



Reading Lolita in Tehran is an evocative example of woman power

GAUTAMAN BHASKARAN

Russian-American author Vladimir Nobokov's novel, Lolita, created a huge controversy with its plot point of hebephilia. And since this sat uneasily with the political powers in the US and UK, it was first published in France by Olympia Press.

In India, the copies of the book were detained at the Bombay port by the Customs for two months before Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru read the novel and decided to let the consignment come in. He said in a note: The book is certainly not pornographic in the normal sense of the word. It is, as I have said, a serious book, seriously written. If there had been no fuss about it, no question need have arisen at all of banning it or preventing its entry. It is this fuss that sometimes makes a difference because people are attracted especially to reading books which are talked about in this way."

He was absolutely right.

I was at school then and overwhelmed by curiosity, somehow managed to lay my hands on a copy. Of course, I could not understand much of what was written, but the thrill of reading a book that had created such a furore excited me. Moreover, there was this talk of a ban.

The story of Lolita is simple. It describes the protagonist, a French literature professor, living in New England (US) writing under the pseudonym of Humbert Humbert, kidnapping and sexually abusing a 12-year-old girl.

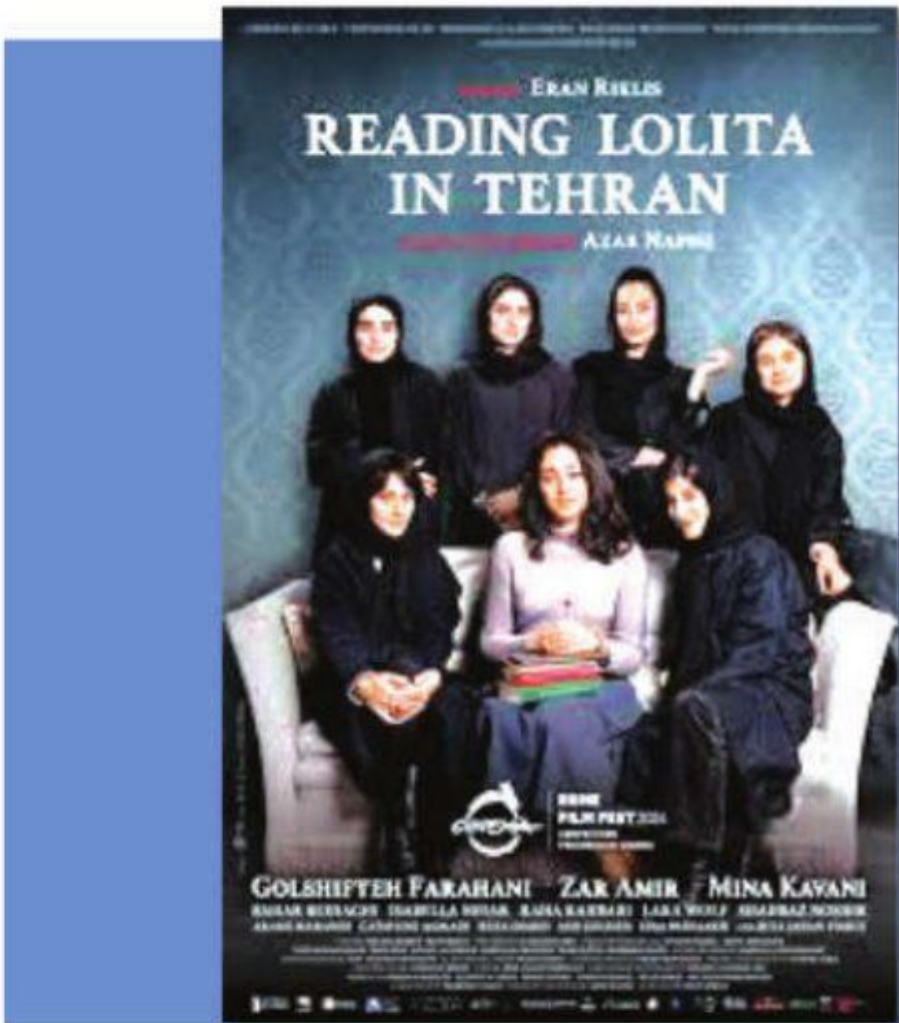
In the film, Reading Lolita in Tehran, by Israel's Eran Riklis, which has been making the festival rounds, we first see university students in a class taken by professor Azar Nafisi (a wonderfully expressive Golshifteh Farahani), who is discussing literary texts like The Great Gatsby, Daisy and Lolita, all of which were opposed by the regime.

The women students soon realise that they are the Lolitas who have been denied the right to make independent choices or express themselves freely.

Adapted from the memoirs of the Iranian-American author, Prof. Nafisi, the movie captures the angst of post-revolution Iran where people's initial hopes are dashed to the ground. The atrocities by the ruling clergy are horrendous, and we can hear men and women on the streets screaming "They lied to us!"

The work – from a screenplay by Marjorie David – spans across 24 years beginning in 1979 when a young academic, Nafisi, settles down in Tehran with her husband just as Iran witnesses the revolution. It looked like the time of hope with many Iranians returning home, only to realise that they had been fed on false promises. This is apparent even as Nafisi is at the airport; she is shocked to see a rude guy at the passport control desk and an equally unfriendly officer at Customs, who shows utter disdain for the books she has brought along. One of them is Lolita, but of course, he has no clue about the controversy surrounding the book.

As the revolution takes a suffocating hold over the country, we see how conservatism begins spreading. Women who walked on the streets without a hijab soon began to cover their heads with scarves. Men in Nafisi's class talk about how the hijab will become compulsory. "One day, it will be the law," a male student hisses. When a male security guard blocks Nafisi's way at the door because she has left her hair uncovered, she says – in one of the strongest scenes -- "My grandmother was the most devout Muslim I knew. She never missed a prayer. But she wore her scarf because she was devout, not because it was a symbol (of male dominance)". She was a



great example of a woman who lived a life independent of men.

Such freedom finds expression inside Nafisi's house where in the comfort of her liberal thoughts, seven women students let their hair down. They listen with rapt attention to lectures on literature by Nafisi, who has by then quit her university job instead preferring to take classes at home. They are held in utter secrecy though, but the excitement of debating books with their bold sexual themes

overwhelms the students to such an extent that the fear of being caught by Iran's secret police no longer matters. The women sing and dance, and freely talk about even taboo subjects.

Reading Lolita in Tehran may not be a great piece of cinema, but the point it tries to drive home is extremely powerful. Women need not live as mere shadows of men.

The writer is a senior movie critic and author

