

October 1, 2011

The Lioness of Iran

Iran's most prominent poet, a two-time Nobel nominee, on the greatest epic in history, the nightmare of censorship, and why her country will eventually achieve democracy.

1



Simin_Behbahani300.jpgIran's most prominent poet, a two-time Nobel nominee, on the greatest epic in history, the nightmare of censorship, and why her country will eventually achieve democracy.

Simin Behbahāni is optimistic about where Persian thought and literature are headed despite Iranian society's many post-revolution disillusionments. She speaks of the ruinous itinerary of the "literature of censorship" and the phenomenon of self-censorship, but she believes that exceptional knowledge has been stored up given Iranian social and cultural resistance to the consequences of the 1979 revolution. This knowledge creates fertile ground for the growth of contemporary Persian literature. From this perspective, the importance of poets and writers for the survival of Iranian civil society is undeniable. Behbahāni points out that this role has been inherited today after a thousand years of attacks on Iran's writers and thinkers.

Behbahāni views her poetry in its historical context. She sees herself as an iconoclast, but has never severed her link with Iran's past literature. On this same basis, far from attaching any importance, as a poet, to 'being a woman,' she considers any reference to it an insult. In other words, her poetry is part of Persian poetry as a whole, whether produced by men or by women. Behbahāni's poetry is varied and, as she puts it, "multi-vocal," because her poetry is the poetry of the "moments" of her life— whether the moments of "convoys of war martyrs on their way to the cemeteries" and "lorries carrying the bodies of executed prisoners, dripping with blood" or the moments of happiness. For Behbahāni, a good poem is one in which "today's language, today's events, and today's needs" are poured into the mold of rhyme and meter.

Born in Tehran in 1927, Behbahāni, often referred to as "the lioness of Iran," has been nominated twice for the Nobel Prize in Literature. She was also awarded a Human Rights Watch-Hellman/Hammet grant in 1998, and similarly, in 1999, the Carl von Ossietzky Medal, for her struggle for freedom of expression in Iran. Her many poetry books include *Tār-e Shekasteh* (*The Broken Lute*), *Jāy-e Pā*, *Chelcherāgh*, and *Marmar*.

Shiva Rahbaran: What impression do people in Iran have of democracy? Do they think that democracy always produces the desired outcomes? Have Iranian thinkers done anything to inform people about the dangers of democracy or not? Also, many people are of the view that democracy is not suited to Iranians.

Simin Behbahāni: Iranians have more or less the same impression of democracy as do the other nations of the world. Democracy means rule by the people. As long as it doesn't make an about-face and turn into a dictatorship, it's very desirable. Why, really, should democracy be suited to other nations but unsuited to Iranians? Western nations have experienced dictatorships in the past, too, and no Western nation has had a democratic state at the beginning of its history. Democracy is the product of human thought and reasoning. It's true that philosophers and thinkers have always imagined a utopia in which everything is as it ought to be and the people live in freedom and comfort. But this was not achieved until recent centuries. And it can even be said that, even in the freest and most developed countries, the bounds of democracy are overstepped from time to time. Or, a country that wants democracy for itself sometimes disregards other countries' rights to freedom. So the Iranian nation, too, wants democracy. But I think that it hasn't, in its experience, reached the necessary conclusions in its reasoning for this kind of government. The Constitutional Revolution and the Islamic Revolution were carried out within a short space of time in the

hope of gaining freedom. But, from the start, the people's dream of freedom turned into a nightmare of tyranny. But I believe that these kinds of experiences and setbacks are necessary to attaining freedom and real rule by the people.

Today, another Hitler can't come to power and turn Germany into a hellish dictatorship and set the world ablaze. Having had this experience, the German nation will be forever immune to the risk of this kind of government.

Our thinkers, too, are changing in the light of the experiences that they have had under an Islamic state. They will no longer consent to any old kind of tyranny as they would have done twenty years ago. We can see that killing people and imprisoning them no longer has the desired effect! Although proponents of freedom are still sent to prison, the future is bright and we will gradually acquire the knowledge that we need to achieve democracy.

Shiva Rahbaran: In the West, some analysts call the Iranian revolution "the Iranian experiment." What they mean by this expression is the synthesis of modernity and religion. Do you think this synthesis is feasible?

Simin Behbahāni: I think that the lapse of 1,400 years can never be discounted. Under the Islamic state, punishments are being carried out that are totally inappropriate in this day and age, such as cutting off thieves' hands, stoning adulterous women and men, or flogging offenders.

It is obvious that the modern world views the cutting-off of hands or feet, stoning, or flogging as a contravention of human rights, and if a solution is not found for bringing these laws into line with the modern world, the success of these kinds of nations will be doubted and require a miracle.

Shiva Rahbaran: As a writer, what is your sense of your role in Iranian society? Bearing in mind that, even including the previous state's policies, artistic activity has been difficult in Iran, how prolific has literature been and what progress has it made?

Simin Behbahāni: Despite my age, I can almost say that I have never put pen to paper without worrying about censorship. The nightmare of censorship has always cast a shadow over my thoughts. Both under the previous state and under the Islamic state, I have said again and again that, when there is an apparatus for censorship that filters all writing, an apparatus comes into being in every writer's mind that says: "Don't write this, they won't allow it to be published." But the true writer must ignore these murmurings. The true writer must write. In the end, it will be published one day, on the condition that the writer writes the truth and does not dissemble. Of course, whenever censorship is stringent, most writers resort to metaphor and figurative and symbolic language. And this can help stimulate the imagination. But taking comfort from this fact doesn't lessen the writer's dream of attaining freedom.

Shiva Rahbaran: So does it become necessary for art to be political?

Simin Behbahāni: Politics is the impact of the prevailing atmosphere on the people and, naturally, on any artist, especially the writer. Regardless of how far removed a writer may be from a knowledge of politics, it is impossible to rid their mind of the influence of the prevailing atmosphere. Politics becomes a part of a writer's working life. The writer's protagonists are born in the context of the feelings that this atmosphere evokes. How can writers separate themselves from these feelings and create protagonists that come from Mars? Even writers who only write about psychological or internal issues or about love are writing under their prevailing atmosphere, and their writings will take on the hue of the time, place, and mood of their environment.

Shiva Rahbaran: Has literature reacted to the anomalies that nations, past and present, have engendered? Has it played a constructive role in changing the mood and creating normalcy?

Simin Behbahāni: Of course. Our literature has always been a reflection of contemporary events. The *Shāhnāme* is the greatest epic in history. It is a treasure trove of ideas, wisdom, advice, help, guidance, and rites. With this immense work, Ferdowsi revived the spirit of serenity, magnanimity, and pride in the Iranian nation, which had lost itself under the weight of the Arab conquest of Iran. It empowered divided Iranian peoples to unite. Most of our poets, even those who worked as tyrannical kings' eulogists, have used their poems to remind rulers of the right way to run the state, practice justice, and uphold the welfare of the people. At the time of the Mongol invasion of Iran and the horrific massacres, writers and poets belonging to the mystical school of thought set out to soothe the people's pain and sorrow, to teach them to be patient and ascetic, because there was no other alternative at the time. In any age, writers have produced works which were in keeping with their society's needs and which helped and guided the nation.

Shiva Rahbaran: Some writers in the West are envious of Third World countries, and countries that have less freedom. They think that the restriction of freedom forces writers to be more creative in order to say what they're not allowed to say. According to this viewpoint (based on the American-British novelist Henry James's idea that every story is a window in the house of fiction), the bigger the wall of tyranny, the bigger the opportunity to put in windows. Do you agree?

Simin Behbahāni: I have experienced this as a neoclassical poet and as a writer who is committed to literary rules. The more stringent the rules and the more limiting they are, the more the poet and writer is forced to resort to special techniques and intricacies to escape them. And these techniques and intricacies adorn the writing and make it more beautiful. But, in the modern world, linguistic intricacies and embellishments do not attract much attention anymore, and the more sincere and intimate the relationship between a work and its reader, the better. So the countries that don't have walls don't need windows either, because the entire world is their field of vision and they can establish an unmediated relationship with their readers. I, in turn, envy them their free world.

Shiva Rahbaran: Do you consider yourself an iconoclastic poet and, consequently, not widely accepted by the public, or the other way around?

Simin Behbahāni: Being iconoclastic is only acceptable and desirable if the public—or at least a specific segment of society—is open to it. A literature that the public cannot relate to in any form will not endure. I have been iconoclastic, but I've never broken my ties with Iran's past literature. No one can create a noteworthy work without knowing the tenets of their own language and literature. Language is renewed but it never changes its essence, because the contracts that have come about over time for communication cannot be rescinded so easily. It takes a thousand years before a word, among the thousands of words, dies away in a language or changes its meaning.

Literature rests on language. It is a linguistic art. So it cannot sever its relationship with the past. But it can create new methods and styles that differ in structure, form, and content from the past.

Shiva Rahbaran: Is the fact that you're a woman important to your art and, if so, does it help you in your artistic work or not?

Simin Behbahāni: The fact that I'm a woman is as important to my work as a poet as the fact that Ahmad Shāmlu was a man was important to his work as a poet. Basically, gender shouldn't be viewed as an advantage in art. If a poem or a piece of writing is good, what difference does it make whether it's by a woman or a man? And, if it's bad, why should its writer's gender make it good? Of course, in the past, we had very few women poets and writers because the environment didn't allow women to become educated and to learn to read and write. Illiterate women couldn't write anything. So if, occasionally, there was a woman who was a poet or a writer, a particular value was attached to this because it was a skill that was rarely seen among women. And any weakness in her work would be overlooked. But, today, when men and women have equal access to education, why should the fact that I am a woman be seen as a plus? I consider this view an insult and I always want to be compared with men.

Shiva Rahbaran: Your new poems that were published in the London edition of *Kayhan* newspaper revealed a new passion that distinguished them from your other poems, which often carry references to blood, war, and injustice. Is this the beginning of a new path for you?

Simin Behbahāni: I have said again and again that my poetry is the poetry of the moments of my life. I've experienced years when the sky over me was blackened with the smoke of missiles and the ground on which I walked turned into ruins under exploding bombs. I've seen convoys of war martyrs on their way to the cemeteries. I've seen lorries carrying the bodies of executed prisoners, dripping with blood, that were being taken for burial in Behesht-e Zahra.

I've stood in long lines, in the rain and under the sun, just to buy a pack of butter or a box of paper napkins. I've seen mothers running after the corpses of their martyred sons, oblivious to whether their headscarves or their *chadors* or their stockings and shoes were slipping off or not. I won't say any more. In the light of all this, how did you expect my poetry to be joyful or, as in my recent poem, to speak of love? Even so, more than half of my poetry is joyful and these are the products of the moments when I've felt happy. As a matter of fact,

my poetry is multi-vocal. I've spoken about everything. I've written poems that consist of a story in minimized form. I've used surreal subjects. I've produced 'dialogic' poems. I've produced descriptive poems. I had one working period which was totally devoted to transforming the foundations of the *ghazal*. I have used about seventy new or disused meters, and this is something that can give the ghazal a totally new potential and a new mold in which to pour today's language, today's events, and today's needs. You can find any type of poem that you like in my works and anyone, with any taste, can find something to their liking in them. On the whole, there's a great deal of variety in my works. I can't predict how my poetry will be in the future. It will depend on the state of things and how I'm feeling.

Interview from [Iranian Writers Uncensored: Freedom, Democracy and the Word in Contemporary Iran](#) (translated from Persian by Nilou Mobasser), to be published by Dalkey Archive Press in 2012. © 2012 by Shiva Rahbaran.

[Photograph](#) via Wikipedia by Fakhradin Fakhraddini

To contact *Guernica* or Simin Behbahāni, please write [here](#).

1

At *Guernica*, we've spent the last 13 years producing uncompromising journalism.

More than 80% of our finances come from readers like you. And we're constantly working to produce a magazine that deserves you—a magazine that is a platform for ideas fostering justice, equality, and civic action.

If you value *Guernica*'s role in this era of obfuscation, [please donate](#).

Help us stay in the fight by giving [here](#).

Subscribe to the *Guernica* newsletter.

SUBSCRIBE