

Lila, Intellectualite: Peripatetic Nabokovian

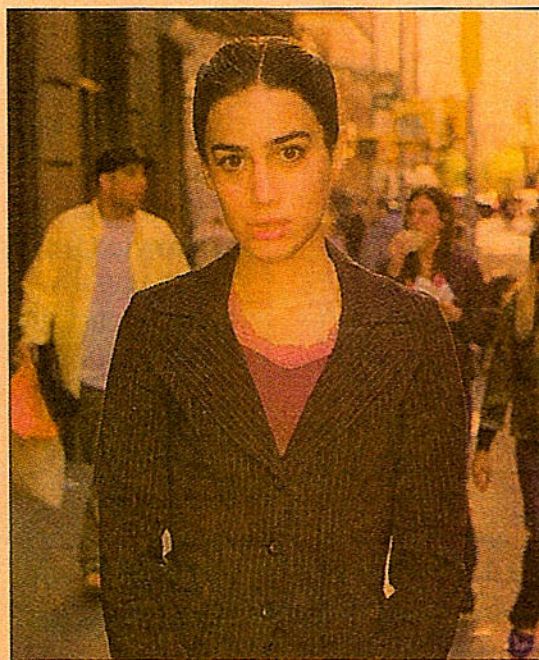
BY SHEELAH KOLHATKAR

While lots of bright-eyed young women come to New York to take acting classes or become publicists, Lila Azam Zanganeh—an Iranian-French journalist, amateur opera singer and self-described Nabokov scholar—has other plans.



“I remember hearing on the Boston radio, they were discussing the term ‘public intellectual,’” said Ms. Zanganeh, 29, in her precise, plummy English. “Perhaps being a public intellectual is being able to write, but also to be connected to the world. I mean, it sounds almost childish, but I would say that’s really, *really* my dream.

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MELANIE FLOOD

INTERNATIONAL INTELLECTUALITE: LILA AZAM ZANGANEH IN SOHO.

The Transom

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And I hope that I can do it. I don't have unrealistic expectations."

Ms. Zanganeh represents a curious phenomenon in the New York literary world: the intellectualite, a person with highbrow aspirations who attends enough parties to make David Patrick Columbia's head whirl. She turns up everywhere—at the annual P.E.N. gala, *The Paris Review's* booze-soaked bacchanals, cocktail gatherings at the New York Public Library and myriad readings and talks, as well as any place where Salman Rushdie and his wife Padma are likely to drop by. And she seems to know everyone that it takes other people 10 years to meet.

"The New York literary world is incredibly monocultural," said her friend and occasional editor Adam Shatz, *The Nation's* literary editor. "But I think that when someone like Lila walks into the room, people wake up. They're confounded and fascinated, because they don't know people like her. And she has a sense of style that is woefully lacking in these parts."

In this regard, Ms. Zanganeh, who was born to wealthy Iranian parents and raised in Paris, seems to hail from another era—or another continent, where the idea of a glamorous smart person isn't an oxymoron. Ms. Zanganeh's command of the role is intuitive. Tall and delicate, with a girlish voice, she speaks five languages and has a taste for dramatic makeup—generous amounts of mascara and lips painted a glossy red—and she always wears her hair parted down the middle in a distinctive black braid. She was educated at the elite *École Normale Supérieure* in Paris, where many of France's academics are trained (she wrote her master's thesis on *Lolita*), and she takes to the public stage like a soprano to Sondheim.

Naturally, ambition is part of the package. When she is not circulating among the New York literati, Ms. Zanganeh is interviewing its elders for *Le Monde des Livres*, the literary supplement of France's leading newspaper, and occasionally for other European periodi-

book, an anthology she edited called *My Sister, Guard Your Veil; My Brother, Guard Your Eyes: Uncensored Iranian Voices*. The mission of the book had been to "challenge Western (mis)perceptions about Iran," and the contributors were explaining that they appreciate literature and makeup and hate being thought of around the world as bomb-toting Arabs. The audience was swirling with Middle Eastern women dripping with jewels and neo-intellectual men gawking at them ("No wonder they keep them covered up," remarked one male writer). There was also a hint of European royalty: The designer Diane von Furstenberg was draped over a chair in the front row, with the French philosopher Bernard-

inative, phantasmagoric landscape that belongs to me. That speaks to me. That is me. And it had nothing to do with Iran."

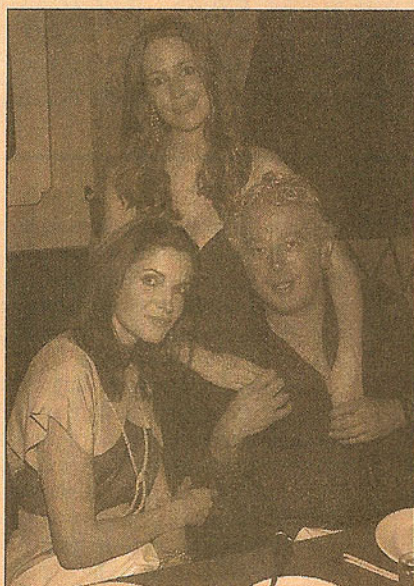
Her family back-story is appropriately intense. Ms. Zanganeh's father founded Iran's domestic airline under the Shah; the family left the country for France just prior to the revolution of 1979. Her mother—who writes Italian poetry in her spare time—escaped on the last Air France flight out of Tehran on the day that the Ayatollah Khomeini arrived.

Ms. Zanganeh's mother taught her English by making her watch *Hamlet* with Laurence Olivier, and she also imparted Italian, Persian and French. But Ms. Zanganeh said she felt like a misfit for most of her youth. It wasn't until she reached the Lycée Henri-IV, a demanding preparatory school (Jean-Paul Sartre is an alumni), that she finally felt comfortable.

"For the first time in my life I was actually happy, because I was with people who were exceptional, who were stimulating, they were funny, they were not conformist," Ms. Zanganeh said. "For the first time I met students who thought it was interesting that I was Iranian. It wasn't 'Oh, my friends were dark and my parents were weird, and why did we speak with accents or foreign languages?' It was like, 'Oh, really—how exotic!' And they began asking me questions about Persian poetry."

After university, she spent two years as a teaching fellow at Harvard, then enrolled at Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs in 2000. She thought she might want to go into television and spent a summer interning with CNN in Russia (CNN was "completely horrible," but she "adored" Russia.) She also hated the BBC, where she was an intern. ("I certainly wasn't going to do the blond lettuce hair.") During this period, she took a class at Co-

the glass eye



ABY BABY, WE LOVE YOU! German real-estate tycoon Aby Rosen celebrated his 45th birthday at the Chinatown Brasserie May 15 with a grisly-looking main course—and more appetizing side dishes Stephanie Seymour and Samantha Boardman.

Henri Lévy not far behind. (Both are friends of Ms. Zanganeh's.)

Before a packed auditorium, Ms. Zanganeh performed with extreme poise, although some in attendance found the event frustratingly light on the subject of politics. At one point, during a conversation with Azar Nafisi, a fellow "Nabokovian" and the au-

cais. (She has written articles about Mr. Rushdie, *Paris Review* editor Philip Gourevitch, *New York Times Book Review* editor Sam Tanenhaus, Yale scholar Harold Bloom, Gore Vidal and Jonathan Safran Foer, among others, and her interview subjects often become friends, mentors or even assign her stories.) Last November, she organized a fund-raising reception for victims of the Pakistan earthquake at the Asia Society and persuaded several former subjects to participate. (The keynote speaker was Hillary Clinton.)

That such a person would choose to make her name in New York at a time when America is reviled the world over is somewhat comforting. "I actually miss Europe very much. I adore Europe in many, many ways," said Ms. Zanganeh, who favors words such as "extraordinary" to refer to things she likes. "In America, at every level you have people constantly saying, 'Well, why not this? Why not that?' I thought that it was energetic. I wanted to do so much, but in Europe I couldn't really do it."

She described present-day France as "very medieval," and said that when she'd attempted to volunteer for Amnesty International there, for example, no one would return her phone calls. (Despite the fact that she was born there and comes off as absolutely Parisian, Ms. Zanganeh said that at home she is looked upon as a foreigner and is not considered to be truly French.) New York, on the other hand, was downright hospitable: When she wanted to write a story about Nabokov for *The Times*, she simply dialed up Steven Erlanger (then the newspaper's culture editor) and made her pitch.

"And you know what he said? He wrote back and said, 'Why not?' And I was off to Geneva," Ms. Zanganeh said (she's currently applying for a green card). "That, for me, could only happen in America—this feeling of childlike energy. There's this cliché that Americans are always optimistic, but it's true. Americans are always so much more optimistic than the French. In France, nothing's quite possible."

Around 8 p.m. on Wednesday, April 19, Ms. Zanganeh was planted on the stage at the New York Public Library with four hot Iranian women in chic black outfits, moderating a discussion about her first

thor of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Ms. Nafisi pointed to the fancy Persian ladies in the front row and burst out with: "These are Iran's weapons of mass destruction!"

The night before, Ms. Zanganeh had attended P.E.N.'s black-tie gala at the Museum of Natural History with Ms. Nafisi. The next week was packed with events for P.E.N.'s festival of international literature; in between there were media appearances on NPR and CNN to promote the Iran book, as well as the book's launch party.

However, Ms. Zanganeh was already feeling burned out on Iran. "After this, I don't believe I will write about Iran for some time," she said, explaining that she is wary of "the quintessential American intellectual trap" of being expected to write only about your own kind. "It was just bizarre for me—Iranians on Iranians, Arab-Americans on Arab-Americans, fat people on fat people. I thought, 'That's strange—I want to write about Africa, I want to write about anti-Semitism, about French literature . . .'"

As they were shopping the proposal for the anthology, publishers kept suggesting that Ms. Zanganeh simply write a memoir, which inflamed her. "I thought, 'But I have no memoirs—I've never been to Iran!'" she said. "It's just this trend; Iranian women have to write their memoirs of Iran. I thought it was a bad joke. 'What are you talking about? Memoirs? No. No way.'"

Her next project, in addition to her journalistic contributions, will be a book about Vladimir Nabokov, which is her true passion. (Her agent is Nicole Aragi.) "My interest in Nabokov was really, purely a literary one. I just adore him," she said, adding that any parallels between Russia and Iran were not the source of her admiration. "It took me four months to read *Ada, or Ardor*, because I read every page five times. I can't read it normally—I can't help it. I remember, just to give myself a break while I was reading *Ada*, I began reading *The Invention of Solitude* by Paul Auster, and it was like drinking water with a little bit of dust in it after having eaten the most exquisite kind of *mille feuille*, with all kinds of creams and the most refined pastry in the world.

"Just purely the language, the style . . ." she continued, becoming all dreamy-eyed, "I really have the feeling that [Nabokov] is *phantasmagorique*—it's an imag-

lumbia's journalism school and was inspired to try writing by its famously draconian instructor, the film critic Judith Crist.

"I had always thought before that I can't write," Ms. Zanganeh said. "The thing is also, when you study literature, I mean, how can you write? You know how bad it is, you know? I think this whole American thing gave me the *humility* to be able to write, meaning that the French think that writing comes with a stroke of genius—you have it or you don't have it—and the Americans really see writing as a craft. And that way you can work and improve."

On Saturday, April 29, Ms. Zanganeh was basking in these various turns of events at her book party. It was held in a penthouse apartment overlooking the Hudson that belonged to two corporate attorneys, Virginia Davies and Willard Taylor, whom Ms. Zanganeh had met through a former boss from an internship at NPR. She was wearing a little silk jacket with intricate buttons and a towering pair of pumps, and was boasting of a recent journalistic "get": an exclusive interview for *Le Monde* with the Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk, who was in town for the P.E.N. festival and who had backed out of an interview with *The Times Magazine* but had agreed to sit with Ms. Zanganeh. (Salman Rushdie had even told her that it was hopeless.)

"He'd been refusing everyone, apparently," she told two male admirers. "I sent him an e-mail anyhow, and he agreed!" (She said that she found Mr. Pamuk to be extraordinary.)

"I'm sure he just took a look in your eyes," joked one of her friends, a documentary filmmaker recently returned from Iraq. "I'm going to refrain from saying something sexist." A moment later in the conversation, he said: "My ambition is nothing compared to this woman. She's here to conquer the world."