

Ghosts of Revolution: Rekindled Memories of Imprisonment in Iran

Shahla Talebi

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Shahla Talebi's memoir, *Ghosts of Revolution: Rekindled Memories of Imprisonment in Iran*, is painful to read; it is hard to read. The book, a recollection of Shahla Talebi's years in Iran's notorious Evin Prison, is jail-like itself – unrelenting in stark accounts of torture, murders, madness, and mayhem. From the very start, the prologue, until the very last words of the epilogue and even its twelve pages of acknowledgements, the agony goes on. Every chapter, every paragraph, and every line stabs the readers with the hopelessness of Iranian citizens caught in the murderous, diabolical schemes of the uncontrolled, unethical, and ruthless government, which has ruled Iran since the Revolution of 1979.

Four out of six chapters are named after prisoners: Roya, Fozi, Kobra, Maryam, and one after a cousin, Yousuf. The first chapter, "In the Footsteps of the Giants," presents background information on the author's life – including her first imprisonment in 1977–1978, when she was a first-year student at the university during the previous government, the Pahlavis. The author compares, even if disjointedly, the brutality of the two regimes.

Upon her temporary release from prison in November 1991, Shahla Talebi visits the cemetery, where her murdered husband's body is presumed to be buried in a mass grave (29–30). She then describes the "meat trucks," which had carried the bodies of the tortured and murdered prisoners to the cemetery – and of the "restless dogs" whose insistent barking announced the mass burial in shallow graves where the dogs would feast on "flesh and blood" soon after (33).

About her experience at Evin, Shahla Talebi writes, "I did not submit, nor did I go crazy, but I felt the burden and the responsibility of giving voice to those who were, in one way or another, lost" (52). Her heart-wrenching account of prisoners' inescapable physical and mental torture is a noble effort to give name and dignity to those Iranians who disappeared or were broken without the knowledge of the outside world.

The *dastgah* – a torture machine used by the most vicious of prison guards – is reminiscent of an inquisitionist's creative methods of inflicting pain in the name of religion. The author paints a clear picture of the *dastgah*'s destructive forces, not just on the body but also on the prisoners' minds. Long after being tortured and forced to act like a dog, even after be-

ing away from her torturers – Roya, a prisoner, “crawls” and “barks” like a dog, begging “her interrogator to let her remain a human” (55).

Madness takes many shapes after tortures by prison guards. Fozi, a collaborator – a young woman who broke under torture – is hated by the guards, the prisoners, and her own family. Her husband, who has escaped to Europe, sends her “a message of repudiation,” divorcing her. Fozi’s parents refuse to visit her; Fozi goes mad. The author uses the example of public masturbation (inserting a bar of soap into her vagina) to prove Fozi’s madness. “Lying down naked in her bed, touching herself in front of everyone, she was undermining an extremely sensitive aspect of the Iranian political prisoners’ unwritten moral and social code of conduct” (141). Despite Shahla Talebi’s horror, the reader feels pity for Fozi, even if she is a traitor. Not every young person can withstand torture. Talebi’s lack of sympathy and compassion for Fozi has the opposite effect on the Western reader. Should Fozi not touch herself, love herself, when everyone else has forsaken her tortured body and mind? Shahla Talebi later adds that Fozi ate “about forty or so cooked eggs. . . .” (115). The reader is left baffled that so many eggs were available in prison when they all suffered from malnutrition. The author has a great story without resorting to such anecdotes.

Although the majority of chapters are clearly named after prisoners, they often do not represent the chapter’s namesake. For example, the chapter named Kobra, isn’t entirely about her, but also about Roudabeh, Mahmoud, Hamid, and Marjan. The theme of madness is central to this memoir. However, there is no need to go beyond the prison walls to show the madness inside and outside. The episode about Yousuf, a cousin who is mocked by coworkers and driven to insanity feels out of place.

The many quotes from well-known poets and writers, both Western and Persian – such as Rumi, Shamlu, Michel Foucault, Stefanie Pandolfo, and Elaine Scarry – make the book feel pretentious, without adding to the understanding of the intense sufferings that the author has witnessed. For example, in a subchapter heading, “On the Ashes: Words That Replace Tears,” the author cites from Vera Schwarc’s, “The Pane of Sorrow”: “To say that the pain has no music is to know that those who suffer are in a hell without song” (199). Sections like this are strewn throughout the book. Block quotes, flashbacks in italics, poetry, and scholarly citations crowd the narrative. Nevertheless, Shahla Talebi’s firsthand account of prison life in Evin is a valuable historical documentation of Iranian government’s brutality of its citizens.

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