
REVIEWS

Mightier than the Sword: Shiva Rahbaran's Iranian Writers Uncensored

By ZACH PONTZ *posted at 6:00 am on April 5, 2012*

1

In recent months few stories have been so vigorously discussed by the American news media as the Iranian nuclear issue. While concerns over the intent of their nuclear program go back nearly a decade, if not more, the international outcry reached a crescendo only recently, as the Iranian regime has become more resistant to the demands of the West; and as their internal affairs have become complicated by infighting and sanctions.

As such, the headlines have done little to change the perceptions of many that Iran is nothing more than an irrational actor on the international stage. Starting with the Islamic Revolution of 1979 (which saw the removal of the American-friendly **Mohammad Rezā Pahlavi** from power, and installed the theocratic regime headed by **Ayatollah Khomeini**) Iran's relationship with the West has been contentious at best. Having turned inward, the opaque nature of the regime has allowed few images to escape to the outside world save those of crowds chanting gleefully for the death of Israel and America.

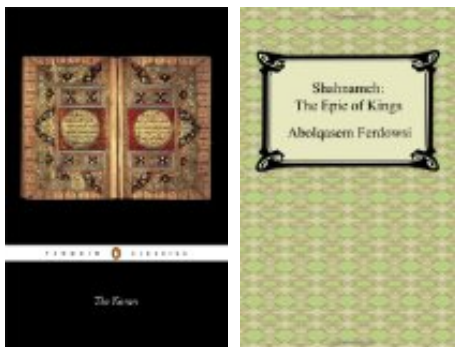
This facile image was upended momentarily in 2009 by the Green Revolution, which showed that Iran — far from being a country of devoted subjects — harbored a palpable dissatisfaction with the ruling regime. But the movement was quashed, and the image returned and has mostly remained intact.



Shiva Rahbaran's new book, *Iranian Writers Uncensored: Freedom, Democracy, and the Word in Contemporary Iran* does much to dispel the idea of Iran as a one-dimensional society of religious fanatics. Translated from the Persian by **Nilou Mobasser**, it details the complex relationships that mark Iranian society through interviews with 11 prominent Iranian writers who, despite the turmoil in the country, have remained within its borders working and writing.

Rahbaran proposed two points with which to approach this study of literature in contemporary Iran: how post-revolution Iran has affected Iranian literature and the role of literature on Iranian society itself. But the intellectual depth of the conversations quickly exceeded her initial intent, and considerable territory is covered, beginning with the very nature of the Persian language and proceeding to cover issues as complex as Iran's resistance to modernization and the possibility of Iran one day embracing the Western values that, at present, their ruling Ayatollahs so vehemently oppose.

The foundation of any society is, of course, its language, and in Iran, Persian holds special significance as a symbol of the country's cultural resilience. Revived in the 9th century, 200 years after the Arab Muslims conquered the area and began to Islamicize it, it was the sole language to survive in the region; those spoken by the Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians, and Phoenicians, were eliminated. Rahbaran notes in her introduction the significant symbolism attached to the language: "It is in the resurrection and prevalence of the Persian language that Iranians see their glorious victory over all invaders...the language of the conquered invariably became the language of the conquerors."



The responsibility of safeguarding Persian has often been left to poets, who in return have sat at the center of Iranian culture for more than a millennium, starting with **Ferdowsi** and his epic *Shahnameh*, which consists of some 60,000 verses and was composed over several decades in the late 10th and early-11th centuries. Still considered the foundation of Iranian literature, most Iranians have a copy of *The Koran* and this poem available in their households. "Iranian poets believe that poets rank second after prophets, historically speaking," notes poet **Mohammad Haghoghi** in one interview (Haghoghi is since deceased).

What is clear from reading these interviews is that, while the 20th century has not be kind to Iran, it has been particularly difficult for Iranian poets, writers, and intellectuals looking to articulate

the problems of their homeland.

The fall of one monarchy gave rise to another when, in 1926, the Pahlavis supplanted the Qajars. There was a brief interlude for democracy –and free speech – but in 1953 the democratically elected **Mohammad Mossadegh** was removed from office by coup d'état after Western powers took exception to his nationalization of the country's oil industry. Mohammad Rezā Shāh Pahlavi continued to rule until 1979's revolution, when a new set of rulers with their own cultural inclinations took power. The Iran-Iraq war followed, and saw the death of some one million Iranians.

The turmoil created an atmosphere in which free speech and social norms fluctuated dramatically, placing the country's intellectuals in a precarious and often dangerous position. Depending on the form of censorship, writers had to adapt constantly. For instance, the poet **Manouchehr Atashi** says that “censorship after the revolution is not the same as it was at the time of the Shah. The censorship under the Shah drove poetry straight into symbolism,” because of the stringent regulations of the monarchy.

But, as Iran's citizens have turned towards the West for inspiration, poetry has slowly lost its status (though it's still much stronger than in the West). This while Iran's literary preferences have shifted towards the novel form – which is more in sync with the individualistic ambitions of Iranian citizens – and to altogether other mediums such as film.

Internationally renowned writers such as **Mahmoud Dowlatabadi** and **Shahriar Mandanipour** – who are interviewed in this collection – have found readerships both within Iran and the West, as they've been able to identify and discuss the major issues of the day through their work. But they've had to do so at the peril of strict censorship by the ruling regime.

The interviews in this collection are not so much a celebration of literature's role in Iranian culture as they are a discussion of how a nation's recent history has influenced the role of the intellectual in society. What is clear is that each writer has his or her own idea of what the poet or novelist's role in Iran is today – and how that role relates to the common individual and the ruling regime. This is the strength of the book: the diversity in opinions. Topics of conversation vary dramatically from interview to interview and no consensus is ever reached on any one issue; each writer argues passionately his or her basic beliefs, arriving at different conclusions on subjects such as whether the Islamic Revolution of 1979 was detrimental to Iranian literature; if democracy can ever gain a foothold in the country; and whether the benefits of being an intellectual in Iranian society outweigh those of their Western counterparts who see a reduced role in their more tolerant societies.

The only considerable shortcoming of the book is its timeliness. The interviews took place during the second term of the relatively moderate presidency of **Mohammad Khatami** (1997-2001; 2001-2005) which means that **Mahmoud Ahmadinejad**, the events of 2009, and the current nuclear standoff – perhaps the most familiar motifs of present day Iran – are absent from

conversation. It also means that the writers were able to speak with a candidness they would most likely be unable to at present, as the government has tightened control of the press and publishers in recent years. But while the book doesn't mention all of this explicitly, it provides enough context so that the Iranian psyche is better understood, and the country's current state of embattlement is brought into a clearer, less iniquitous light.

And anyway, the book's importance still feels strangely immediate. Filled with profound perspectives of myriad issues, as well as remarkable insight into the thought process of the intellectual class, it humanizes a conflict that consists, for the majority of us, of nothing more than a few choice sound bites and several minutes of TV footage.

Amid all the political jarring back and forth — the threats of attack and annihilation— **Mahmoud Dowlatabadi** says it best when remarking of the novel — though it could also be said of all literary pursuits — the subject and focal point is “the human being, and the human being exists and lives everywhere in the world.”