



Thoughts from Linda:

Iran Awakening

Shirin Ebadi with Azadeh Moaveni
2006

“Surely, I thought to myself, they will not come for me!”

These words, uttered by Nobel Peace Prize recipient and famed champion of human rights in Iran, Shirin Ebadi, reflect, as she says, “her naivete” when, in 1979, the country of Iran quickly converted to an Islamist State, following the overthrow of the Shah and the subsequent successful Iranian revolution.

Indeed, “they”—meaning various arms of the Iranian government-- did come for her, often but thankfully, without success over the next 30 years as she remained in Iran, working to protect those who were victims of an unjust and terrible regime.

Sherin Ebadi tells the story early in her book of reviewing papers as a lawyer in 2000, where she came across this passage from a recent transcript between a government minister and a member of the ‘death squad.’ “When my eyes first fell on the sentence that would haunt me for years to come, I thought I had misread. I blinked once, but it stared back at me from the page: ‘The next person to be killed is Shirin Ebadi’ -- ME.”

She evaded this order, although she did spend several months in prison as a political prisoner in 2002 and 2003. Before that time, she was demoted from her role as the most senior female jurist of her era in the country and was often threatened with her life. She fought incredible odds and stood up to forces of fundamentalism in this most unsettled time in the history of Iran—1979 through 2003, when she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. She has lived in exile in the United Kingdom since 2009.

This book is an intimate story of her journey, from her birth in the small rural city of Hamadan in Northwestern Iran in 1947 to her role on the global stage as a model for

justice and courage. She tells her story chronologically and reveals the life of a somewhat traditional woman, happily married to a most advanced and self-aware man who believed in equality of the sexes and her life with two daughters. She describes her thinking and feelings during the final corrupt days of the Shah. She explains how she, like many other reasonable people, celebrated his fall and departure from the country. She then proceeds to take the reader through the following decades, illustrating from her life's experiences just how events unfolded in Iran with her keen eyes and rational approach as filters to help us understand the events from a different perspective. In many ways, it is a horrifying view of an almost unbelievable turn of events.

I appreciate how she describes the events of the time through her eyes as if she were reliving the experience, which gives the reader the feeling of 'being there.' For example, she takes us through her journey immediately after the revolution, when she had to find medical assistance during her first pregnancy and had to leave the country briefly for one month.

After getting the needed medical help in New York right after the return of Ayatollah Khomeini, she gives a page-turning description of how things had changed so quickly by the time of her return. As she says, "the head-scarf invitation" was the first warning that this revolution might "eat its sisters," which women called one another while agitating for the Shah's overthrow. The major streets in Tehran were quickly renamed, and the long boulevards that had previously been named Eisenhower, Roosevelt, Queen Elizabeth, and Peacock Throne. All had been renamed after Shia imams, martyred clerics, and Third World heroes of the anti-imperial struggle.

During the taxi home from the airport, she noticed evidence of dramatic change as the normal long line of cars at the ministry had been replaced with motorcycles, and men no longer wore formal suits and ties but rather plain slacks and collarless shirts. She notes, "At some moment during my short absence, apparently the populist revolt had stopped to devote attention to truly consequential matters (she writes with the sarcasm for which she is well-known) such as the outlawing of the tie on government property. The radical mullahs had long disparaged Westernized technocrats as fokoli, from the French word faux-col, or bow tie. Now, the tie was deemed a symbol of the West's evils, smelling of cologne signaled counterrevolutionary tendencies, and riding the ministry car to work was evidence of class privilege. In the new atmosphere, everyone aspired to appear poor, and wearing dirty clothes had become a mark of political integrity, a sign of one's sympathy with the dispossessed."

Two other topics I found of particular interest in the book include 1) the dramatically altered role of women in Iran and 2) the experience of the Iraq/Iran war described by Shirin Ebadi.

First, in a quick move to disempower her, she was stripped of her judgeship in 1980, shortly after the revolution. There was a committee known as a 'purging committee,' and they summarily demoted her in a meeting late in 1980 from being the first woman judge in the country to the role of typist/clerk. She tells the story in a long passage and notes the conversation with her right in front of the men on the committee. "The unthinkable occurred. They began speaking about women judges as though I were not in the room. 'They're disorganized' one said. 'Distracted constantly,' another murmured. 'Yes, chimed another. They're so unmotivated; it's obvious they don't even want to be working.'"

She continues, "In the days that followed, the unthinkable continued to occur with astonishing regularity...The imposition of the Islamic penal code, inspired by Islamic law, is a momentous overhaul of how a society is governed. It would fundamentally transform the very basis of governance, the relationship of citizens to laws, the organizing principles, and the social contracts along which society is conducted. It would be a shift of such overarching significance that it should be read from the ramparts and put on a ballot." Instead, it was announced in a newspaper article.

She describes the statutes that would consume her for the rest of her legal life in Iran: those relating to women and the vulnerable. Specifically, the value of a woman's life was now half that of a man (for example, if a car hit both on the street, the cash compensation due to a woman's family was one-half that of the man.) Also, a woman's testimony in court as a witness to a crime counted only half as much as a man's. A woman had to ask her husband's permission for a divorce. As she noted, "the drafters of the new penal code had apparently consulted the 7th century for legal advice." She continued, "The laws, in short, turned the clock back 1400 years to the early days of Islam's spread, when stoning women for adultery and chopping off the hands of thieves were considered appropriate sentences."

In the chapter, Iran at War, she describes how this situation became clear to all Iranians and explains the impact it had on citizens in general and with revolutionary actions specifically. Most readers would know this from their history books, and the description might be different based on the view of the writers. In her case, she tells the story from the perspective of an intelligent and wise jurist and legal scholar who had to navigate

this difficult situation as a professional, a mother, and a wife, in Tehran as on September 22, 1980 (one year into the revolution) Saddam Hussein invaded Iran.

She describes how the public learned of the invasion from a brief television announcement made by Ayatollah Khomeini when he said simply, "The Iranian people will defend their homeland" as Saddam Hussein launched what he called the Qadisiya against Iran, ostensibly to redraw the borders and take control of Iran's oil-rich southern province. She notes that by invoking this seventh-century Arab-Muslim conquest image of what was then Persia, Saddam sought to mythologize his war for territory and oil as a modern-day fight of Arab against Ajam. (Ajam is the Arabic word for a foreigner, specifically a Persian.)

She takes us through this war and its terrible impact on all involved as Saddam used chemical weapons on the Iranian army for the first time and continued with the practice, introducing sarin gas, blister agents, and finally, mustard gas. She details much of the complex arrangements of this war, as the United States supported Iraq in many ways.

In an instructive section, she reflects on its impact as it influences culture and attitudes inside Iran today. She notes: "I must linger on the war just a bit longer because its impact is largely what has shaped current Iranian attitudes about our future and our place in the world. First are the skepticism and mistrust it reinforced in us about America's motives in the region. Imagine if you were an Iranian and watched the boys in your neighborhood board the bus for the front, never to return. Imagine staring in mute horror at the television screen as Saddam rained chemical weapons down on your boys, his death planes guided by US satellite photos. Fast forward about 15 years. Now you are watching faded video footage of Donald Rumsfeld shaking Hussein's hand, smiling at the butcher who made our capital's cemetery a city."

As she notes, the war superseded the revolution and delayed some of its more horrifying approaches, but the tremendous toll it took cannot be overstated. Both sides minimized their troop casualties and exaggerated the enemy losses; the only agreed-upon figure is that more than one million Iraqis and Iranians were killed or wounded between the two. More than 100,000 POWs were taken, and over 2.5 million refugees were created. Both sides sustained about \$500 Billion in lost oil revenue, military expenditure, and destroyed infrastructure.

She tells her story in twelve chapters in this short and revealing book. They begin with A Tehran Girlhood and progress through titles such as Discovering Justice, The Bitter

Taste of Revolution, Iran at War, Strange Times My Darling, Terror and the Republic, A Conscientious Prisoner, and The Nobel Prize.

Today, Sherin Ebadi continues to be a strong voice for peace and speaks out often and publicly about current conditions in her own country of Iran, most recently, on November 22, telling the France 24 station in Paris that "in light of current events concerning the death of Masha Amini, we are witnessing the fall of this regime." She notes that 14,000 people have now been arrested due to the nationwide protests, and there are over 400 deaths, including those of at least 50 children. She says, "The Iranian Government has committed unforgivable crimes, and we simply cannot go back."

In this most hopeful interview, she predicts the reemergence of a democratic and secular government in the future in her country.

Let's hope that the vision of this courageous fighter for global justice becomes a reality.

I highly recommend this book.