



Azadeh, Malaki, and Marty Nikou

Photo by: Ardalan Nikou

**STRENGTH of WOMEN
in the
Cultural CONSTRUCT of IRAN**

Marty Nikou's Paper

**Presented in a
Panel Discussion on the
"Roles of Women in Contemporary Iran"
At Doris Duke's Shangri La**

**Sponsored by
Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Arts,
The Honolulu Academy of Arts, and
Doris Duke Theatre**

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Moana Rumi (Marty) Nikou
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On behalf of the Persian community in Honolulu, I would like to thank Doris Duke Foundation of Islamic Arts, The Honolulu Academy of Arts, and Doris Duke Theatre for helping us to celebrate Nowruz, the Iranian New Year with The “Persian Nights Film Festival” and the panel discussion on the “Roles of Women in Contemporary Iran.”

I would like to extend our appreciations especially to Shangri La’s Director, Ms. Deborah Pope; Project Manager, Ms. Carol Khewhok; and Shangri La’s superb staff.

Further, I wish to thank Ms. Gina Caruso, the Director of Doris Duke Theatre and her hardworking staff and volunteers who allow the magic of arts and cinema enrich our multicultural community here in Hawaii.

My sincere gratitude also goes to my two esteemed colleagues and panelists, Professors Farideh Farhi and Marcia Morse.

At the end, I wish to thank my beautiful wife, Azadeh, and son, Malaki Arsalan, for their love and support.

— Marty Nikou

In the Name of God
The Kind and the Merciful

I would like to start my talk with two of my poems in celebration of Nowruz and change:

نوروز ۱۳۸۸

بهار رسد
نور امید آمد

سحر صدر

بریا خیر
عشق را بگوش

آدمیت بگوش
کار در پیس

۱۳۸۸
۲۰۰۹
م. نیلو

Nowruz (Persian New Year 2009)

Spring is at the door!

The light of hope,
knocking

In the early morning hours,

Get up!

Wear love

on your ears,

Put on

the robe of humanity.

Your work

has just begun.

I wrote the following poem a few days before the 2009 Presidential Inauguration:

A Sea of Change

I am a man,
I am a woman
I am change, power and beauty
I am a world at its best
I am a sea of infinite wisdom
I am storm
I am a war won to peace
I am love
I am truth
I am fantasy
At the palm of your hand
I am us
As we humble and yet proud
We laugh
We cry
We are humans
A sea of change

I grew up in a world where the women I have crossed path with have always been powerful, resilient, persistent, imaginative, highly resourceful, manipulative, and yet nurturing.

My mother, for example, had an amazing ability to manage five children, plan our family affairs, cook three meals a day, cater to my father, who was an extremely high maintenance man, take care of her own mother, and at the end of the day, she still had time and energy to sit down and have a meaningful, fun family moment with all of us.

My father was a physically and mentally strong man. He was what we called, a leader type. But, despite of his physical strength, I do not recall him ever raising his hand onto my mother. She was beloved; she was respected and very influential in my father's life. She knew how to sway my father's thoughts and feelings. She was in control.

I have experienced nearly the same qualities in a majority of the Iranian women I have encountered for the last forty years.

So, when I hear in America and elsewhere people talk about Iranian women who are, in general, the victims of a blood-trusty, man-dominated society, I simply wonder: If I have ever met an Iranian woman in distress only because, she was a woman, and she was Iranian.

Of course, there are certain roles assigned to people in a male-dominated society where women may be given many important but less visible responsibilities to perform.

Of course, there is injustice in Iran as well as elsewhere in the world. Of course, men hold major decision-making positions in the Islamic Iran.

One, however, needs to realize that men are the façade of the Iranian society. They are the executors; they are foot soldiers on the battlefields; they do most of the dirty work. They are, therefore, immediately in our face.

Yes. Men are visible.

Now, being less visible should not automatically mean less powerful. I think this is where the most common Western preconceptions about Iranian women are formed.

In the West, the visual world and public presence are paramount. If one is not seen, people may say, "one does not exist."

Metaphorically speaking: The house of our host, Ms. Doris Duke's Shangri La, may be experienced as an example of a stark, plain and uninviting home from the outside and highly ornamental yet functional from the inside.

Persian and Islamic architecture embody a simple and yet esoteric proposition: Only those who are privileged and trusted may enter my home. The most significant and the most precious of what I own is kept inside. Step in, to the less seen and more private.

In contrast to a visually oriented value system that requires a constant struggle to remain publicly visible and competitive, one may find the Persians' esoteric division between private and public spaces less-than-tasteful.

We in the West may think: Yes, Iranian women are victims of a male conspiracy. Women are put down and restrained in their homes, so men could rule.

This is a simplistic and highly ethnocentric point of view. Those who are familiar with the social structure in Iran know that the issue of sexual divides is more complex and hard to comprehend for us looking in from the outside.

Iranian women have been less visible; but that has been a part of the Iranian cultural construct for centuries. To change such a complex and ancient mechanism, a society as a whole has to have a reason to look for the problem of gender inequality, find it feasible to design a new social model, and then work on changing it over time.

How much time is required to change such a culturally rooted model? This is only a decision for the Iranian society as whole to make. This is a life-changing decision.

You see? Here in the West, we are used to finding instant gratification a lot more appealing than a prolonged, process-oriented form of redemption.

The need for speedy resolves and instant satisfaction are evident in our culture and technology. Remember the Polaroid and now digital cameras. They give you a slice of time in no time.

Now, one may ask, what can be done to help those Iranian women who do wish to change or modify the traditional Iranian culture and make it more accessible for women to step out of their cultural interiors and enter the façade of the Iranian social construct.

I, for one, do not doubt the Iranian women's ability to flexing their muscles and performing well the new and more visible responsibilities while competing against men in a male-dominated society.

The transition from the interior to the exterior by the Iranian women may be seen as necessary and/or ornamental. Yet this is an educated decision that must be made not by us but by the entire Iranian society.

Shirin Neshat in one of her interviews with the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) says, "Muslim women embody more of the culture than men. By studying women, one can study the culture" (Cinema on Fire—A look at Iranian Cinema and New Wave of Directors-DVD).

What I believe Neshat is saying here is that women, in their roles as mothers, wives, and sisters are not simply the passive byproducts of a prolonged and unfair social injustice; but, they are, in fact, the actors and agencies of the same cultural construct.

Sussan Deyham, a well-known Iranian-American vocalist and performance artist who is an indispensable part of Shirin Neshat's 1998 video installation, "Turbulent," says, "Iranian women do not need your pity, nor they need a wrong kind of compassion" (Feminine Breeze—Arts and freedom in Iran-DVD).

And that, really get me thinking about all the Iranian women I have crossed path with. They do engender the strength to sustain or change their society if they so choose to. The only question remaining, in my mind, is how we are going to find consensus among those who are willing to undergo this painful and epic transformation.

Ms. Aaseeh Aminee, one of the executive editors of the “Eatamad” (Or, Trust) newspaper in Iran says, “I know there are women whose rights are violated; but, I am the evidence that change is possible. I am an example of a woman in a country in which most of the world thinks women have many unwavering limitations. But, I have reached a level that I find myself equal to men” (Antje Beyen —www.beyen.com).

Today, in Iran, women of power have managed to penetrate the echelon of the Iranian workforce. They are private citizens who work as architects, physicians, computer engineers, attorneys, ministers, and parliamentary representatives, to name a few.

Within the Iranian cultural construct, women perform in cinema and theatrical productions. And, unlike the general belief in the West, Iranian women could also sing and produce musical albums within the existing but ever so fading restrictive religious rules.

None of these was possible ten years ago.

This, I hope, could represent, if nothing else, a slow progress toward equality and justice for women. One should not forget, that as major elements in a society begin to shift, other major and peripheral elements will also change for better or for worse.

I would like to conclude with a thought shared by Shirin Neshat:

She says, “You are truly free, when you are mad.”

— Thank you