

# Iran awakening

[Family](#), [Divorce](#)



Jessica Muhr May 2nd, 2012 History of the Middle East “ Iran Awakening” “ One Woman’s Journey to Reclaim Her Life and Country” This book, “ Iran Awakening”, is a novel written by Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi. Ebadi weaves the story of her life in a very personal and unique way, telling the account of the overthrow of the shah and the establishment of a new, religious fundamentalist regime in which opposition to the government are imprisoned, tortured, and murdered.

By simply reading the Prologue, one can see the love Ebadi has for Iran and her people. This love that Ebadi has for the oppressed of Iran is a theme that appears throughout the book and seems to be a large factor behind her drive to stand up for those who cannot stand up for themselves. In the first chapter, Ebadi recounts her childhood from her birth on June 21st, 1947 in Hamedan, to her childhood in Tehran. Something that may come as a surprise to a reader was the equality between male and female in Ebadi’s home.

This equality, however, was not common in most Iranian households, “ Male children enjoyed an exalted status, spoiled and cosseted... They often felt themselves the center of the family’s orbit... Affection for a son was an investment”, says Ebadi. In Iranian culture, it was considered natural for a father to love his son more than his daughter. In Ebadi’s home, though, she describes her parent’s affections, attentions, and discipline as equally distributed.

This equality in the home seems to play a large role in creating the strong, determined woman Ebadi would come to be, “ My father’s championing of my independence, from the play yard to my later decision to become a

judge, instilled a confidence in me that I never felt consciously, but came to regard as my most valued inheritance. ” (Ebadi, 12). One may also find it interesting that as a child, Ebadi did not know anything of politics; until the coup d'etat of 1953. On August 19th, 1953, the beloved Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh was toppled in a coup d’etat.

Ebadi says that, as children, this news meant nothing. But the adults could see what Ebadi, at the time, could not. The book makes it clear that, to those of Iran who were not paid to think otherwise, Mossadegh was revered as a nationalist hero and the father of Iranian independence for his bold move of nationalizing Iran’s oil industry which had been, until then, controlled by the West. Therefore, it was obvious that this was the beginning of a vast change for Iran. Before the coup, Ebadi’s father, a longtime supporter of the prime minister, had advanced to become minister of agriculture.

In this new regime, Ebadi’s father was forced out of his job, fated to languish in lower posts for the rest of his career. This was what caused a silence of all things political in the Ebadi home. Entering law school in 1965 was a “ turning point for me”, says Ebadi. The vast interest in Iran’s politics was shocking to her after coming from a home in which politics were never spoken of. After toying with the idea of studying political science, Ebadi decided on pursuing a judgeship; which is exactly what she did. In March of 1970, at the age of twenty-three, Ebadi became a judge.

In 1975, after 6 months of getting to know each other Ebadi married Javad Tavassoni. Her husband, unlike many Iranian men, coped well with her professional ambitions. In the autumn of 1977, there was, what Ebadi describes as, a “ shift in the streets of Tehran”. The shah’s regime was trying

to reduce the power of the judiciary by setting up the ‘ Mediating Council’, an extrajudicial outfit that would have allowed cases to be judged outside of the formal justice system. Some of the justices wrote a protest letter arguing against the council, demanding that all cases had to be tried before a court of law.

This was the first collective action taken by the judges against the shah. Ebadi signed the letter. In January of 1978, President Jimmy Carter arrived in Tehran, Iran and described it as an “ island of stability”, something he later came to regret. Not long after President Carter’s statement, a newspaper article aggressively attacking Khomeini inspired a revolt among the people of Iran, calling for his [Khomeini’s] return; the police shot into the crowd and killed many men. By the summer of 1978, protests had grown larger, making it impossible to avoid them. In early August, a crowded cinema in Abadan was burned to the round. This horrific event burned 400 people alive. The shah blamed this event on religious conservatives; Khomeini accused the SAVAK, the regime’s secret police, which was a force of legendary brutality against the government’s opponents. This tragedy pushed many Iranians against the shah. They now realized that the shah was not merely an American puppet. Ebadi herself says that she was ‘ drawn’ to the opposition. She says that it did not seem a contradiction for her, an educated professional woman, to back it (Ebadi, 33). She had no idea that she was backing her own eventual defeat.

Ebadi uses something close to irony as she describes a morning when she and several judges and officials stormed into the minister of justice’s office. The minister was not there, instead a startled elder judge sat behind the

desk. “ He looked up at us in amazement and his gaze halted when he saw my face. “ You! You of all people, why are you here? ” he asked, bewildered and stern. “ Don’t you know that you’re supporting people who will take away your job if they come to power? ” “ I’d rather be a free Iranian than an enslaved attorney,” I retorted boldly, self-righteous to the core. (Ebadi, 34)

On January 16th, 1979, the shah fled Iran, ending two millennia of rule by Persian kings. The streets were over-crowded with euphoric citizens, Ebadi herself being one of them. On February 1st, 1979, Khomeini returned to Iran. For about a month, the country of Iran hung in the balance. In most of the cities an emergency military had gone into immediate effect and Khomeini had ordered people to go back into their homes by nightfall with the instruction to go onto their roof at 9pm and scream, Allaho akbar, “ God is greatest”.

On February 11th, Khomeini exhorted people to defy the 4pm curfew the military had imposed by coming out into the streets. Ebadi remembers going into the streets, hearing sounds of the gunshots echoing, and taking in the frenzied scene of emotion. The next day, the 22nd of Bahman on the Iranian calendar, the military surrendered and the prime minister fled the country. The country rejoiced, including Ebadi herself. She says, looking back, she has to laugh at the feeling of pride that washed over her for it took scarcely a month for her to realize that she had willingly participated in her own defeat. (Ebadi, 38)

Merely days after the revolution’s victory, a man named Fathollah Bani-Sadr was appointed provisional overseer of the Ministry of Justice. Expecting praise from this man, Ebadi was shocked when he said, “ Don’t you think that out of respect for our beloved Imam Khomeini, who has graced

Iran with his return, it would be better if you covered your hair? ” This headscarf “ invitation” was the first in a long string of restraints on the women of Iran. After being away for less than a month, Ebadi could already see the changes that had taken place in Tehran. The streets were renamed after Shia imams, martyred clerics, and Third World heroics of an anti-imperial struggle. ” (Ebadi, 41) Her fellow co-workers, male and female, were dirty and smelled. The bow tie had been banned, being “ deemed a symbol of the West’s evils, smelling of cologne signaled counterrevolutionary tendencies, and riding to the ministry car to work was evidence of class privilege” (Ebadi 42). Rumors spread that Islam barred women from being judges. Ebadi was the most distinguished female judge in all of Tehran.

So, upon hearing these rumors, she tried to counter her worries with her connections; but even this small comfort proved to be in vain. In the final days of 1979, Ebadi was effectively stripped of her judgeship. She stubbornly stood, though six months pregnant, as the committee flippantly tossed a sheet of paper at her and said, “ Show up to the research office when you’re done with your vacation”, her ‘ vacation’ being her maternity leave. The men then began to talk about her as though she was not there, saying things like, “ Without even starting at the research office, she wants a vacation! ” another said, “ They’re disorganized! and another, “ They’re so unmotivated; it’s clear they don’t want to be working! ” ... The point Ebadi was trying to make is clear by the telling of these statements. Most men, especially those in the government, had lost what little respect they had previously held for women prior to the Revolution. That much, at least, seemed very clear. The post-Revolution’s effect on women was a grim one. As Ebadi read in a

newspaper piece titled “ Islamic Revolution”, “ the life of a woman’s was now half that of a man (for instance, if a car hit both on the street, the cash compensation due to the woman’s family was half of that due the man’s), a oman’s testimony in court as a witness now counted only half as much as that of a man’s; a woman had to ask her husband permission todivorce. The drafters of the penal code had apparently consulted the seventh century for legal advice. ” (Ebadi, 51). Ebadi’s head pounded with rage as she read this news. “ The grim statues that I would spend the rest of my life fighting stared back at me from the page”, she writes. One effect of the new Islamic penal code was the imbalance it caused within Ebadi’s marriage. “ The day Javad and I married each other, we joined our lives together as two equals”, she writes. But under these laws, he stayed a person and I became a chattel. They permitted him to divorce me at will, take custody of our future children, and acquire three wives and stick them in the house with me. ” (Ebadi, 53). Ebadi knew her husband had no intentions of putting this new law to use, but she still could not accept the distraction the imbalance between them was causing her. At length, Ebadi came up with a solution: within the course of the next morning, her and her husband drove to the local notary where her husband readily signed a postnuptual agreement.

This granted Ebadi the right to divorce her husband without permission, as well as primary custody of their children in the event of a separation. “ Why are you doing this? ” the astonished notary asked [Javad]. “ My decision is irrevocable, “ Javad replied. “ I want to save my life. ” This eased Ebadi’s feeling of unrest greatly, her and her husband were equals again, but a small part of her was still at unease. “ After all, I couldn’t drag all the men of Iran

down to the notary, could I? ” (Ebadi, 54). September 22nd, 1980 marked the day that Saddam Hussein launched a full-blown invasion on Iran.

Though the popular discontent with the revolution had by no means abated: as Ebadi mentions, during the war, “ the newspapers still had long lists of the executed, all the former regime’s officials and counterrevolutionaries who had been shot or hung, and sometimes pages filled with macabre photos of gallows and dead bodies. ” Despite all of this, the people went on, just as they had through the upheaval after the revolution. In short, the decade after the revolution was one filled with much strife, war, and repression.

This strife first became personal to Ebadi in the form of the political imprisonment and murder of her brother-in-law Fuad at the young age of 24. “ Fuad’s death made me even more obstinate”, she writes. “ We had been told not to discuss his death with anyone, so I talked about his execution night and day. In taxis, at the corner shop, in line for bread, I would approach perfect strangers and tell them about this sweet boy who was sentenced to twenty years in prison for selling newspapers, and then executed. ” (Ebadi, 89)

This tragic event in Ebadi’s life, the hot outrage that it made her feel, is remembered as the spark which would lead to her return to legal practice in the 1990’s. Things had, of course, continued to happen since Fuad’s death in the fall of 1988. In 1989, Khomeini had died, the komitehs harsh, unnecessary punishments grew more serious and frequent: Ebadi writes of one instance in which her friend’s fiance is whipped 80 times with no legal grounds whatsoever. The extreme laws against women grew more and more severe.



When Ebadi was arrested for the first time (for a crime of wardrobe), she mentions an elderly woman who was arrested for the “crime” of wearing slippers. Yet over time, it again “became fashionable for the daughters of Traditional families to attend college”, Ebadi writes. “Throughout the nineties, the number of women with college degrees rose steadily, and eventually the women began to outnumber the men in universities by a small margin.” This new wave of educated women emerging from Iran created a people that was no longer content to slip back into their old, traditional roles in the home.

This new attitude was often met by extreme clashes within the family. Ebadi writes of one such woman who, upon requesting a divorce from her husband, was refused by her father. Facing a lifetime of unhappiness, the woman doused herself in gasoline and set herself ablaze. In 1992, Ebadi again began practicing law, this time exclusively taking on pro bono cases. She pored over religious texts, attempting to gain sufficient knowledge to argue against particular interpretations that would claim that, within Islam, discriminatory interpretations were to be made.

Ebadi began to take on only the cases of women and children, for these were the ones who were constantly at the mercy of a sick, twisted government. Ebadi took on many cases; one was that of the family of Zahra Kanzemi, an Iranian journalist who had been killed in police custody in 2003. Another was that of a student who was beaten to death by paramilitaries during a 1999 protest; Ebadi herself was imprisoned during the course of this case. While digging through the paperwork for a case representing the children of a

couple who had been slain in their home, Ebadi stumbled across the official authorization of her own assassination.

The response Ebadi has to this shocking information was one of the major instances that. I believe, greatly endears her to the reader as an extremely brave and powerful woman. “ I wasn’t scared, really, nor was I angry”, she writes. Instead, Ebadi simply wanted to know why. One thing that is truly unique about Ebadi is the way in which she writes about her life choices. She writes about them as if they were natural, obvious, and just the thing anyone would have done in her place. In reality, this is not so.

Many others around Ebadi had the education and ability to make the same choices that Ebadi had made, but they did not, some even emigrating during the Iran-Iraq war. For Ebadi, patriotic to the core, the only choice was to stay. She has a love for her country that defies the instability and repression the government tries to place upon her. Ebadi knows, deep within herself, that the government is not the country. The only moral choice she could live with was to fight injustice with law; the very law the injustices claimed themselves to be. Following the ‘ Reform Era’, you can see Ebadi breathe a huge sigh of relief.

The years of constant anxiousness over everything, even her girl’s birthday parties, were behind her. The days when young people would be whipped for venturing into the mountains together, women would be detained or lashed for simply wearing a smudge of makeup or nail-polish, or for wearing any color clothing besides navy or black tones, were happily retired. Moderate President Khatami sought to pull back the system’s interference in the

people's private lives, but as Ebadi states, " President Khatami deserves only a measure of credit for this shift.

Really it was because my daughters' uncowed generation started fighting back, and, through the force of their sheer numbers and boldness, made it unfeasible for the state to impose itself as before. " This book was, in my opinion, a fantastic portrait of a life lived in truth. It was a delight to see how Ebadi's simple courage and outright stubbornness made a vast difference in the lives of many, even in the face of extreme adversity, like her own possible assassination. In conclusion, I will once again quote Ebadi, as she articulates the dignity of the reform movement within Iran. It so happened that I believed in the secular separation of religion and government because, fundamentally, Islam, like any religion, is subject to interpretation. It can be interpreted to oppress women or interpreted to liberate them... I am a lawyer by training, and know only too well the permanent limitations of trying to enshrine inalienable rights in sources that lack fixed terms and definitions. But I am also a citizen of the Islamic Republic, and I know the futility of approaching the question any other way.

My objective is not to vent my own political sensibilities but to push for a law that would save a family like Leila's" — a child who was raped and murdered — " from becoming homeless in their quest to finance the executions of their daughter's convicted murderers. If I'm forced to ferret through musty books of Islamic jurisprudence and rely on sources that stress the egalitarian ethics of Islam, then so be it. Is it harder this way? Of course it is. But is there an alternative battlefield? Desperate wishing aside, I cannot see one. " – Shirin Ebadi