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Shirin Ebadi

Transcender of Divisive Boundaries

NAZANIN SHAHROKNI

Shirin Ebadi, an Iranian lawyer and human rights activist, was little known outside Iran before being awarded the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize on the 10th of October. Inside her country, however, she is widely recognized for her work around issues of social justice and human rights. As an academic she has written several books¹ and journal articles on human rights in general, and on the rights of children, women and refugees in particular. She is also widely regarded as a civil society activist and was a founding member of the NGO, *Association for Support of Children's Rights in Iran*. As a lawyer Ebadi has been involved in numerous cases related to the violation of children's and women's rights. Her most notorious case involved an eight-year-old girl believed to have been abused and killed by her father and stepmother and led to the revision of the Iranian Child Custody law. She also worked on various political cases relating to a series of 1998 murders of secular intellectuals, and on the case of a student who was killed during student uprisings following raids on dormitories at Tehran University by paramilitary and vigilante groups in July 1999. Her efforts in publicizing those behind the raids on dormitories led to her and her colleague's arrest and imprisonment on charges of forging evidence and spreading lies in June 2000.

The international recognition bestowed on Ebadi has re-invigorated the fight for human rights and democracy in Iran. Since her Nobel Prize was announced activists have convened numerous meetings of every size to discuss 'the next step' towards creating a more open society. Awarding the Peace Prize to this Iranian woman lawyer has implications for human right activists far beyond the borders of Iran.

Being Muslim

In its October announcement, the Nobel Committee expressed pleasure in awarding the Nobel Peace Prize 'to a woman who is part of the Muslim world'. In almost all her interviews Ebadi has underscored her Muslim identity and emphasized that 'you can be Muslim and support democracy'. The fact that the Peace Prize has gone to a Muslim woman, and the fact that Ebadi identifies herself as a Muslim even though she does not don the veil, is highly significant. Firstly, the monolithic image of Muslim women, despite reams of postcolonial writings to the contrary, is, at least momentarily, cracked. Notwithstanding occasional exceptions, 'Western' mass media has continued to portray Muslim women as passive, oppressed and trapped within rigid discriminatory structures assumed to be intrinsic to Islam. Muslim women are largely conceived of as powerless, choice-less victims, who, in order to be emancipated from their painful shackles, need help from a savior—usually in the form of a non-Muslim westerner.² By awarding the Nobel Peace Prize to a Muslim woman from the Muslim world, in acknowledgement of her efforts to promote democracy and the rights of women and children in Iran, the world is presented with a new, high profile image of a 'Muslim woman' as an agent of change rather than as a victim of tradition.

The 2003 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the Iranian human rights activist Shirin Ebadi, signifying the first Muslim woman to receive a Nobel Prize. The international recognition bestowed on Ebadi has re-invigorated the fight for human rights and democracy in Iran and elsewhere. It has also provided a much welcome change in the international image of 'Muslim woman' as victim of tradition to active agent of social and political change.

Yet Ebadi's unveiled appearance at her Paris press conference in conjunction with her own emphasis on her Muslim identity has left many perplexed and asking: 'What kind of a Muslim is she, if not wearing the veil?' In this sense, Ebadi has unsettled the familiar assumption of a unified, fixed, and, at least in the case of Iran, state-defined religious identity. Her brief appearance and statement subtly im-

plied that religious identity is a social construction, and that every member of the community has the right to participate in its definition. She is, therefore, pushing for a more inclusive and pluralistic definition of what it means to be Muslim and implying that the definition of religious identity cannot be monopolized by a government or the religious establishment. The significance of her action was not lost on conservatives in Iran who were, and continue to be, infuriated that Ebadi claimed to be Muslim but did not wear a veil.

Secular orientations

It is not only conservatives who disapprove of Ebadi's approach, for many secular Iranians in and outside Iran have also been annoyed and disappointed by her emphasis on her Muslim identity. Indeed, Ebadi is well known as a secular activist. Against the odds she has defended many secular writers and intellectuals prosecuted for their views and has been an active member of the *Iranian Writers Union* which is well known for its secular orientations. She supports the separation of religion from the state and believes that in a democracy the legitimacy of political power is not sanctioned by sacred texts or official religious beliefs, but by popular consensus. With regard to Iran she has said, 'If the present regime does not reform and evolve into one that reflects the will of the people, it is going to fail, even if it adopts a secularist posture.'³ However, recognizing the essential role of Islam in Iranian culture and daily life, she tries to promote democratic interpretations of Islam and has said, 'there is no contradiction between fundamentals of Islam and ideals of democracy and human rights.'⁴ Ebadi realizes that having secular political orientations does not imply hostility towards religion or the displacement of religious identity from the public sphere. Her short statement speaks volumes in terms of the debates among all those Muslims who wish to legitimize the identity of secular Muslims, just as secular Jews and Christians are recognized. This is important in a context where proponents of political Islam, particularly since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, have redefined the popular meaning of secularism to mean 'anti-religion'. Shirin Ebadi transcends the reductionist dichotomy of religious verses secular; she has breached some of the barriers separating different forces and voices for democracy and freedom of thought. Her nuanced stance has greatly annoyed conservative state officials who were taken aback by the entire situation surrounding Ebadi's Nobel Prize.

Women in Iran

The Western media frequently portrays Iranian women as victims of fathers' strict controls, husbands' harsh treatments and the state's restrictive laws. Rarely do the complexities of gender ideology in Iran get covered. Indeed, being a woman in Iran can be challenging and difficult, however this is only one aspect of an Iranian woman's life. The fate

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Shirin Ebadi addresses a news conference in Paris, 10 October 2003.

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of Zahra Kazemi, the Iranian-Canadian journalist murdered while in custody, of Afsaneh Noroozi, sentenced to death for killing the man who attempted to rape her, and of thousands of others trapped within the undemocratic and inhumane threads that are part of the fabric of Iranian society are real. But the untold stories of all those women who are agents of change are also real. Shahla Sherkat, editor of the monthly Iranian feminist magazine *Zanan*, Samira Makhmalbaf, a filmmaker who has won numerous international prizes, Elaheh Koolaei, a female MP pushing for bills benefiting women and supporting democratic reform, represent only a few of a large number of culturally, socially and politically engaged women. These stories do not belong solely to well-educated, middle class women. There are many women from less-privileged, more traditional segments of society, even in the rural areas, whose names are not known but who have breached the seemingly impassable through enormous will, determination and innovation.

Zinat Daryaei who is from an isolated village in the south and who obtained only a few years of education, became a health worker and community reformer.⁵ Farkhondeh Gohari who lives in a low-income neighborhood in the south of Tehran turned her small hairdressing room into a library for neighborhood women. Sedigheh Sedighi, an elected councilor in a small town, has established a sewing workshop to create jobs for local women and turned her old family home into a girls' elementary school. Such women and many like them also represent the reality of 'being a woman in Iran', yet they are consistently ignored not only by the international community and the media, but also by their own government.

The awarding of the Peace Prize to an Iranian woman has forced the media to recognize that 'being a woman in Iran' is complex and to pay attention to the role of girls and women in public life.⁶ Moreover, the fact that Shirin Ebadi is a civil-society activist who has lived her life among 'ordinary' people has another significant impact. As a grassroots activist she has the ability to connect the different and sometimes contradictory experiences of Iranian women.

Since her Nobel, Ebadi has been attending meetings organized by groups as diverse as *The Iranian Bar Association*, student organizations, the Parliamentary women's caucus, NGOs, local government authori-

ties and the *Iranian Artists Association*. She continues to transcend governmental versus nongovernmental, professional versus nonprofessional and traditional versus modern divides. Her capacity to move between seemingly opposing arenas is helping to form networks which can serve to facilitate the creation and reconstitution of public spaces where diverse groups will be able to interact and engage in meaningful dialogue. Ultimately, this can promote inter-group tolerance and understanding which facilitate a shift from less-than-productive counter-state politics to constructive, practical strategies for supporting the non-violent transition to democracy.

By awarding the Peace Prize to Shirin Ebadi, the Nobel committee has promoted a broader, more inclusive definition of peace-building which includes the recognition of and respect for human rights; the use of non-violent means for resolving political and social disputes; and the substitution of competition with cooperation to promote inter-group tolerance and mutual understanding.

Notes

- Two of Ebadi's books available in English are: *The Rights of the Child, A Study of Legal Aspects of Children's Rights in Iran* (Tehran, 1994 with the support of UNICEF); and *History and Documentation of Human Rights in Iran* (New York, 2000).
- Lila-Abu-Lughod, 'Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others', *American Anthropologist*, 104(3): (2002) 783-790.
- Interview with *Gulf News* on Oct. 30, 2003.
- Ibid.
- For a detailed discussion see, Nazanin Shahrokni, 'Baa Zinat Dar Salakh', *Zanan*, September 1999 (55) and Homa Hoodfar, 'Volunteer health workers in Iran as social activists: Can 'governmental non-governmental organizations' be agents of democratization?', *WLUM Occasional Paper*, No. 10, December 1998.
- For example see: *The Economist*, 18 October 2003 and *The Christian Science Monitor*, 14 October 2003.

Nazanin Shahrokni is an independent researcher and a journalist working closely with Zanan (a monthly feminist magazine in Iran). She is currently at Concordia University, Montreal, Canada, collaborating with Dr. Homa Hoodfar on 'Women and Electoral Politics in the Middle East'. E-mail: nshahrokni@aol.com