

**The Lonely War: One Woman's Account
of the Struggle for Modern Iran**

Nazila Fathi

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Nazila Fathi's *The Lonely War* joins a number of similar journalist memoirs by Iranian or Iranian émigrés, including Roxana Saberi's *Between Two Worlds* (Harper Collins: 2010), Ramita Navai's *City of Lies* (Public Affairs: 2014), and Maziar Bahari's *Then They Came for Me* (Random House: 2011), which was recently reissued as *Rosewater* and adapted into a film by The Daily Show's Jon Stewart. Fathi and Bahari mostly grew up in Iran, whereas Azadeh

Moaveni and Roya Hakakian mostly grew up in the United States. Thus they offer a different sort of history, one that is less inclined toward nostalgia or narratives of leaving and return.

As a proverbial first draft of history, Fathi's memoir appeals to a wide audience interested in current affairs, but also to policy wonks in both the media and politics. Fellow journalists seem captivated by such stories, particularly when they involve the author's attempts to analyze civil society in the Islamic Republic. Fathi's work will also appeal to Iranians in the diaspora, others interested in the Shi'ah polity's internal problems, and those concerned with questions of social class in addition to gender in the Islamic Republic.

Fathi sums up her main argument at the end of the book when she states that Iran's middle class has been unable to "fulfill a historic mission to create institutional reform" (p. 267). *Class* is the key word here, for much of her book focuses on the conflict between an educated secular middle class and an uneducated or religiously indoctrinated working class. In this sense, this book provides a popular demonstration of what sociologists Farhad Nomani and Sohrab Behdad have analyzed at a more empirical and theoretical level in their *Class and Labor in Iran* (Syracuse University Press: 2006). They argue that much of the conflict is economic, that religious questions are manifestations of class conflict, and that class conflict is often couched in religious ideology and narrative.

Although less sociologically sophisticated, Fathi's memoir approaches the question of class through individual stories: hers and others. She shows how complex conflicts of class, religion, and gender are manifested in people's daily lives. But although she attempts to give voice to segments of Iranian society other than her own, she sometimes falls into broad generalizations. Some of her stories challenge our assumptions, and others reinforce them or introduce new ones.

The book is divided into three parts, "The Formative Years, 1979-1989," "Awakening, 1989-1999," and "The Decade of Confrontation, 1999-2009," each of which consists of eight or nine chapters. Putting her journalistic training to good use, Fathi deploys what is sometimes still referred to as "human interest." Many chapters center on an individual with whom she has personal contact (e.g., her parents' maid Nessa and later her own maid Nasrin), representative members of a social block (e.g., Masoud, the black market VHS seller), and public figures like President Khatami or Nobel Peace Prize winner Shirin Ebadi.

This character-driven approach conveys her story at multiple levels. Fathi relates these individuals' stories in order to outline historical events and simul-

taneously depict the social formations that result in different political loyalties. For example, one key figure in her narrative is Nessa. Introduced in chapter 2 and reappearing in chapter 15, her story is that of how the poor and working class both gained and suffered as a result of the Islamic Republic's populist ideology. This method of individual "characters" symbolizing whole sectors of Iranian society runs through the entire memoir.

The author relates stories that are both unfamiliar to western readers, among them the 1995 workers' protests, and such well known (if not well understood) events as the 1979 Revolution and the 2009 protests. She presents these events both through her own perspective and through those of figures like Nessa. Fathi's own perspective represents that of Iran's educated, secular, and reform-minded middle class that, she claims, has failed to achieve its historical mission of reform. Nessa represents the point of view of the religiously conservative working class.

The danger in this approach is that the author sometimes tends to over-generalize. For example, she claims that the working class is less educated and more religious than the middle class. And, indeed, this does seem to plague some of her narratives, especially her story of Nasrin, another domestic worker whom she and her husband hire only to find out that she has begun to spy on their family. But despite this tendency, Fathi's rendering of history through her own and others' points of view offers a complex picture and allows her to present counterintuitive images. For example, a seemingly traditionalist Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance official betrays a desire for change and freer forms of expression, despite his traditional and conservative appearance. The author deploys these multiple perspectives to familiarize her western readers with historical issues that might be new to them, as well as to defamiliarize certain events or historical situations that we take as given: that Iran's youth, for example, are all digitally savvy critics of the regime.

In addition to relating her story through these various perspectives, she also uses another interesting method of narration: recurring motifs. For instance, one image that serves as a sort of coda and that appears among the book's photographs, is a swimming pool that comes to symbolize freedom, particularly for women. In an early chapter entitled "Our Bodies, Our Battlefields," Fathi tells of how she and her friends were newly required to wear the hijab in public in their early teens, and how one night they defied a ban on women swimming in public by plunging into a pool fully dressed but without the hijab. This story contrasts the freedom she feels in the water with the way her wet clothes drag her down. At the end of the memoir, she describes how, despite living in exile, she wishes she could go back to a Tehran

in which she could plunge into a swimming pool and “swim in those waters again” (p. 268).

Indeed, clothing and its relation to individual freedom becomes another modest but meaningful motif in this memoir. Of course the headscarf, manteaux, full chador, and hijab in general are key images. But seemingly mundane sartorial signs became important: a schoolteacher deemed Fathi’s white socks decadent, or Khomeini’s granddaughter Zahra Eshraghi wearing of pant suits and cowboy boots. Men’s clothes also take on important implications, beginning with her father’s defiantly “Western” tie but also including the plastic slippers favored by religiously conservative men, and Khatami’s pragmatic dress shoes.

The relevance of the author’s work to Islamic history is the way she addresses class and gender in the formation and transformation of Iran. Fathi attempts to present historical moments and social movements from multiple social points of view. Her human-interest stories relate history through the eyes of specific “characters” other than herself or her class. However, the perspective remains tied to her own class position, as when she describes how her housemaid Nasrin became an informer. Specifically, she notes that women like Nasrin and Nessa were favored by the regime because they were willing to serve as symbols of religious conservatism through their modest dress and loyalty. They were correspondingly rewarded, at least until the end of the war.

Nasrin’s access to power comes despite, and in some ways because of, her working class background. The poor became the symbol of the Islamic Republic’s “Rule of the Oppressed” as outlined by Nomani and Behdad (*Class and Labor in Iran*, p. 1), according to which the *taghotian* (the arrogantly wealthy and powerful) are vanquished by the *mostazafan* (the dispossessed). Fathi sees that she is caught in this struggle – this lonely war – that the Islamic Republic created early on and which continues to plague civil society. In this context, domestic workers like Nessa and Nasrin, along with young Basijis from working-class and peasant backgrounds, feel a sense of entitlement and power.

However, in depicting this sort of class conflict, Fathi’s narrative falls prey to overgeneralization and monolithic characterization. For instance, she notes at one point that “Nasrin was no longer my maid – she was something else entirely” (p. 227). The status of “maid” is never really interrogated here. Even though the author is careful to explore the economic changes that transformed Iran’s economy and shifted power, she never questions the social relations and economic conditions that give some Iranians the privilege of hiring a maid and other Iranians the necessity to work as maids.

Ultimately, *The Lonely War* provides a compelling journalistic narrative of power struggles – of lonely wars at the national, class, and individual levels. As such, it cannot help but fall into overgeneralizations at some points; however, overall the book is insightful, compelling, and often surprising and counterintuitive in its conclusions. I believe it is one of the strongest journalist memoirs about Iran published during the past decade.

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