NASSRIN
Who’s doing that?

CHORUS
None of us are. Most don’t have that choice. We’re behind Jane Austen’s times.

NASSRIN
A man can have unlimited temporary wives,

CHORUS
As many as he wishes.
MAHSHID
Men have more needs!
And it’s still the girl’s choice.

NASSRIN
What funny notions you must have of choice!

CHORUS and AZAR arrange themselves in the living room for Austen-style dancing.

CHORUS / AZAR
Pride and Prejudice is like eighteenth century dancing.
Lizzie and Darcy move toward and away from each other
Moving backward reappraises former moves in the dance and conversation.
The best dancers match their partner’s steps.
Imagine that Mister Darcy stands opposite you.

MITRA
I’ll be Elizabeth!

YASSI
No, that would be me.

NASSRIN
I’ll play Jane!
She’s the most beautiful.

AZAR
Come on, Mahshid, we need Mister Collins.
Enjoy stepping on my toes.

MAHSHID
I’ve never danced all my life.

AZAR
Consider this homework.

CHORUS / AZAR
Forward, backward, pause.

AZAR
Harmonize your steps.

CHORUS / AZAR
Turn, turn, turn.
AZAR
Keep with the rest of the set.

Who can dance Persian style?

MITRA / YASSI
Sanaz can dance. / Come on, Sanaz.

SANAZ dances.

SANAZ
Subtlety, brazenness.
A hazy, lazy flirtation.
Naz and eshveh and kereshmeh.
I am elusive, sinewy, tactile.
Twist and twirl, wind and unwind.
Hands curl and uncurl, coil and always recoil.
Each step predicts its own effect,
before the next step.
Openly seductive, yet unsurrendering!
Daisy Miller could never dream of being me.

The dance finishes just as AZIN abruptly rushes in, visibly bruised and beaten.

YASSI
What happened to you?

MITRA
What did he do?

AZIN
My husband hates my every joy,
jealous of my books, my computer,
my Thursday mornings.
Humiliated by my independence,
he...beats me,
then swears undying love.
More than this,
he taunts that no one else could ever love me.
I am used, secondhand.
He could marry an eighteen-year-old,
and start new.
AZAR and the MAGICIAN meet for coffee discussing SANAZ’ broken engagement, while SANAZ, MITRA, and YASSI go shopping and talk about the same event.

MAGICIAN
Stop blaming the Islamic Republic of Iran.

AZAR
But they cause my girls trials and tribulations.

MAGICIAN
Tell me.

SANAZ / AZAR
My engagement is off. / Sanaz’ engagement is off.

MITRA / YASSI
What did he say to you?

SANAZ / AZAR
He was still a student.

MITRA / YASSI
Excuses!

SANAZ / AZAR
How could we be happy? / How could they be happy? He would always love me / He would always love her.

MITRA / YASSI
Does he know what love is?

AZAR
Bloody coward!

MAGICIAN
How does the jilting of a beautiful girl relate to the Islamic Republic?

MITRA / SANAZ / YASSI
How can he leave his love? Can’t he be brave for once? What does this mean for us? Every part of life is touched. The regime’s not kind to us.
AZAR
My girls feel doomed to be unhappy here.

MAGICIAN
They need to learn to fight for happiness.

AZAR
Magician, am I doing more harm than good? 
The stories of my past create a glowing picture 
of that other world, of the West.

MITRA / SANAZ / YASSI
She tells us stories, 
abroad adventures, 
American college.

Maybe we should escape, 
to Syria, England, Oklahoma.

MAGICIAN
We each create our own paradise.

AZAR
Rub your magic lamp, 
make the revolutionary guards vanish, 
along with Azin’s husband and the mandatory veil.

AZAR and CHORUS gather around YASSI for story time in the living room.

YASSI
My “Gentleman Caller:”
Before any decisions are made, 
we should get to know each other, 
we’d be modern about it.

So, we go to a park, 
he and I, 
followed by parents and sisters, 
and aunts, and grandparents. 
No, just one grandparent…
I ask him about his field: 
mechanical engineering. 
Reading anything interesting? 
Doesn’t have time to read!

Suddenly, I get a brilliant idea!
I start to walk faster.
He starts to walk faster.
The family behind adjusts to my pace.
I come to a sudden halt.
They run into us!

If he gets it and laughs,
I’ll give it a chance.
If he doesn’t, that’s it,
I won’t waste my time.

I won’t waste my time.

AZAR and MAGICIAN meet in a café.

AZAR
One of my girls asked how Jane Austen is so optimistic about the world.

MAGICIAN
Most people make that mistake, they should read her more carefully.

AZAR
Austen writes on cruelty under everyday circumstances by people like us, isn’t that frightening?

MAGICIAN
It’s frightening to be free, to take responsibility, to have no Islamic Republic to blame. I’m not saying they’re blameless.

Guards outside!
Since we’re not related, I should go.

AZAR
We’re not doing anything wrong.

MAGICIAN
Don’t be stupid, you don’t want scandal.
AZAR hands MAGICIAN A Thousand and One Nights.

MAGICIAN
I don’t know when I could return this.

MAGICIAN places the book on the table as he leaves. Change to Azar’s house. The CHORUS gathers in the living room for one last meeting.

MAHSHID
Nassrin left for the border.
By next week she should be riding a camel
or donkey or jeep across the desert.

SANAZ
We should be happy for her.
Nassrin got the message from Dr. Nafisi.

AZIN
It isn’t her fault you feel trapped here.

SANAZ
I do feel trapped,
why shouldn’t I?

AZIN
You act like it’s Mrs. Nafisi’s fault.

SANAZ
You have shown us staying here is useless.
We should all leave if we want to succeed.

MAHSHID
Where’s your loyalty?

AZAR
You can’t follow me in everything.

SANAZ
I’m not like Mahshid,
I don’t think that anyone
has the duty to stay,
we have only one life to live.

MITRA
In Damascus I could walk freely,
wearing t-shirt and jeans,
feeling the sun and the air,  
on my skin, on my hair.  
I’m angry for my lost portion of wind.

MAHSHID  
You know the laws.

SANAZ  
At least for you the veil is natural.

MITRA  
It’s your religion, your choice.

MAHSHID  
But if I lose that?

YASSI  
If one day I lose my faith,  
it will be like dying,  
starting again in a world without guarantees.

MAHSHID  
During the Shah’s time,  
I had to guard my faith.  
I was in the minority.  
Now that my religion is in power,  
I feel more helpless,  
more alienated.

Nassrin sends her regards.

MAHSHID hands AZAR a note from Nassrin.

AZAR  
(Reading)  
I still owe you a paper on Gatsby.

Magician’s house, he brings two mugs of tea.

AZAR  
Thank you, Islamic Republic of Iran,  
for all the things you’ve taught me,  
to love Austen and James,  
ice cream and freedom.
AZAR / MAGICIAN

The Austen we know is forever linked to this place,
This land, these trees,
those long streets’ warm embrace.
Where the film censor is blind,
where they hang girls in those streets,
and segregate men from women
by hanging curtains.

AZAR

Perhaps by writing
I’ll become more generous,
less angry.

SANAZ meets AZAR one last time. SANAZ reads the remains of tea leaves in Azar’s cup.

SANAZ

Before you leave,
let me tell your fortune:
I see a bird,
which means good news,
but you are agitated.
A road that looks bright,
you are on the first step.
You are thinking of a thousand things
At the same time.
There is a key,
a problem to be solved.
A small ship still in the harbor
has not yet set sail.

Packed and ready to go, AZAR envisions herself as a bird about to take flight. After AZAR moves to the other side of the stage, she can strip off the veil and chador, becoming herself again.

AZAR

Little bird,
I know that you prefer death
to this emptiness you feel.
Each day, you wonder
if you'll ever return to the land
that will accept you,
where you will be free
and happy
blessing the air with your song
until the day is done.

Your heart is filled with the memory of such things.

Little bird,
I’d turn your bright wings to laughter, and your silence into everlasting music.

Your little form is on the bare branches now.
In the twilight shadows you sing for the last light of day.

I write to celebrate reading Nabokov, James, Fitzgerald, and Austen against all odds.
So many memories connect Lolita and the city: Listening to music, falling in love, walking down the shady streets.

The novel colors Tehran. Tehran redefines the novel, turning it into our Lolita.