

Reading Lolita in Tehran: *Reflections upon Reading an English Novel as a Foreign Language Learner*

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Abstract:

This is an ESL learner's reading response to a literary work and a literature circle activity run in a classroom in the United States. After reading the assigned novel, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, the author not only reflected on her view upon the story, but she also detailed the reading process. Most importantly, she passionately echoed her personal experiences in her home country, Thailand related with the novel's theme. Indeed, along with reading the women's lives in Tehran, the author used reading to revisit and narrate her own life, one scene to another, in Bangkok and in southern Thailand where she was born and had a memory of love and pain. This reflective account demonstrates the importance of novel reading to ESL learners. It not only provides a space for the writer but it evidently also provides a sanctuary for a common reader.

Key words: Lolita in Tehran, Reading in a foreign language, ESL readers, reflective response

"Literature provides a living- through, not simply knowledge about: not the fact that lovers have died young and fair, but a living-through of Romeo and Juliet; not theories about Rome, but a living-through of the conflicts in Julius Caesar or the paradoxes of Caesar and Cleopatra" (Rosenblatt, 1983, p.38)

History repeats itself

One month prior to when one of my MA courses, *Introduction to Literacy*, embarked, I picked up *Reading Lolita in Tehran* to do a quick review. To my surprise, I couldn't put it down; I spent a whole week, reading hungrily, and finished the book with a feeling of being overwhelmed. I felt stunned, sad, and depressed; feelings from two decades ago knocked at my life again. In my deep thought, I learned that bloody episodes born of a desire of democracy and a cry for freedom repeat themselves from time to time; it merely happens in different places. Was this phenomenon an epidemic?

Going back to the old days when I was six years old, my memory of the *Field Marshal Thanom Kitti-Kachorn* regime is still vivid. Thai people will never forget the October 14, 1973 uprising and the October 6, 1976 political upheavals at Thammasat University, Bangkok. (We Thais called these *Hok Tula* and *Sib-see Tula*). Through oppression, rampant corruption, political domination and greed, Thanom's empire inadvertently gave birth to a collective spirit of freedom that won on Rajadamnoen road in 1973, lost at Thammasat in 1976 and reappeared in May 1992. (We called it the cell phone or middle class uprising).

From the national tragedy, I recall the days when my brother, a law sophomore, had escaped into the hills, and joined the communist party for four years. I remember the days my mom and I listened to urgent national news from an old transistor radio, holding our breath when the names of students who died were announced, and us taking deep breaths when the name was not of my brother or of the ones we heard. Such a cruel and torturous moment in our life! The picture of my mom watching the transistor and holding it tight for days and nights without eating and doing anything is still in my mind. I will never forget days, weeks and months during those years that my mother left home without telling me where her destination was. But when she came back, she was so proud to present me a story of acupuncture she had learned from her beloved communist comrades and told me to hide the books she had carried back from the hills.

The Thammasat University massacre 1976 (*Hok Tu La*) relates to Iran in many ways; the labels "tyrant" and "dictator" were so hard to shake off. Anti-government protesters were rounded up. Press freedom was dramatically curtailed, the closing of printing presses was a normal occurrence, and the freedom of reading was prohibited. As for this Thai

tragedy, until the present day, the number of innocent people killed has never been independently confirmed and the figure is still disputed.

Another feeling came to my mind; on the upside I felt I was so lucky to have been born in Thailand. Compared to Iran, the war with dictators in Thailand was over and Thai people have enjoyed freedom under democratic government. Nonetheless on the downside, war itself actually seems to be prevailing. Thailand, and I think many countries have been fighting with a new form of war—an economic war (some might say a dollar or a capitalism war). If we take a close look, we can smell and see this horrible and threatening new kind of war. One super power country with a powerful economy now undertakes and manages the world. The currency is a new kind of weapon. We seem to be colonized not by military armies but by a global financial system of US dollars. The war is bloodless; nobody dies. However, we can't deny that it mentally terrifies life.

At this point, I was so grateful to the professor who introduced *Reading Lolita in Tehran* to me; I couldn't wait for the semester to start.

Through different lens

My feeling after reading this book reminded me of the notion of Manguel (1996, p.93). He stated, "I think we ought to read only books that bite and sting us. If the book we are reading doesn't shake us awake like a blow on the skull, why bother reading it in the first place?" I haven't had such kind of passion in reading for a long time since I finished college. Because of the economic and academic forces, most of my reading during post-college mainly engaged in efferent purposes even though I prefer aesthetic reading (Rosenblatt, 1978).

I love reading short stories, magazine columnists, memoirs, autobiographies and personal accounts like this book. I notice that the older I become, the shorter the manuscript I read. To me, reading is like eating dessert and going to play a game in a casino! I value the happiness, which comes from reading highly; the feeling of being isolated from the real world while reading is so great. I don't want to stop consuming once I find good books. This may sound "precarious" for some readers. To a certain extent, those people think that reading, especially for young children, needs to be monitored, making sure their kids consume the right dose of reading at the right age.

As for my reading habits, I usually read books, like watching movies, without wanting to know any clues, namely previews, or critiques. For me, the pleasure from reading was from the first moment, an on-going process and the ending. The impressive feeling of reading came from the interaction with stories, making predictions, making my own plots, putting my self in the stories and portraying the endings of the story. The feeling when I read *Reading Lolita in Tehran* was also similar to when watching movies that I haven't previewed before. I enjoyed the plot and characters.

The author of this novel, Nafiri, really made me keep thinking who a magician was! Did she make it up to represent her shadow?

Reading it like “if tomorrow will never come”

As for the process of reading this book, students were asked by the professor to record it in detail. For the first reading, I started reading the book by going through the critical praise, the authors' notes, and the table of contents. Judging from the titles, finally I decided to read chapter I—the title of this book.

I kept reading without checking vocabularies even if I encountered many difficult and unknown words. As I said before, there was a sense of immediacy to this book, which aroused me to read it without stopping. To my surprise, the more I read, the more I realized I was very poor in vocabulary skills. But I did not pay attention. This was my customary reading habit, including when I read academic texts for the first time.

I continued reading quickly and skipped the parts I considered unimportant, over-detailed and confusing. Especially, since I really didn't have schema in the novels that the author referred in each story, I thought it would be great if I had some heightened literature background. (My English major excluded literature courses)

Strategically speaking, I applied metacognition in reading by guessing meanings from context, which I actually didn't take too seriously. I ignored difficult vocabularies and skipped many passages; however, in general I thought I could comprehend the mood, and the gist of all of six stories (Kintsch & Van Dijk, 1978).

Generally speaking, what I did was read through page by page. I felt as if I were watching movies scene after scene. The feeling was unique and

unexplainable - in a way like finding a long lost friend. Her stories were so fascinating that I felt it was difficult to put the book down. I heard her powerful, beautiful, and sad voice. Overall, even though I didn't have a literature background, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* was a very intriguing, provocative and enlightening book. The author also strongly stimulated me to read novels she mentioned, namely Vladimir Nabokov; F. Scott Fitzgerald; and Jane Austen.

I noticed that the hunger for reading came back once again. Like when I fell in love with someone, my mind always kept thinking about him all the time. It reminded me the time I fell in love with *The Mother*, *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, *Animal farm*, *A memoir of Japanese Woman in Cambodia* (I totally forgot the title), *Khun Thong Jao Ja klab mia fa sang* (*He will be back home at dawn*) and a few more of short stories in my language.

The post- reading moment was like after watching great movies, I couldn't hold back my tears. And I told my roommates how I had fallen in love with reading again (she had seen me how very obsessed with the book I had become) and told my self how lucky I was. For a week, I read and cried, read and cried. I read like I was dying. This kind of aesthetic reading was really wonderful.

Once I finished *Gatsby*, I did research to know more about the author. As a daughter of an Iran mayor and the recipient of higher education abroad, I didn't feel surprised at the way she thought and acted, which she represented through this book. In the meantime, the author's view and personality—which was very American—reminded me of some of Thai technocrats, teachers and colleagues who had degree from abroad, and obviously promoted American and westernize culture and acted against Thai traditional ways of practice even though they spent just a short period of time abroad. To these people, it seemed that westernized value was magic! Yet Thai cultural mores were priceless. On the other hand there was a group of people, who understood the whole picture of Thai culture, and who tried to compromise new culture with the original one. This group was much more welcome by the public!

Time kills the beauty of reading

Acting as if I were a movie critic, I was quite serious for repeated readings of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, since I had role and mission to take into account. I checked unfamiliar words and reread the main parts of the story to make

sure I got its main idea right. To my surprise again, I realized that I was not a good reader at all. Later on, I gave up checking vocabularies since time was so tight (Actually, it's not my habit). When I encountered phrases and words I didn't understand, I noted them down in my journal, wishing one day I have time to go back again.

The role in reading log group did force me to reread so many passages in each story even though my role was an illustrator; I thought I should read thoroughly so that I would be able to draw pictures. At the beginning, I was worried about my incredibly poor drawing skill; however, I found drawing from reading insight was fun and interesting. I enjoyed!

I also tried to understand in detail the seven girls' names, their personalities, and the main characters of Gatsby, James, and each story. My goal in the reading kept me focused on a role I was given; the aim of my reading was efferent oriented. My pace was slow and sometimes I got terribly fatigued. This book made my vocabulary list much greater.

Two heads are better than one

Compared to the first reading, my repeated readings were goal-driven. Honestly, the beauty I was struck at the first reading was completely gone due to time constraints but, instead, I gained new knowledge and different aspects of reading after discussion. The insight I learned from the reading log group enriched me and gave me a clearer picture of each story; we read out loud, exchanged our thoughts, and rechecked our comprehension by doing a slow movement from word to word, paragraph to paragraph. Each member excelled in her role. I got a different list of vocabulary. Judging from my experience, I seldom consult dictionaries in my language. Thus, when my group members, native speakers of English, coming up with a long list of vocabularies, this astonished me tremendously.

Fortunately, since we had Renée, a student from a major of Literature and Criticism, present a literature expert, I thought I had gained much insight. She seldom spoke in class but in the reading log group, she's the real one. I wished she shared more in a class discussion. But she might prefer listening!

Closing remarks

In a nutshell, the book brought me back to a song devoted to Chit Bhoommisak, who was a famous noble Thai writer. Sadly and very

unfortunately, he was killed by anti-communism groups during Thailand uprising. He died young, when I was 2 years old; his writing and his impact however last so long. The famous passage of one of his Thai songs, is translated as "*Dictators can put men in jail. Yet, they can't put men's heart and strong will of freedom in jail. I was born to kill dictators.*" My last reflection here is that dictators die hard yet. So does freedom of reading! It seems that most great writers and readers were born in jail.

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