

Dissidence and Literature
by Marina Nemat

Last August, when I was at Lake Como to speak at an event, a teenage boy asked to interview me. I was exhausted, but I decided not to say “no” to him, because I remembered that I was about his age, maybe a little younger, when I began writing articles against the Islamic government in my school’s newspaper. I had grown up during the time of the Shah, the king of Iran, and I had had a rather idyllic childhood. I was 13 when the Islamic revolution succeeded in my country in 1979 and turned my world upside down. I was not from a political family and had never been political. How political can you be at the age of 14? I was a young girl who had grown up listening to the Bee Gees, watching *Little House on the Prairie*, reading C. S. Lewis and Jane Austen, and wearing bikinis at the beach. I had dreams of becoming a medical doctor, which was quite possible, and I wanted to marry a handsome young man like Mr. Darcy one day and raise a family. Then, I ended up writing articles against the Islamic regime in my school, which the government had turned into one of the first fronts of the Islamic Cultural revolution. Immediately after the revolution, there was some freedom of speech in my country as the new government was trying to define itself and write its laws. During this period of relative lawlessness and anarchy, all political groups that had been illegal during the time of the Shah surfaced. I had no idea what a Marxist was and now they were everywhere, selling their magazines and newspapers. The doors of the world had been opened to my generation, who had lived most of their lives in the controlled society of the Shah, and we were very curious and excited and eager to understand the world and to change it for the better. The word “democracy” made our hearts beat faster, and our young minds were completely unaware of the complexity and danger of the road ahead. After all, at the age of 14, you believe you’re invincible.

But things took a turn for the worse. Finally, the government did write its law, which was based on sharia law, was very severe, and had been created to pave the road for a totalitarian dictatorship, one probably harsher than we had ever experienced before. In the new system that governed my country, the Supreme Leader, who was Ayatollah Khomeini at the time, had complete power over the government and could even veto the decisions of the parliament. In my school, our wonderful teachers, who had taught us literature, history, geography, math, and science, were replaced by fanatic young women, members of the Revolutionary Guard and Islamic Committees, who were eighteen or nineteen years of age, were not qualified to teach at all, and were appointed as teachers to brainwash us and deliver the government’s propaganda. Soon, the rights of women came under fire: the hijab became mandatory and the new family law granted all the power to men, giving them the right to abuse their wives without consequence. Most of my friends were Muslim girls and they were angry about this, and I, who was a Christian, was furious. This was when I began to write, and, as a result, the new principal of my school, who was also a member of the Revolutionary Guard, put my name, along with many other young girls from my school, on a black list, which she submitted to the Courts of Islamic Justice. The waves of arrests began in 1981, and, eventually, we were all arrested and taken to Evin Prison. Evin was a political prison built during the time of the Shah, where political dissidents were tortured and executed. When Khomeini returned to Iran with the success of the revolution, all political prisoners were freed, and Evin was

supposed to turn into a museum, but it only expanded and became more horrific. In 1981 and 1982, the Islamic government of Iran arrested thousands of young people, 90 percent of whom were under the age of 18. Almost all these young people were tortured and many of them were executed under the name of “antirevolutionary” and being a threat to national security.

At the beginning of this talk, I told you about a young man who wanted to interview me at lake Como. When we sat down together and he turned on his voice recorder, I was ready for him to ask me the typical questions most journalists asked me, either about my book or about the political situation in Iran, but he pleasantly surprised me. He asked: “Why do we have to read books?” I have two teenaged sons, so I have a great deal of experience when it comes to the reluctance of the youth to read. I said: “Why did Hitler burn books? Why did Mao do the same thing? Why did Khomeini ban books?” The young man seemed satisfied with my answer.

Technologically, the world has come very far in the recent years, but still, dictatorships follow the same path as they always have, but of course, now they do it in a more sophisticated way. They still burn and ban books, but now they also try to limit and control the use of the Internet, because it is through the internet that the written word can reach millions of people in an instant and bring them the information that these governments and powers have tried to hide. In the past, once a writer was in exile, he/she would be more or less disconnected from his/her people, but today, this is not the case at all. Books and articles can be written and be made available on line. Discussions can be made, and the truth can rise to the top. Of course, this age of technology has its own complications. Just the same way that writers and dissidents can use the Internet to reach people, dictatorships and their agents and supporters can do the exact same thing and try to distort the truth. But this is a battleground of a very serious war that goes on without pause and to which every writer needs to remain dedicated. The future belongs to the young generation, and in order to make this future better than the present is for the older generation to succeed in giving to the youth the burden of history it has carried. However, let’s not forget that history can be abused and twisted. For example, there are still those who say the holocaust never happened, even though the holocaust is a very well documented event of recent history.

As human beings, we have a tendency to turn our backs on what causes us sorrow, pain, and despair, especially when these are historical events that bring our conscience, whether personal or social, under a microscope. So a writer who writes about such matters is always faced with a great deal of resistance. Also, let’s not forget that governments and extremist political groups have and will use literature as a tool of propaganda. Of course, it’s needless to say that when literature becomes a tool to serve a certain ideology, it automatically loses its soul and becomes lost. Any intelligent reader can spot such a condition without effort, no matter how skillfully it’s done. Literature is not to serve a certain ideology, but to become the honest bearer of the human experience and condition, whether in the fiction or non-fiction form.

There are also those who take the power of literature too lightly. Without words and literature, we become secluded and imprisoned in our own bodies. What is the use of experience if it cannot be shared? I learned more about the holocaust from *Anne Frank's Diary*, Ellie Wiesel's *Night*, and Imre Kertesz's *Fatelessness* than I have ever learned from any history books. This is because these amazing works of literature not only tell us about what happened, but they tell us about how people felt as they experienced such horrors, so that we can put ourselves in their shoes and not only know but feel their experiences. Without literature, history and the human experience, which is a very important part of history, becomes a cold and impersonal recitation of numbers and words that can rarely bring tears to anyone's eyes or touch anyone's heart.

I am a practical person by nature, and as I told you, I wanted to become a medical doctor, but I ended up becoming a political prisoner at the age of 16 and spending more than 2 years in prison, and then I became a writer. I have always admired those who act on their convictions for a good cause: doctors who risk all and work in war and poverty torn regions to save lives, human-rights activists who are at the front lines of humanitarian disasters, journalists who risk their lives to bring us reports and images about events happening across the globe, engineers who build roads and schools in remote areas or bring clean running water to those who need it, etc. What is the role of the writer? In my humble opinion, every writer is a part of humanity's collective conscience. As a writer, I am here to remember and to make sure that the world knows and remembers. Some people say, "but these are only words." I would say that these are the words that contain our humanity. We're here at this conference to speak about dissidence and literature, but I would like to ask you "what is dissidence?" To you, is dissidence a political act or a human one, or maybe both? I believe that when dissidence is mainly political and serves a certain ideology or religion, it should be left to politicians. However, when literature enters the arena of dissidence, in order for literature to keep its soul and humanity, it has to serve the human conscience without serving an ideology, and if it manages to do this, it would deliver to the future generations the truth of our experience, humanity, and imagination. But this is easier said than done. As human beings, we are very much prone to letting our political views cloud our judgment. So when a writer allows his/her ideology to shape and define her work and become its blueprint, we see the death of good literature, which bears witness to human and historical conditions, and, we see the rise of a phenomenon which I choose to call "literary propaganda."

In Iran today, before each and every book is published, it has to be examined by the Ministry of Information. For thousands of years, Persia produced world-famous writers and poets, but since the success of the Islamic Revolution, the only books that officially make it to the printers in Iran are the ones that promote the government's ideology and propaganda or the ones that are deemed "harmless." As a result, most writers and poets choose to leave Iran in order to write freely in Diaspora, and this is one of the reasons why during the recent years, there has been such a surge in the number of Iranian writers being published abroad. And, naturally, most of these writers are women, because they are the ones who have suffered the most and have the most fascinating and intriguing stories to tell. A point that I have to bring up here is that, unfortunately, there is the danger that dissidents who live in their own countries or in the Diaspora might also fall

into the trap of creating literary propaganda in the name of literature. If a dissident writer is overly dedicated to a certain ideology or religion and lets this affect his/her work, then literary dissidence loses soul and meaning, because it has now become a mere political tool.

Today, we live in a war-ravaged world where certain countries invade other countries based on lies and false information and in the name of justice and democracy, breaking international laws without being held accountable. And our world is also plagued by terrorism and religious fanaticism that pretends to be serving God while killing innocent people and promoting hatred and violence. Also, we hear of countries where any form of dissidence, even in its mildest form, is never tolerated. In these countries, torture and execution is commonplace. I ask you: "Can one wrong correct another wrong?" The interesting thing is that each and every of these sides, countries, and political groups use their own literary propaganda to tell the world that they are the "good" and that the other is the "evil." Please correct me if I'm wrong, but I do not see much goodness in any of them, and this is when as a writer, I have to tell the story of the victims and of those who suffer and are in the danger of being forgotten.

We have all grown up reading books like *Cinderella* and the *Sleeping Beauty*, in which the world is divided into absolute good on one side and absolute evil on the other, and we have a tendency to adhere to such a simplistic view of the world even as we get older, because the simplistic way is the easy way. However we have to realize that most of the world, of course not all of it, is different shades of gray and is neither black nor white. Once we decide that a person is evil and there's no goodness in him/her, this would justify our holding a gun to that person's head and pulling the trigger, and this is where extremism, terrorism, and genocide are born, and they can happen to anyone, whether atheist or religious. When I was in prison at the age of 17, I was forced to marry one of my interrogators, and, under the name of marriage, this man raped me over and over again, and I hated him from the bottom of my heart. Then, I found out that during the time of the Shah, he had been a political prisoner himself in the same prison that I was in now. He had been tortured one day, just like me. He had been a victim, just like me, and now he was a torturer. This situation told me that a victim (the good) could become a torturer (the evil). And this understanding changed my view of the world and made me understand that the line between good and evil was quite easy to cross.

In a country like Iran where 70 percent of the population is under the age of 30, it becomes even more important for literature to be accessible to the youth. First let me explain that in Iran, almost every book, whether foreign or not, is available in the underground market. Even though these books are illegal and they are never officially published, people have found ways to stay under the radar of the government and import, translate, and publish books. Iran is a rich country, and in big cities there is money in people's hands and many are curious to read the banned books. Also, in Tehran's large cities, the majority of people are now quite well educated. After the period of the Islamic Cultural Revolution in Iran, during which I was a teenager, when universities were shut down for "restructuring" and history, science, literature, etc. in high schools was replaced with political and religious propaganda, the government of Iran realized that it needed to

train doctors and engineers, so the regular subjects returned to schools and the universities reopened, but, of course, the government did squeeze in a good amount of political and religious rhetoric into the curriculum. Still to this day, students are forced to line up in the schoolyard before class and yell “Death to America” and “Death to Israel” and many other things. Young people are curious by nature, and in a young country like Iran, where the majority of the population is young and literate, literature becomes even more important, especially in its relationship to dissidence. In a country like Iran, or anywhere, in order for literature to be able to make real changes in people’s understanding of who they are, where they are in their history, how they arrived here, and where they want to go, it has to be accessible and readable. Long complicated sentences, which go on for 10 lines, even though very impressive, lose the young reader. The story needs to be relatively easy to relate to, void of messages and propaganda, and honest, so that it can reach the youth and touch their minds and hearts. And to truly change a country for the better and to prepare it to become a cradle of democracy, the best route is to reach the heart and soul of its young generation, and the worst possible way is to invade a country in the name of democracy and have foreign soldiers armed with the best and most deadly weapons march its streets.