

Women who fight for freedom

Azar Nafisi, *The Guardian*, Tuesday 6th October 2009

When I first read Anna Politkovskaya, I was almost startled by her no-nonsense prose, her preoccupation with facts, whether they were about Russia's crimes in Chechnya or Vladimir Putin and corruption in the prime minister's regime, brutality and boorishness against Russian citizens or even the shortcomings of the Russian people whose rights she so ardently defended. She spared no one, not even her allies. The poetry of her prose was matched by her passion for truth. Her facts were lovingly gathered and made to march, leading us to the terrible truth of the realities she revealed. And it was that single-minded commitment to truth, and her demand for justice, that made her so dangerous to the tyrants in her country and inconvenient to leaders of western democracies.

This love for truth links her to the former recipients of the Raw in War Anna Politkovskaya award, Natalia Estemirova, and Malalai Joya, and this year's recipient "to be announced this evening" they come from different backgrounds and nationalities and speak different languages, yet they share a universal language that is the basis of both freedom and justice. Once we know of atrocities we cannot remain silent, and knowledge inevitably leads to an urge to protect the innocent. These women have recognised that their own fight for freedom would be meaningless without empathy for others and that the best guarantee of their security and freedom lies in a guarantee of security and freedom of others.

The award is given each year in the spirit of that common humanity, one for which Politkovskaya and the first recipient of the award in her name, Estemirova, gave their lives, and in celebrating those lives while mourning their untimely deaths we have to acknowledge both their love of truth and their empathy for others.

Women

in the country of my birth, Iran, are great examples of the universality of this urge. For more than 30 years the Islamic regime and its apologists have tried to dismiss women's struggle in Iran as part of a western ploy. They claim that the repressive laws against Iranian women are part of their Islamic and Iranian heritage. Thus the regime has deprived Iranian women not just of their present rights, but also of their history and their past. The regime's victims are not only atheists, secularists, or people of other religions and faiths, but also Muslims, those whose interpretation of their religion is based on different principles, those who disagree with the Islamic Republic's views have been punished and deprived of their most basic rights.

Those

in the west who dismiss the repressiveness of laws against women in countries like Iran, no matter how benign their intentions, present a condescending view not just of the religion but also of women living in Muslim majority countries, as if the desire for choice and happiness is the monopoly of women in the west. After all, at the start of the last

century in no western democracy did women have the right to vote. In the US and Europe women were told that according to the Bible women's place should be at home, blue stockings were mocked and called unfeminine and women had to throw themselves in front of king's horses to attract attention to their plight. Around the same time, women in Egypt, Iran, Turkey and other Muslim countries were fighting for essentially the same rights. At the heart of all those struggles then as well as now was the right of a woman to choose. For Iranian women the issue is not religion, but the fact that no power, no state should dictate to its citizens how to worship and connect to their God. Islam, like all other religions, has many interpretations and it should not be used " in this case abused " as a political ideology. Women in Iran are proving once more that human rights recognise no boundaries and are not exclusive to certain societies. We should be reminded of the Noble laureate Shirin Ebadi, when she said that she was a Muslim and she believed in human rights.

Iranian

women today have many models from their own past to learn from. At the start of 20th century an American, Morgan Shuster, in his book *The Strangling of Persia* (1912) claimed that Iranian women in a matter of years had made leaps of centuries and that in some ways they had been far ahead of their western sisters. At the time of the Islamic revolution, women had been active in all walks of life, there were two women ministers, one a minister of women's affairs. What made Iranian women join the protests against the shah was not a desire to abdicate the rights they had fought for over a century but to gain the right to political freedom. Their rights were not something that a shah had granted to them to be taken away by an ayatollah. And that is why from the very start Iranian women protested at the repressive laws imposed by the Islamic regime, pouring out in hundreds of thousands into the streets shouting that freedom is neither eastern nor western but global.

The recent

events in Iran negate the regime's claims that women in Iran approve of its repressive laws. For more than 30 years, female activists have fought to change these laws. Perhaps the best example of this struggle and its centrality to the fight for pluralism and democracy in Iran is that of the women working for the One Million Signatures campaign against Iran's repressive laws. These women, without using violence or rhetoric, have been struggling for years to change the laws oppressing women. They have proved that Iranian women no matter what their beliefs and views share the same plight, that the laws are as effective against the traditional as they are against the modern secular women, creating a sense of kinship and solidarity between women. Iranian women have become canaries in the mines, the standard against which we can measure the degree of freedom in that society. The recent demonstrations broke the Islamic regime's mythology surrounding Iranian women, and forced the world to see them as they are: vital, various, strong and courageous. It also demonstrated how central their aspirations are to the democratic movement in Iran. Now a vibrant and beautiful young girl, Neda Agha-Soltan, and not the men who rule over Iran has become a symbol of Iranian people's fight for democracy and pluralism. Her murder, like those of Politkovskaya and Estermirova, gives the lie to the claims of those who vainly tried to silence them, and reminds the rest of us that we neither should or can evade the truth and its consequences.