



New York Democracy Forum



Women, Culture, Human Rights: The Case of Iran

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Thank you Carl, and I would like to thank the New York Democracy Forum and everyone who has made it possible for me to be here to have this exchange. What Carl didn't tell you was that the first meeting I had with him, I had some hesitation. I didn't know what the National Endowment for Democracy was all about, and a friend told me no, go, go, it's a good place. So I went but I didn't know what to do because I was going to be talking about Jane Austen, and these people don't seem to be really interested in Jane Austen. So that is what I did. I went there and I spoke about reading Jane Austen in Iran.

After the meeting Carl, who was the chair, thanked me and started talking about Lionel Trilling and Jane Austen and we had a very passionate discussion on these authors and many others, and I knew that he was one of us. At that time I was going back and forth from Iran and it was very difficult to be able to communicate with the National Endowment for Democracy, so we were thinking of ways to do that. Finally we decided.

One of my absolute favorite artists, or at least one of them, were the Marx Brothers. I fell in love with them again and again when I went to Iran, when they were part of the forbidden videos in Iran that we watched and then our children watched. So we decided to create this legendary “University of Freedonia” and Carl became the President, and I kind of communicated with him through faxes with that title. So, this is how fiction can somehow divert reality. So I am very thankful to David Lowe and Carl and all my friends at NED, and now at the New York Democracy Forum.

Every time I give a talk, especially nowadays, I keep thinking that people think this woman must be completely mad. I mean, “Reading Lolita in Tehran” in this day and age? How relevant is Lolita to Tehran? And how relevant is Lolita to New York City or Washington D.C. for that matter? So I am here in fact to make a plea for Lolita, and for Tehran, and to tell you why I think both of them in this day and age are in fact central and relevant to the issue of democracy. And not to the issue of democracy in what we often call “that part of the world,” but in fact an issue related to democracy in this part of the world.

We live in such divided times. You turn on the television and beheadings, murders and prison riots have all become part of our daily routine. In one city that I love, Tehran, it becomes a crime to look the way I do. I could be flogged and jailed even despite the openings that we talk about right now.

In another city that I love so much and is now my home, Washington D.C., when we talk about the colors orange and yellow and green we don’t mean the colors of flowers or the colors of someone’s dress, we mean the levels of alert. In places where I would walk freely before 9/11, all of the wonderful places like the Library of Congress or the National Mall or the Capitol, are now blockaded. So every moment, you are now reminded that this building, or that monument, is a soft or a hard target.

This is the kind of world that we live in, and in terms of this country, I was so amazed and shocked and dismayed during the presidential elections, when there was so much polarization. I would like to quote, for the time being, one of the immortals of our time, John Stewart.

[laughter]

I used to watch John Stewart long before he became so popular and trendy, though I might not watch him anymore. He said something very interesting on Larry King. He said that the extreme right and the extreme left have occupied all the spaces for debate. What about us?

And in this country, the level of political debate was reduced to whether we call something “Freedom Fries” or “French Fries” and the debates between the Swift Boat Veterans and the Dixie Chicks and Michael Moore. So I think that when we talk about the issue of democracy, we need to look at the others and we also need to look at ourselves.

This is why I think Lolita is important. This is why I think imagination in the kind of world that we live in today is important. I think that in every era, you define who you are partly through who you are, but also through the form and style you use in order to confront those whom you disagree with, or those whom who oppose.

So we know that in our world today, and through what we call democracies today, that one of the fundamental issues we are dealing with is the issue of fundamentalism, or what we would like to call Islamic fundamentalism. We know that, but how we define that will be defining us. How we will encounter that phenomenon will tell something about how we define democracy today.

And in order to define our opposition, or what we call our enemy, correctly, we need to get away from easy formulas and simplifications, from this sound bite culture which has penetrated not just our political discourse – reducing politics to a form of politicization – but also, unfortunately our intellectual and academic discourse. We need to fight against that simplification which is in us, not just in them. We need, then, to go back to the culture of thought and imagination. We need to look at the world through the alternative eyes and sort of dehabitualize the formulas that we accept.

For example, and this is something we were just talking about before this meeting, we are so used to calling a variety of cultures and nations and countries with amazingly different backgrounds and histories and traditions “the Muslim world.” We feel very comfortable constantly saying “the Muslim world” or “Islam.” Or “Is Islam compatible with democracy?” I haven’t heard anyone asking if Christianity is compatible with democracy, or if Buddhism is compatible with democracy. But whether or not Islam is compatible with democracy keeps coming up.

Now, just remember that one of the first things that imagination -- and here I am here as an apologist of fiction -- one of the first things that fiction does is that it differentiates, it particularized, it brings to your attention the details, the individuals. It avoids and resists and defeats generalizations. So you don’t say, “the Muslim world.” You are talking about Indonesia. You are talking about Malaysia. You are talking about Saudi Arabia. You are talking about Turkey. You are talking about Iran. You are talking about Afghanistan. Each of these countries are far more different than one another than France is from Germany or Germany is from Britain or Britain is from the United States. We don’t call these countries Christian countries.

So one of the first things that we do once we think of other human beings not in terms of formulas but as individual entities, is restore to these countries their names. I am not saying their identities, identity is a very flexible thing, but their names. So that is why I think we need imagination and we need thought, because any form of knowledge, especially imaginative knowledge, is based upon curiosity.

And like the situations that we are dealing with today, when you think through the eyes of a great writer, or when you think through the eyes of a great reader, the urge to read, the urge to write the urge to paint, all of these urges come out of the urge to know, to investigate. I remember Margaret Atwood in an interview, when they asked her, “Why do you write, how do you start to write?” replied, “I don’t know, there seem to be voices from distant villages beckoning me. It is as if I see a bloody hatchet in the middle of the living room and I ask myself, hmmm, what is that bloody hatchet doing there? It needs to be investigated.”

So at the heart of imagination is the desire to investigate, and not just to investigate the others, but to investigate ourselves. And that is why I think that I like very much what Nabokov used to tell his students, that curiosity is insubordination in its purest form. If you want to be genuinely and not just politically insubordinate, become curious, because once you become curious and restless like that little girl named Alice, you are constantly running and going beyond appearances, not just seeing a white rabbit, but a white rabbit with a waistcoat and a watch, and a white rabbit who talks. And once you fall into the wonderland, and follow that urge, then of course your reward is seeing the world through different eyes. Never again would Alice see grass as just grass, or a white rabbit as just a white rabbit, or a flower as just a flower.

Still, you might ask, what does this have to do with the price of peaches in Alabama, or, I don’t know, is it Georgia? [laughter] It

is through this curiosity that you come to an empathy with others who are not like you. Since we live in an era of political correctness, I would like to say that no amount of political correctness will make us empathize with a slave who lived 200 hundred years ago and whose child was taken away from her under the guise that these people don't feel that way that we do, or an Afghani woman who was taken to a football stadium and a gun was put to her head and she was shot to death because of the fact that she did not dress properly.

We cannot just be politically correct about compassion. The only way we in this room or we in this country feel empathy with a woman in Saudi Arabia or a child in Darfur or a child in Indonesia is through empathy, through the ability, as the narrator says in the book that everyone in this room has read, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, that you never know another human being until you wear their shoes and walk around in them. That is what you need to do, and that is what fiction does for you. That is what culture does for you, it puts you in the shoes of others who seem to be not like you.

And once it does that there is the shock of recognition. As Shylock says in the *Merchant of Venice*, "If you prick us, we do bleed." And we all bleed. And we all, essentially, as human beings, want the same things. And we all, as human beings, are equally capable of both the best and the worst. Democracy and terror, human rights and fundamentalism are not the property of the West. They are not geographically or nationally or culturally defined, they belong to all of us.

The worst crime in the 20th Century happened at the heart of European civilization which was Germany. Another one happened in the neighbor to European civilization which was Russia. And, of course this country been fighting and resisting first in its war of independence and then through its civil rights movement,

reminding us that every culture, every nation, every people, are capable of the best and the worst.

But the important thing about these cultures is that they also have the right to change. They have the right to say no. Change is the essence of life. So how can we in the United States buy into the terrorist discourse and say that it is their culture? This is again one other thing that I want to question through this talk.

So to sum up this part, and then we will move quickly to Iran and discussion, what I want to say is that there is an area, there is a space, a public, in which ideological polarizations and politicizations, national, religious, ethnic, class differences and limitations lose their meaning. There is a space in which human beings meet as human beings and connect. Without connections the word humanity would lose its meaning. And that space is one part of what I would like to call the Republic of Imagination.

The other part of it is what I would like to call the Domain of Human Rights. I think that anyone who questions the universality of human rights should be rethinking and questioning his or her own attitude toward freedom and democracy.

But why Iran? There are so many other countries, each of which is so important. We should have listened to Carl, who just came from Afghanistan, and we have the big problem of Iraq right now ahead of us, its constitution and the rights of its people, especially Iraqi women, which is also at risk. It is a lot to think about. So why Iran?

I think Iran is important for essentially two main reasons. One is that in 1979, when the revolution was hijacked and taken over by what we call fundamentalists in my country, it was Ayatollah Khomeini and the theoreticians of that system, that regime, who formulated the idea of a modern theocracy. They were the fathers

of what we know call Islamism or Islamic fundamentalism. Afghanistan, or Pakistan, or all these others did not have the theoretical or ideological power which Ayatollah Khomeini did have, and it was since then that Iran was changed from a modern dictatorship to a theocracy. And what has happened in Iran over the course of the past 25 years -- the failure of the Islamic Revolution to reach its goal, the failure of the Islamic Revolution to create a new generation that would be following the flag of Islamism in Iran and the region -- has very, very important lessons for us.

The second thing is that Iran, exactly because it was a very advanced country, exactly because it was a modern country, exactly because its culture was so complicated, its traditions so contradictory and paradoxical, exactly because of that, it resisted this theocracy and through that, it came to a self-criticism that no other country in the region has gone through.

The interesting thing about Iran is that it has a very vital civil society. It might not be a formulated one as yet, and there might be many obstacles to its realization of its goal, but it is a restless country which for 26 years has questioned the system that was imposed upon it. And of course, we Iranians, to take some responsibility for it -- I really disagree with putting all of the blame on the Islamic Republic. These things don't just happen. We a lot of times bring our prosecutors and our butchers on our own shoulders. So we are all answerable to that. So this is the Iran that I briefly want to talk about.

The first thing I want to put forward to you is that what we call Islam in a country like Iran, or what we call Islam in the way that fundamentalists today define it, is not religion. It is a religion that has been confiscated by an ideology. If you look at the structure of the Iranian system, it is far closer to a totalitarian system like

Communism under Stalin than it is to anything you would call Islamic. I will just go very briefly into why I think this.

First of all is the way this regime came to power. You know, the first thing a totalitarian system does is confiscate the past. They have to confiscate the past in order to justify the present. They have to say this is not the way we were. You look at Hitler's theories, going back to the Aryan race and Germanic gods and all of that. So the past has to be completely negated and denied.

Therefore, what people like myself and millions of Iranians thought of modern Iran was being questioned as alien. And the first thing that this regime attacked were individual rights, human rights and at the center of it the rights of women, and of course culture and minority rights.

The first eight months before the creation of a constitution, or having a president, they annulled the family protection law, which protected women at home and at work. Then Ayatollah Khomeini tried to issue an edict about women veiling, and hundreds of thousands of Iranian women came into the streets protesting this edict. One of their slogans was "Freedom is neither Eastern nor Western, Freedom is global." And the Ayatollah had to move back, to retreat from his original statement.

Then they brought Sharia law, which to my horror when I came to the States, I found so many policy experts and those in academia in fact in some way or another justify. Let me tell you what these Sharia laws are, and they are more or less the same everywhere.

First of all, they changed the age of marriage from 18 to nine. Now, any of you who think that it is their culture for a nine-year-old girl to be married to a man three times her age, most probably, and at the same time, to legalize polygamy and temporary marriages where a man can rent a women for as many years as he

wants to, any of you who think it is our culture to have this sort of obscenity in our midst, I would like to tell you that it is your culture to burn witches in Salem. Not Thoreau, not Emerson, not Hawthorne, not Melville. Slavery is the culture of Southern states, not William Faulkner, Zora Neal Hurston, Carson McCullers or Flannery O'Conner. Inquisition is the culture of Europe. Not St. Augustine or St. Thomas Aquinas.

They brought stoning to death. It's shameful that in the world we live in today, in different parts of the world, governments, states, are stoning people to death. And we justify it and go to bed fine by saying, "It's their culture." And those people who oppose this culture are "Western." This is a great insult to people who call themselves Muslims. It is a great insult to say that the desire for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness is an American entity, or is a Western entity. That a woman in Nigeria, or Afghanistan or Iran does not want to be happy, does not want to pursue happiness. Do not think that you are giving us credit by saying that it is "part of their culture."

To make a very long story short, the issue of the veil was not the issue of religion. My grandmother, who wore the veil all her life, and refused to come out of her house without the veil, used to cry and say, "This is not Islam. This is not religion," because for my grandmother and millions of women like her, the veil was a symbol of their faith. It was a symbol of their belief, and once the state took over that symbol, it became no longer her belief but an instrument of power, an instrument of state.

It is like saying America is a Christian majority country, therefore we reduce American to Christianity – and some people are doing that – and we reduce Christianity to just one aspect of it, say Jerry Falwell, and as of tomorrow, everyone must wear the cross. Would it mean anything then, if I wear it? So this is the issue of the veil in Muslim societies. Don't let anyone intimidate you.

You are not criticizing the veil. You are criticizing the imposition of the veil upon a whole population.

Carl talked about culture. Obviously once we start doing this we go on to culture. He mentioned Mona being deleted out of Lawrence Olivier's Othello. What he didn't mention is that they also deleted Othello's suicide, on the basis that the masses become depressed watching Sir Lawrence Oliver commit suicide and scream. They don't become depressed being stoned to death, they say its our culture, what can we do? We have to show the world that you know, we like to be stoned, but not this man, don't kill him!

Remember in Russia, in the Soviet Union, they took the death of Swan out of Swan Lake for the same reason. And they called Sartre, and Camus and Hemingway and Faulkner decadent writers, who should be forbidden. And remember that fabulous Greta Garter movie Ninotchka, where she brings some lingerie from France to the Soviet Union and her roommate becomes scared and she says, "I don't want my underwear to undermine the state!"

So, to sum up. This brief picture, which is of course simplified – things are much more complicated than what I have just said – what happened in Iran? The fact is that for 26 years the Iranian people have been resisting these laws. For us Iranians -- people think I am political, I am not at all political. I wish I could just spend all my time writing and then reading Atwood or Bellow or Rumi, this is what I really want to do.

But for us, this fight is existential, because in a totalitarian state, what they target is your identity as an individual, your integrity as an individual. When they force you to wear the veil, it is not that you don't like the veil, it is just that it is not you, and so you feel as if you are participating in a lie. This is the worst thing about a totalitarian state, that it makes you complicit in the crime against

you, and if you want to know more about it you should be reading Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*.

The whole point is that the way the Iranians resisted was not through violence, it was not through ideological polarization, which is what we did during the Shah's time, it was through using their weapons of mass destruction, like my lipstick, reading the Declaration of Human Rights, reading Jane Austen, reading Bellow, debating Hannah Arendt. Hannah Arendt and Carl Popper are two of the most popular writers in my country. My students know much more about de Tocqueville, unfortunately, than my American students do.

Iranian women became the semiotic signs of protest in the streets of Tehran when they refused to wear the veil comply with the mandatory clothing that the regime had asked of them. Young women and boys holding hands would be taken to jail, flogged and humiliated, beaten, they would come back and they would repeat it.

So what I am trying to say to you is that this new generation, the children of the revolution, they have gone to jail not for any political activity, they have gone to jail in order to keep their right to dress the way they want to, to wear friendship bracelets, to walk to read to talk to live the way they want. It is not the elite, but the ordinary Iranians today who through this instinctive feel for the meaning of freedom and pluralism that are making this regime retreat step by step.

And now in the streets of Tehran it is the morality police that have disappeared. But the young girls, as any American journalist can tell you, are looking as sinful and tempting as any American counterpart and more.

One other thing in Iran that happened was that some of the former revolutionaries, some of the former Islamists, they started looking at themselves and at this failed revolution, and they didn't like what they saw. So they started to question their own view of their religion, and now the jails in Iran are not just filled with those who are secular, but they are filled with former revolutionaries, people like Akbar Ganji, who in his unpublished interview and in his published articles, whenever he talks about the Islamic Republic he brings the example of Hannah Arendt's discussion of fascism.

And it is now the former revolutionaries, -- one of them is Atri, who was just talking in Washington last Sunday, another one is Mohsen Sazegara at the Washington Institute, of course, I think that someone like Sazegara needs to look at his own past and talk about it and criticize it much more than he has done -- anyways, these are the people who now are talking about secularism, about a referendum, about change in their country.

People ask, "Should there be art after Auschwitz?" There can only be art after Auschwitz actually. If you read the memoirs of the concentration camps, both Stalin's and Hitler's, if you read a person like Primo Levy, you wonder what is it that makes people who are deprived of everything they have, who are at death's door, who think like Primo Levy did, to remember lines from Dante in order to repeat them to his fellow prisoners was more important to him than the daily ration of his bread?

I have two students, I write about them in my book, one of them was a strict Islamist who fell in love with Henry James and with Henry James' women, her name was [Razie], and I talk about a scene where one of my students who was in jail with [Razie] came and told me "I was in jail with her and we realized that you had been teaching both of us, I talked to her about Gatsby and she talked to me about James," and then she said, "you know, [Razie] was executed."

And I thought, how amazing. It would only be a Gatsby or a James who would be deserving to go with a young girl to her death. That it is not just in places like this where Gatsby and Twain and Shakespeare thrive, but in those places, because those people who have been deprived of their right to individuality, of their right to integrity, in times of greatest brutality, in order not to lose their faith in humanity, they go back to the highest achievements of humanity. And our highest achievement of our humanity is our philosophy, our thoughts, our novels, our poetry, our music our painting -- those aspects of human life that fight not just political tyranny, but the tyranny of time, and those aspects that celebrate every individual, every moment every detail of life.

That is why Lolita, the most apolitical of novels became so important in my country Iran, because Lolita is about the confiscation of another human being's life and the imposition of a tyrant like Humbert's dream upon a little girl named Lolita's life. And that is what they did to us.

So I want to end my talk by saying that I'm very hopeful about Iran. Of course, hope always comes with a big question mark. There are so many "ifs." I think Iran is the case model for democracy today and I think that you will be able to help my country and you will be able to help promote democracy in your own country by supporting the issues that Iranian people right now are fighting for.

However, having said that and having talked so much, I don't want to end with Iran. I want to end with here. I want to end with a great writer. You know, since last August, we've witnessed the deaths of some of the best minds of this past century. There was Milosh, one of the most important poets and human rights advocates for Eastern Europe and the whole world. There was Susan Sontag. There was Arthur Miller and also Saul Bellow. I think it would have been fitting for us to come in front of New

York Public Library and other public libraries and celebrate the lives of these people. I think it was more fitting to remember them than to flock to television sets to watch Prince Charles's wedding.

So I want to end with the name of these people and I want to end with the great Saul Bellow, whom my students in Iran loved absolutely. They wrote poems to him and paintings for him. Bellow was always worried about the ordeal of freedom in his own country. In *More Die of Heartbreak*, *Dean's December* and *Bellarosa Connection* he says, "We survived the ordeal of the Holocaust, will we survive the ordeal of freedom?"

And he talked about the atrophy of feeling in the West; the fact that we lose our consciousness to the bombardment you know, of the simplifications and sound bites and politicizations. And he said, "A country that forgets about its poetry and its soul is a country that faces death."

This is what we bring to you, from my country. We remind you of Saul Bellow, of Jane Austen and of the fact that they are the universal property of all human kind. And that in order to celebrate democracy you can not celebrate it without celebrating your poets.

Thank you for your time.

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