

Shirin Ebadi: A Conscious Muslim **Diana Hayworth**

Personal Statement

I decided to conduct my biography on Iranian Muslim Activist Shirin Ebadi, Nobel Peace Prize recipient for 2003, for several reasons. First among them is that, as a non-religious American, I feel myself to be highly underexposed to Islam, the religion that some say is practiced by as much as one sixth's of the world's population. And so I wanted to take this opportunity to educate myself. Secondly, I wanted to get a progressive view of Islam. Finally, our current presidential administration has indicated that Iran, as part of what it calls the "Axis of Evil", is another potential target for invasion by US military forces. So I also wanted an opportunity to educate myself on Iran. All of these points led me to Shirin Ebadi.

During this research, I have found myself completely inspired by her determination, fearlessness, and desire to inspire others to use their own intellect to lead them, not to use her as a role model. Additionally, I found myself wanting to know more about her personal life - In what ways has her husband been affected by her activism? Her daughters? Who are the male lawyers who allowed her to work under them? How did this affect them? Did she ever think of leaving? Why did she stay? What, specifically, is it about Islam that keeps her involved in this religion? I suppose I will discover the answers to these questions in May, 2006, when her memoir will be published by Random House, Canada.

Biography

Who is Shirin Ebadi? Ebadi is a conscious Moslem. She sees no conflict between Islam and fundamental human rights. It is a pleasure for the Norwegian Nobel Committee to award the Peace Prize in October 2003 to a woman who is part of the Moslem world, and of whom that world can be proud - along with all who fight for human rights wherever they live.¹

For some, Ms. Ebadi is a source of inspiration and pride, as she is the first Muslim woman and only Iranian to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. She is also the recipient of the Rafto Human Rights Award (2001), a lawyer, judge, author, activist, professor, daughter, wife, mother, and friend. For others, such as devout Muslims, Ms. Ebadi is a faithless betrayer of Islam, a "Western Mercenary"² and an embarrassment to Iran. For still others she is traitor to all those who view Islam as an oppressive force over women, someone who has missed an opportunity to do something good for all the women living under the Islamic laws.³

Although her convictions are controversial, and to some, heretical, she has managed to move forward with her work not by advocating dissolution or revolution, not by turning away from her Islamic heritage, but by working within Iran's system, guided by an interpretation of Islam that seems to respect it's traditions while allowing for the full participation of women in Muslim society. Her view is that: "It is not Islam at fault, but rather the patriarchal culture that uses its own interpretations to justify whatever it wants."⁴ And, "Women constitute half of the population of every country. To disregard women and bar them from active participation in political, social, economic and cultural life would in fact be tantamount to depriving the entire population of every society of half its capability. The patriarchal culture and the discrimination against women, particularly in the Islamic countries, cannot continue for ever."⁵

Ms. Ebadi was born in 1947 in northwestern Iran, and raised in the capital city, Tehran, by her mother, Mini Yamini and father, Muhammad Ali Ebadi. One could say she chose the family business, as both her paternal grandfather and her father were respected attorneys in Iran, with her father, a highly regarded expert in commercial law, being of the first generation in Iran to study western law. She is one of 4 children, 3 daughters and a son, raised in a middle-class home where education was valued. Ms. Ebadi has said that she credits her "strength and perseverance" to her parents, who she says created a family filled with "kindness and affection. My mother dedicated all her time and devotion to our upbringing."⁶ It also appears her parents instilled in her a sense of independence and self-reliance, as when asked in an

interview about her own role models, she says, "I have never been convinced throughout my life that one needs to be imitating others. I even tell my daughters not to look at me as a model. Everyone's condition is different, and the way that each person lives his or her life is different. What is important is that one utilizes one's intellect and not to be 100 percent sure about one's convictions. One should always leave room for doubt."⁷

Ms. Ebadi was educated in Iran, earning her Law degree in 1969, and her doctorate with honors in Private law from Tehran University in 1971. She is married to Javad Tavassolian, an electrical engineer, and they have two daughters currently engaged in university study in Canada and Iran.

Revolution = Rollback of Rights: Ms. Ebadi came of age during that period of time known as "pre-revolutionary Iran", when Iran was under the control of the controversial Pahlavi regimes. The Pahlavi regimes were known for great corruption, and yet, great strides in the area of women's rights were made. In 1936, prior to Ebadi's birth, the elder Pahlavi successfully banned the use of the veil by women, and in 1962, when Ebadi was 15 years old, his son, Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, passed the "Family Protection Law", said by some to be "one of the most enlightened documents on the rights of women in the entire Middle East and the Islamic world as a whole."⁸ That law gave women the right to vote, gave women equality of civil rights with men, and allowed women to work at all levels of society.

Ebadi herself gained prominence under the Shah's progressive policies, when in 1969, she was the first among 100 women to be granted judgeships in Iran, an act "unprecedented in the 1500 year history of Islam, which has traditionally regarded the testimony of a woman in court only half as valid as the testimony of a man."⁹ But for many in Iran, progress brought western excesses, political corruption and cultural erosion, and created an environment where many thought Islam was being blatantly disrespected, where "the elite gyrated in bikinis."¹⁰ Ebadi and her husband were among those who were frustrated with the direction their culture was headed, and were in support of revolution. "With their education and good jobs, [Ebadi and her husband] seemed to represent all that had gone right with the Shah's modernisation project. But both embraced the Islamic revolution in 1979 because they believed it would bring new freedoms."¹¹ Also significant is the fact that, "women were at the forefront of the 1979 revolution that toppled the monarchy, although they had not done so badly out of the shah.

The revolution promised women dignity, as well as equality."¹² The revolution was successful in overthrowing the Shah's regime, and installed the Ayatollah Khomeini as the Iranian ruler in March, 1979. It did not, however, bring dignity or equality to women, as in the subsequent 8 months, it abolished the Family Protection Law, removed women from judgeships, forced women to wear the hejab (scarf and long dress to cover one's body) in the workplace, sex-segregated beaches and sports, banned opposition groups and newspapers, and granted the Ayatollah Khomeini total control over the government. What followed, too, was a period of terror in which, according to Amnesty International, 6,027 people were executed.¹³

Flight or Fight? One can imagine that Ms. Ebadi and her family were most likely in the position to summon together the financial, political, and personal resources one would need to take their life to another country. Indeed, many Iranians left Iran at this time. But Ms. Ebadi and her family chose to stay, determined to continue in the country of their birth. When she was told by the government, that "women, according to Islam, could not be magistrates or judges,"¹⁴ she says, "I retired from the Ministry of Justice, which amounted to starting a career in begging."¹⁵ She applied for attorneyship, but was turned down for seven years [for her law license] although in that same time period others were given the same license. During that time she wrote several books, the first one entitled "The Rights of a Child", a book that was eventually translated into English and published by UNICEF. "Before that", she says "no one had any idea about children's rights in Iran. I had to introduce and explain what children's rights are."¹⁶

In removing her rights, Khomeini gave birth to her activism, and in this phase of her life, she found her calling. She also found supportive allies and eventually rose to national prominence. " 'Once I did get the license to practice', she says, 'I knew exactly where I was headed, and that was towards the defense of human rights.' She [then] worked as a lawyer in an office of all male lawyers as women were not allowed to practice law on their own."¹⁷ Iranian journalist Amir Taheri says that "By 1995 [Ebadi] was known as the D'Artagnan of a quartet of female lawyers dubbed 'the Four Musketeers'...Wherever someone was in trouble with the authorities, one or all the four were there...The mullahs called them 'the four mares of the apocalypse'." ¹⁸

Is an Activist Born - or Bred? Where did this activism come from? Ebadi has spoken of the significance of her parental examples and influence, saying, "I learned absolute human equality from my father", who treated her, her sisters, and her brother with equal respect as they were growing up, an exception to the rule in her country.¹⁹ But being treated as an equal and acting as an equal are two very different things. Her own words point to a deeper motivation:

"Everyone is born with certain characteristics. I always had a feeling during childhood, almost like a calling, which I could not name then but I later found that it was about seeking justice, a certain commitment to justice. When I was a child, whenever I would see children fighting, I would naturally try to defend the underdog, the weakest, I even got beaten up myself a couple of times doing that!"²⁰

In spite of being imprisoned by the government for her activities, and reportedly being the target of two assassination plots she has proceeded with determination. She has admitted, however, that she also battles that basic human nemesis: fear. "Don't tell anyone, but I am afraid," she says. "Anyone who fights for human rights in Iran lives in fear. But I have learnt to overcome my fear."²¹ She has also indicated that she feels a responsibility to the next generation of women and the children they are raising, women who have only known life under the changes brought by the revolution and Khomeini, because, as she says, "How could peace and the rights of another person be the subject, if one has not experienced them and had to do without them? How can one expect a woman whose rights have constantly been violated and overlooked, who lives her life in uncertainty, a woman who has not received enough room to develop her own human potential, to be able to pass on important, barely experienced values, such as self-confidence or respect towards the rights of others or avoiding violence, in the raising of her child?"²²

The heart of the matter: Human rights: While Ms. Ebadi's primary work has been within the context of Iranian culture, she is a vocal advocate of using the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights as the standard by which all cultures should be measured. To Ms. Ebadi, the aforementioned "peace and the rights of another person", human rights, are Universal rights, and for her, this point is paramount among all others, and is non-negotiable. She believes that the human rights measurement for a society should be the same for everyone, globally, regardless of gender, race, or religion. "Human rights are indivisible. All defenders of human rights are members of a single family. Some people argue that what's happening in Iran today is an Iranian problem. I do not agree with this. If we say that the human rights issue is an internal issue then every government will have its own version of human rights."²³

Ebadi extends the field of human rights to include the rights of a people to determine their own course to democracy, and is a vocal critic of the US foreign policy to invade a country as a method of bringing democracy and human rights to an oppressed people. She feels that the American government's long standing willingness to overlook abuses of human rights, particularly women's rights, by close allies like Saudi Arabia undermines its language of promoting human rights.

Critics - we all have them: Those critical of Ebadi range from former Muslims who feel the religion can never be compatible with human rights and democracy to who might like to adopt her point of view but find her rhetoric out of reach, not understanding her point of view in advertising the compatibility of Islam with democracy. While there are those who have focused on an analysis of the Qur'an that offers an interpretation compatible with Ms. Ebadi's human rights stance, many look to Ebadi for specific Qur'anic answers, and find themselves coming up short. Ms. Ebadi does not appear to ground her argument by offering any specific Qur'anic readings as proof. She is a democratist, arguing for separation of church and state, and points to the fact that Islam, like every other religion, is subject to interpretation. For a Muslim woman who spent the early part of her life enjoying freedoms that many take for granted, only to have those freedoms stripped from her, this conclusion seems completely logical. She also says that the current interpretation of Islam is designed to keep the patriarchal order in power. "Patriarchal culture, not religion, is the root cause of inequality between the sexes... My aim is to show that those governments that violate the rights of people by invoking the name of Islam have been misusing Islam. They violate these rights and then seek refuge behind the argument that Islam is not compatible with freedom and democracy. In fact, I'm promoting democracy. And I'm saying that Islam is not an excuse for thwarting democracy."²⁴

What's a prize worth these days? While there are many who hail Ms. Ebadi's Nobel Peace Prize as a sign that human rights issues in Iran are moving in a positive direction, there are others that say the award itself is meaningless within Iran's borders, as, despite the efforts of Ms. Ebadi and others like her, things have simply

not changed in any significant way. Yet others say that the efforts of Ms. Ebadi's generation have inspired the next to continue to push forward, because, as Ebadi has said herself, "Democracy can't be achieved overnight. It's little steps like the gradual amendment of social culture for the better that results in the ultimate creation of social democracy."²⁵ When asked in an interview if she had a final message for Muslim women, she said: "Keep fighting. Don't believe that you are decreed to have an inferior position. Study the Koran carefully, so that oppressors cannot impress you with citations and interpretations. Don't let individuals masquerading as theologians claim they have a monopoly on understanding Islam. Educate yourselves. Do your best and compete in all walks of life. God created us all equals. In fighting for equality we are doing what God wants us to do."²⁶

Footnotes

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- ¹ "Nobel Prize Press Release 2003." Les Prix Nobel/Nobel Prizes 2003. Nobel Lectures. Ed. Tore Frangsmyr, [Nobel Foundation], Stockholm, 2004. <http://nobelprize.org/peace/laureates/2003/press.html>
- ² Peterson, Scott. "Iran's Nobel Winner Doesn't Make News at Home." 2003. Christian Science Monitor. <http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/1212/p01s04-wosc.html>.
- ³ Darabi, Parvin. "Open letter to Shirin Ebadi, winner of Nobel Peace prize 2003." A publication of the Dr. Homa Darabi Foundation. <http://www.homa.org/Details.asp?ContentID=2137353198&TOCID=2083225413>
- ⁴ Pal. Amitabh. "Meet Shirin Ebadi". 9 March, 2005. The South Asian. <http://www.thesouthasian.org/archives/000325.html>
- ⁵ Ebadi, Shirin. "Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech."
- ⁶ Ebadi, Shirin. "Shirin Ebadi - Autobiography." Les Prix Nobel/Nobel Prizes 2003. Nobel Lectures. Ed. Tore Frangsmyr, [Nobel Foundation], Stockholm, 2004. <http://nobelprize.org/peace/laureates>
- ⁷ Pal. Amitabh. "Meet Shirin Ebadi".
- ⁸ Jahanpour, PhD, Farhang. "The Recognition of the work of Women and Human Rights Activists in Islam." Transnational Foundation for Peace and Future Research. http://www.transnational.org/features/2003/Jahanpour_ShirinEbadiPeace.html.
- ⁹ "Information sheet - Shirin Ebadi." http://www.vodium.com/vs_data/ifc_hrights/ebadi_bio.htm
- ¹⁰ Ghazvin and Tehran. "Shorn of dignity and equality". The Economist. 18 Oct. 2003. Vol 369, Issue #8346, Pg. 23-25.
- ¹¹ Taheri, Amir. "To Iran in Hope and Fear". The Sunday Times. 19 Oct. 2003. Available through author's website: <http://www.benadorassociates.com/article/657>.
- ¹² Ghazvin and Tehran. "Shorn of dignity and equality".
- ¹³ Gheytauchi, Elham. 2000. Iran Chamber source www.iranchamber.com/podium/society/001009_chronology_events_women_iran.php
- ¹⁴ Shaikh, Nermeen. AsiaSource. A publication of the Asia Society. Participant in the *Citigroup Series on Asian Women Leaders* in New York City, held at the Asia Society 10 June. 2004. interview. http://www.asiasource.org/news/special_reports/ebadi.cfm
- ¹⁵ Farhadpour, Lily. "A Short Visit with Shirin Ebadi". Originally published Mid 2000. Bad Jens Newsletter, 4th Edition & 6th Edition. <http://www.badjens.com/sixthedition/ebadi.htm>.
- ¹⁶ Taheri, Amir. "To Iran in Hope and Fear".
- ¹⁷ "A & E lives that make a difference: Shirin Ebadi." <http://www.aetv.com/class/makeadifference/celebstory.jsp?num=5>
- ¹⁸ Taheri, Amir. "To Iran in Hope and Fear."
- ¹⁹ A & E lives that make a difference: Shirin Ebadi.
- ²⁰ Shaikh, Nermeen. Asia society AsiaSource interview. http://www.asiasource.org/news/special_reports/ebadi.cfm
- ²¹ Taheri, Amir. "To Iran in Hope and Fear".
- ²² Ebadi, Shirin. "Women Included: Why Women Also Must Shape and Guide Our World." A speech given by Ms. Ebadi in Vienna, Austria. 14 Sept. 2004. By invitation from Women Without Borders. <http://www.neww.org.pl/en.php/news/news/1.html?&nw=481&re=1>.
- ²³ "A single family: Shirin Ebadi speaks. OpenDemocracy. Newsletter. 17 June 2004.
- ²⁴ Pal. Amitabh. "Meet Shirin Ebadi".
- ²⁵ Qasemi, Farah. "Ebadi on reform in Iran". 26 Oct. 2004. The McGill Tribune. <http://www.mcgilltribune.com/media/paper234/news/2004/10/26/News/Ebadi.On.Reform.Iran.Iran-780427.shtml>

²⁶ Taheri, Amir. "Iran's First Lady". 3 Nov. 2003. The Weekly Standard.
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Timeline

1920's to the mid 1940's: Shah Reza Pahlavi first rules Iran, succeeded by his son, Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi.

1947: Shirin Ebadi born

1969: Law degree in 1969, first among 100 women to be granted judgeships in Iran.

1971: Doctorate with honors in Private law from Tehran University

1979: Iranian Revolution and Ayatollah Khomeini as ruler in March.

2001: Ebadi awarded the Rafto Human Rights Award.

2003: Nobel Peace Prize awarded to Ebadi for her efforts for democracy and human rights.

2005: On June 12, about 3000 women gather, against all odds and intimidations, to protest in Iran. The protesters' slogans do not mince words: 'No to legal violence against women', 'Human rights are the path to democracy in Iran,' 'We are women, we are human beings, we are citizen of this country, yet we have no rights'.