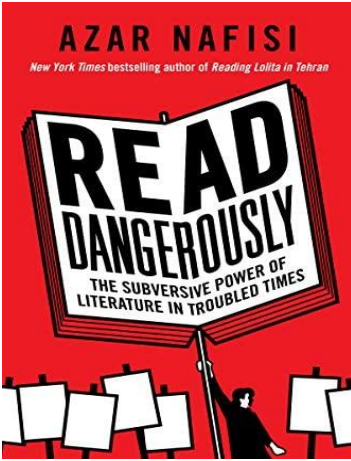


READ DANGEROUSLY: THE SUBVERSIVE POWER OF LITERATURE IN TROUBLED TIMES

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Onur EKLER*



Azar Nafisi’s *Read Dangerously: The Subversive Power of Literature in Troubled Times* is an inspiring book that brings readers out of their “comfort zone” where they read “texts that confirm [their] presuppositions and prejudices” (5). Nafisi complains that most readers avoid reading dangerously in order not to break their “comfort zone”. This, however, causes atrophy to their senses and makes them passive and indifferent to the problems of today’s world. To Nafisi, such readers don’t believe that “sky is falling till a chunk of it falls on [them]” (92). Ordinariness is what

such readers suffer from. Nafisi further claims that ordinariness is the most fearsome state since ordinary people even normalize the violent deeds of totalitarian regimes. They take them for granted without questioning or raising doubts about them. They become docile bodies in the society easily conditioned to move into the predetermined spaces created by the authorities. Realizing the potential threat of routine to individual liberty in the growing totalitarianism, Nafisi urgently suggests the necessity of reading dangerously that would raise higher consciousness in readers in order to actively engage with the opposition. Through reading dangerously, she believes that readers can be carried away to a “disaster zone” which enables readers to negotiate over some critical concepts such as enemy, oppressor, and victim.

With this purpose in mind, the book’s epistolary form is an intentional device that allows the writer enough flexibility not only to move back and forth in time when she mentions her

* Dr. Öğr. Gör., Hatay Mustafa Kemal Üniversitesi, Yabancı Diller Yüksekokulu, Yabancı Diller Bölümü, Hatay-Türkiye, onurekler@gmail.com, Orcid: 0000-0002-0750-0417.

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traumatic experiences in Ayatollah's Iran and Trump's USA but also to make sudden, immediate leaps from her selected readings to her life-accounts. These stunning moves constantly hold readers in waking mode in order to carry them to an anarchic space that eventually decentralizes them. This space is, what she calls, "disaster zone" which might be likened to a melting pot where the traditionally bound assumptions, ideas, dogmas of readers have been critically reconsidered and re-evaluated. As she believes that this zone has helped her to survive through traumas at individual and collective levels, she hopes that it will have the same effect on the readers. It is noteworthy to mention that the writer's witty frame of co-existing her life-events with the fictional events in her readings on the basis of epistolary form implies the inherently designed system in the book, which seems chaotic at first glance.

As mentioned above, the book is written in epistles addressing to her late father. There are five letters at total, each of which comprises a chapter in the book. Each epistle particularly features some selected readings that are relevant to the writer's traumatic experiences particularly in the autocratic Iran. In each epistle these readings are intentionally brought together to critically approach some common problems facing humanity in the totalitarian regimes and to raise consciousness in the readers about the significance of reading dangerously so that they can destabilize their territory and have a nomadic flight in order to see things from the multi-focal lens.

The first letter mentions how the great works of imagination pose a threat to tyrannical authorities. The unbridled energy of imagination is dangerous for the totalitarian communities since it cannot be reduced into any sort of ideology. The writer remembers how Rushdie was condemned and exiled by Ayatollah Khomeini because his novel, *Satanic Verses* was thought to be heretic. Exiling the poets is not a new agenda. Nafisi traces it back to Plato's *Republic*. Nafisi argues that the tyrannical mindset desires to dominate every sphere of life giving no room for individual liberty. Like the prisoners in Plato's cave overwhelmed by the shadow of ignorance, the people in Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* are captivated by the flux of sensations. To Nafisi, the poet's aim is to enlighten the people and awaken them from their deep sleep.

In the second letter, Nafisi highlights her readings of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. Though Morrison's Pecola and Hurston's Janie, as Nafisi states, differ greatly in their reaction to oppression, their struggle for self-worth and dignity is exemplary for the readers that fear to dive into deep water. One implication is that one may witness the heroines' quest for autonomy at the expense of great

sufferings. Nafisi here signals to the power of storytelling that binds readers of different backgrounds together.

In the third letter, the writer shares her readings of war fiction with her father. Her meticulously chosen readings including Grossman's *To the End of the Land*, Ackerman's *Places and Names: On War, Revolution and Returning* and Khoury's *Gate of the Sun* shed light to how war dehumanizes the enemy. She points out that "hatred and rage without direction" blind people so much that they cannot see the humane part of the enemy. These novels, as Nafisi states, "offer a ritual cleansing of the soul" by creating a disaster zone which gives the enemy voice. The emphatic zone presents an opportunity to people to "restore their humanity".

The fourth letter mainly discusses the rise of the totalitarian states on people's indifference, ordinariness, and negligence. Nafisi argues that people's cowardice and listlessness to injustice, cruelties or tyrannies around them will eventually end up in the confiscation of their liberty. Presenting the readers a comparative look on the totalitarian worlds of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Ayatollah's Iran, the writer warns her readers not to normalize such atrocities. Another striking point in her reading of *The Handmaid's Tale* is that the world is so full of contradictions, paradoxes, and complications as not to be reduced to black and white. Her emphasis on the power of storytelling against totalitarian mindset is noteworthy in terms of warning the future readers about the possible outcomes of their stolidity.

The last letter heightens the universalizing aspect of literature. To Nafisi, writing in itself constitutes a subjective-universal space where the particular experiences are universalized when their stories are shared. The writer mentions how she identifies herself with Baldwin and Coates though their experiences differ greatly. Nafisi argues that Baldwin and Coates as African-American writers critically approach 'race'. They perceive it as "a construct, a political ploy". Although their handling with the racial issues as a subject matter are not quite alike, they both see writing as the gate to endless possibilities.

In brief, Nafisi's book offers a rhizomic world of endless connections and ruptures through her readings and personal experiences so that readers can dance with hurting feet through reading dangerously. Her interpretive strategy seems quite relevant to Gadamer's "concept of horizon" which helps readers to look beyond what it is seen. Her readings intentionally induce the conceptual ambiguity in order to enable the readers to have risky leaps on a thin rope between Scylla and Charybdis. This thought-provoking book will doubtlessly create a negotiation space where readers can de-mystify some rotten idols, concepts and ideas as well as warning readers against the impending dangers that lead to the despotic societies.

Sözü Geçen Eser

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