

## Justice Beyond My Ordeal

*Anahita Rahmanizadeh*

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I was around eighteen when I grasped the idea of justice. At that time, the prevalence of inequality, lawlessness and tyranny in my country of origin, Iran, provided me with incentive to think about what a just society should be. I developed the vision of a social order in which there would be equal opportunity for all and people could enjoy the fruit of their labour. I was particularly keen to further the development of women's rights. I was annoyed when I observed gross injustices against women at the familial level and in the working world. I could see how my brother, as a man, received more respect despite working less for the family.

In an attempt to continue with my education, I travelled to the United States in 1977. I learned a lot by seeing a new society and an entirely different culture. I joined a radical movement of Iranian students working against injustice in Iran through advocacy, research, publications, demonstrations and public awareness campaigns. I was fascinated by the movement due to its just and humanitarian approach to women. I was respected as a woman and I did not feel that men looked at me as a sex object. I was given heavy responsibilities with rights equal to those of men. At this time, I made a connection between gender equality and justice. I realized that the implementation of justice would be impossible without the implementation of gender justice. There is no doubt that women are half of humanity and play a key role in all aspects of social life. I believe that depriving women of their rights is depriving society from freedom and progress. I became an advocate of democracy and women's rights. Furthermore, I came to the understanding that even if people get some achievements in terms of social justice tyrannical regimes can easily take them away. Justice is impossible without people's participation in deciding their destinies. A democratic government recognizes the right of oppositional groups for criticism. Society can correct itself in terms of justice when there are challenges from opposition.

While living in the U.S., I was acquainted with a gentleman called Behrooz. Our relationship turned into a loving attachment and we decided to marry in the future. Upon my return to Iran in 1979, I found a society ruled by a highly unjust, fanatical and repressive government. Women had a crucial role in terminating the monarchist rule, struggling against the Shah's dictatorship by being at the forefront of all demonstrations, strikes and movements for civil liberties. They were, unfortunately, the first group to be brutally suppressed by the new clerical regime. The regime forced women, even little four-year-old girls, to wear veils and scarves. Polygamy was allowed, divorce was declared a man's right, women were prohibited from travelling alone and children's custody was given

to fathers. A myriad of medieval discriminative laws and practices were imposed on women. Women's subordinate condition was a microcosm of the overall situation in Iran. The government's oppression extended to workers, intellectuals, students, religious minorities and ethnic groups. Faced with an overall context of injustice, I decided to raise my voice.

I joined a leftist group and started organizing workers, women and intellectuals against the regime. Fighting against a tyrannical government that had the support of fanatical people was extremely risky. I was ready to accept the risk, but I was not ready to accept discrimination within our own small group. We had all come from a patriarchal and highly traditional society. Men occupied leadership roles in our small group. They undermined women and gave us fewer responsibilities. The main challenge was not only to struggle against a tyrannical regime, but also against male domination among our progressive comrades. We accomplished this through constant and constructive criticism, taking on more responsibilities and outright rejection of anything we found to be against women's rights. Unfortunately, I did not have then the gender awareness I have now.

In 1982, I married my comrade Behrooz Fathi. He was a mechanical engineer with an American degree. He had a heavy responsibility in the group and was beloved by co-workers with whom he worked in different factories. He was a very thoughtful and humble person. We maintained a highly passionate and loving relationship during our very short life together.

On a hot summer day in September 1983 we traveled together to rent a house outside Tehran, as the regime had found out about our whereabouts in the capital. After we passed a checkpoint on the highway heading from Tehran to Karaj, two army cars began to chase us. One of the cars turned in front of our car and forced Behrooz to stop the car suddenly. Many armed men wearing dark green military style uniforms surrounded our car, pointing their guns at us. One of them shouted at us to get out the car. I felt as if I was watching the whole thing happen to someone else. I could not believe that it was happening to us. We stepped out of the car and put our hands on our heads. They demanded our identification. We gave them our fraudulent identification and then they separated us. Behrooz was in one car and I was in another. The guard came back to me. "You fools", he said, "cannot fool me. You are Anahita". I denied it, but it was of no use. They had already identified us. It was September 11, 1983 at 11:00 a.m. – I was twenty-five years old and Behrooz was thirty.

As we stood there waiting, many people stared at us from their cars. I could see a trace of sympathy in some of their eyes, but most people passed by without even looking up. I wanted to cry out to them, "Hey

people, I have been arrested and will probably be executed. Please don't look away". But, I stood there quietly.

They covered our eyes with blindfolds and Behrooz's wrists were handcuffed. They forced us to sit in the car bent at the waist so that our heads were pointed towards the floor. We knew that we were headed towards the notorious Iranian jail Evin, one of the biggest prisons in the world. Evin was built in partnership with Israel and the CIA during the Shah regime. Khomeini's regime had expanded it. No one spoke a word for the whole journey. A deep silence ensued. I could hear only the noise of the traffic. When we entered Evin, I was brought to the female section. A female pasdar searched me, took my bag and gave me a dark blue chador (veil). When we passed the main door, we were put in the car again. It stopped in less than two minutes. Somebody guided me into a place that later I found out was called Ward 209 – a ward for newly arrested prisoners.

I was dragged into the torture room, below Ward 209. If I looked out the bottom of the blindfold, I could see three pairs of legs. I could imagine the faces of these men – their bearded, angry faces. I saw many different sizes of cables, from thick to thin, on the ground. There were bloody footprints everywhere. It seemed to me that justice was being mutilated at the hands of cruel torturers. The room was dimly lit by a small lamp. I felt paralyzed by fear. The strong stench of blood made me dizzy.

In the middle of the room, there was a bed. A man was being flogged. He was screaming loudly. A voice said to him, "shut up, get up, get out of the room and wait in the hallway". I could see his feet as the prisoner tried to get up. I wondered if he was going to be able to walk. Eventually, he was able to move and walked towards the door, dragging his bloody feet on the floor.

One of the men told me: "Take off your socks and lie down on your belly on the bed". I was not sure they knew my identity; for me, it was very important to continue to deny that I was Anahita. I hoped to fool them by playing the role of a woman who was very scared and constantly called her mother. One of the men tied my hands to the metal head board. He tied them so tightly that I could feel the ropes bruising my wrists. After my ankles were tied to the bed, a dirty, grey blanket was thrown over my body and one of the men sat on my head. I heard the sharp whistle of a cable cut the air and it landed on the soles of my feet. Pain. The pain was excruciating. I felt a molten pole was put on my sole. Flashes were running through my brain. I cannot compare it with anything or any other kind of pain. All my body was contracted. I was sweating, and also because of the blanket and the heavy body on my head, I could not breathe. I tried to push the heavy body off my head but it was impossible.

Suddenly everything went dark. I began to lose consciousness.

When I opened my eyes, I was alone in the room. The blanket had been removed and my whole body was dripping with water. I laid on the bed waiting. My feet were throbbing with pain. I shivered uncontrollably. After a while, my interrogator returned with another prisoner. It was a man who had been beaten severely. His clothes were torn and there were bloody bandages on his feet. I knew him; he was one of my colleagues. I heard the interrogator asking him, "Is this Anahita?" He refused to look at me but I heard his answer, "Yes, she is".

As I lay there on the bed, I did not know how to react. I was shocked that he had betrayed me and yet, I had felt the pain of torture myself and so felt compassion for what he had endured. As I lay there, I was not sure which pain was more acute, the physical or the emotional pain that I was feeling. They untied my hands and let me get up. When I saw my feet, I could not believe my eyes. My feet had swollen to the size of a pillow.

They brought me to a cell that night. The cell did not have a roof; the ceiling was covered with criss-crossed ropes and I could see the sky. I could hear the sound of the guard's feet when he was walking up and down the roof of the ward. I could also hear the sound of an interrogator's feet who was running happily and saying to others, "at last we arrested Behrooz and Anahita".

I was exhausted but I could not sleep. I lay on the concrete floor. My feet were bruised, throbbing with pain. And, yet I knew that the torture was not over. They would try to break me again and tomorrow would be a worse day than today had been. I was also thinking about my husband. I was worried about him. I began to have doubts: "Can I resist the torture? Am I strong enough?" I was scared. The thought of betraying my comrades was terrible. I would rather die than betray people whom I loved. I looked for something, anything in the cell that could help me to kill myself – a small piece of glass, a rope – but the cell was completely empty. I knew that I would need to be stronger than I had ever been before.

I began to walk on my bruised feet. I knew that by walking I could reduce the swelling. If I could do this perhaps the torture would be easier to bear. As I walked, my mind was filled with thoughts: "Are my comrades okay? Have they heard about our arrest? Have they moved their location so that they are safe?" I looked up and thought that I saw something written on the wall of my cell. I looked more closely and read a sentence scratched into the wall: "This moment will pass".

As long as I live, I will never forget that moment and those four small words on that prison cell. Those words gave me a strange sort of power. I came to know that after all there was an end to everything. The torturers would not be able to torture me forever. Even if they killed me, this would

be an ultimate relief. This new awareness acted as a ray of hope amidst the darkness. It re-energized me and boosted my morale. I felt internally rich. Yes, my plight would be a temporary phenomenon and the physical and emotional assaults that I was facing would pass sooner rather than later. Life would finally become triumphant. It was like oxygen running into my brain. I felt a sense of hope. Yes, this would pass, but the important thing was to figure out how this situation would pass.

After that, I was able to sleep. I woke up when I heard the small window in my door open. Through my chador I could see two men. They watched me for a while and then one of them said, “see how relaxed she is now in her sleep. She is relaxed because she doesn’t know what we will do to her tomorrow”. They laughed and closed the window.

At the time that I was being tortured, I did not realize what an important experience it was for me. What I learned from the pain was important. I learned that the inner strength of human beings is tremendous and even under terrible situations, they can resist. As I lay in my cell that first night with my eyes closed, listening to the words of my interrogators, I decided to be just to myself. The only way for me to overcome their denial of justice was to resist. I thought to myself, “you can kill me but you can’t break me and I will change your laughter to crying with my resistance”.

Resistance to me meant protection of my friends who were active outside by not providing any information to interrogators. It was also important not to show weakness by accepting to collaborate or obeying prison rules. They used all kinds of tricks to make us subservient. They forced prisoners to pray five times a day and abstain from sharing information with cellmates. They spared no time to take away our humanity. We had no right to help a sick prisoner, to move with other prisoners, to smile or to show a semblance of happiness. I tried my best to stick to my human nature and give meaning to my life.

The next morning I got up very early. While I was walking back and forth across my cell, the door opened. A guard handed me a filthy red plastic cup of tea, a very small and dry piece of cheese and a stale chunk of bread and he said “after breakfast, be ready for interrogation”.

I did not have an appetite. I could not consume anything except the tea. Even though, I knew it would be very hard, I was surprisingly relaxed. I was ready for anything. I decided to defeat my interrogators. The guard came back sooner than I expected and said, “put on your chador and blindfold; come out and follow me”. He led me down a long hallway and told me to sit on the floor.

While I was sitting on the floor, I tilted my head up until I could see underneath my blindfold. I saw a long corridor with many rooms. There were many other prisoners sitting on the floor. I also saw three prisoners

whose hands were tied with thick chains and fastened to the wall. One of them was groaning. Later, I discovered that this was a kind of torture. The torturer kept the prisoners chained to the wall for many days so that they were unable to sleep. Another prisoner was tied to the radiator and in his hands he held the Qur'an. He was reading the Qur'an loudly and hitting his head against the radiator. I could see that he had lost his mental capacities. I found it to be a sordid injustice to torture a person suffering from mental health problems. As I was looking at all of these things, I did not hear my guard coming down behind me. The next thing that I felt was his fist striking my head with huge force. He put his mouth right beside my ear and whispered, "If you raise your head again, I'll shatter it against the wall". A shudder went through my body. I could tell that he meant what he said.

I heard a woman screaming, "Forgive me I didn't know. For God's sake, don't execute me. Have compassion for me, for my children". A harsh voice answered her, "If you really loved your children, you wouldn't be a political activist, and instead you would be a simple housewife. Islam is very compassionate with believers, but not with unbelievers who fight against Allah and Islam". This seemed to me a medieval type of religious injustice. As I listened to her pleas, I wished I could talk to her to say "don't cry and don't beg for your life. There is no justice, there is no compassion. He can kill you and your children in this moment, without compunction". I heard a voice calling out my name very softly, telling me to follow him. I got up and followed his voice.

We went to a room down the hall and when I entered, he said "Sit down on the chair". I sat down on the chair. It was a chair with arms and a small table attached to it. He started to pace the floor behind my chair and began to speak to me. He said, "You are a poor, uneducated person who had to escape from war and support your family economically". When he said this, I knew that he had talked to the manager at the factory where I had worked. In order to get a job as a worker, to be involved in the worker's movement, I had told this story to the manager of the factory. Then my interrogator put paper and a pen on the table and said, "You see that we know every thing about you. Now write all the names and addresses of your colleagues. Don't mess with us, when I come back I will expect to see that you have written everything". I heard him leave the room.

I wondered what time it was and whether my husband had been tortured like I had been. He was so thin. I wondered if he could have resisted the torture. I felt sleepy. I was happy that I was left by myself so that I could have some silence. I put my head on the table and slept. I woke up when I felt a sharp pain on my head. My interrogator hit my

head again with his fist. He was holding a pen in his hand and when his fist hit my head, the sharp tip of the pen tore through my skin. A scream came out of my throat, "I have nothing to write".

"Get up, you need some more *tazir* (religious word for torture). When you receive *tazir*, you will tell us everything". Using a pen so that he did not have to touch me, he guided me toward the basement. He called somebody and explained my position in the organization, telling him that I refused to cooperate. As he spoke, he was mocking the *Shar'ia* court, pretending that he was giving evidence against me so that I could be punished with *tazir*. In this way, he showed that he was not bothering with their own Islamic laws and courts. It was an outright denial of any semblance of justice.

While I was sitting on the floor, a young man was brought out of the torture room into the hallway. He was short and thin. I saw this from under the blindfold. His feet were bloody. We were alone for a short time. He asked me, "Were you arrested recently?" I nodded. He continued, "Don't be afraid of them. They are much weaker than us. I was arrested two years ago but my real identity was only released recently. I know I will be executed very soon". Then he lifted one of his feet and asked me, "Should I put my bloody footprint on the wall?" Without waiting to hear my answer he put his foot on the wall. I showed him my praise by smiling. He was taken away very soon after this and I never saw him again. In the course of the year that passed, I always remembered his bloody footprint as a symbol of resistance against injustice. You put justice on the horizon when you negate its violations in the present.

I was sleepy. I did not want to lose an opportunity to sleep. I do not know how many minutes or hours passed. I woke up to the words of my torturer, "Ana, have you thought about it?" I responded, "There's nothing to think about".

"Go ahead and lie on the bed", he said. He tied my feet to the metal of the bed and then threw a dirty, grey blanket on me. He said, "Whenever you want to talk, raise your hands". He did not ask me any more questions and began to beat me. The pain was terrible. My teeth were clenched in pain. Sweat was pouring out of my body as though bucket after bucket of water had been poured on me. I shoved the blanket into my mouth and bit it as hard as I could. While they struck my feet, I saw sparks of lights behind my eyes. It was like electric shocks running through my body. I wanted to frustrate him so I did not scream. I thought to myself:

How weak he is. He has thrown me here and tied my body and is flogging me. I am not imprisoned by him, he is imprisoned by me. All he wanted was to break my morale and make me subservient.

By not achieving this sinister goal he had no choice but to feel humiliated. The most he can do to me is to beat me then kill me, but he can't break me. He is thinking he is strong because he arrested us but I know that he is digging his own grave.

I felt that I was serving justice by psychologically punishing this most unjust person standing beside me.

He started to become fatigued. He began to beat me on my back. He became like a mad man, crying, talking and hitting my whole body with his fists. I could tell that I was causing him to lose control. I was laying there in horrible pain, but I was content. I felt like I had power. I got internal strength by murmuring to myself: "they can break my bones, but not my spirit". Everything went dark as I lost consciousness.

He poured a bucket of water on my head. I did not have energy to move my body or my head. He left the room and after a short time he came back and began to flog me again. I could see my blood on the floor. He was spreading it around the room as he walked. The floor was covered with bloody footprints. It was afternoon before he untied my feet and said "Get up and run around the room". I could hardly get up. I tried leaning against the wall and began to walk around the room. The pain was terrible. There was dirt on the floor and as I walked on it, it caused me extreme pain. He began to whip my feet and said, "Faster, faster, run, run". I tried to go faster but I could not. I fell down and my *chador* fell from my head. As I lay on the ground, he continued to flog me but told me to cover my head. This was a sinister testimony of injustice mixed with hypocritical religious Puritanism.

Their horrible tortures lasted for three days. They prevented me from sleeping by chaining my hands to a hook in the wall and forcing me to stand upright the whole time. Those three nights were the longest and hardest of my life. The third morning when the torturer unlocked my hand, I fell down. He shouted, "Get up". I heard him but it sounded to me like his voice was coming from far away and I could not respond. He began to kick me but I could not even move my body. He kicked me harder but I did not move. He thought that I was unconscious and left me alone.

It seemed that I was in another state of being, far from this world. I do not know how long I remained like this but eventually somebody came and took me to my cell. I fell on the floor and slept immediately. I did not see anyone for two days. The guard would bring my meals but I did not move. On the third day, I opened my eyes and ate my breakfast. Afterwards, I started to walk around my small cell. I was looking for that small phrase of encouragement written on the wall. I read it and repeated



it several times to myself: *these moments will pass*. I was worried about Behrooz. I did not know what he was experiencing and had no idea how to contact him. I wondered if he was alive. When I thought about the way they tortured me, I wondered what they would have done to him because he was one of the leaders of our organization.

While I was walking, the door was opened and the guard said, “put on your blindfold and chador and then come out for interrogation”. I was brought into the corridor and sat down beside a closed door. Somebody was being tortured in the room. I could hear his screams. Then, the door was opened and I could see inside the room. The torturers had surrounded the man and kicked him with their feet. It was like a ball in a small field. The prisoner had stopped screaming; now he was only grunting with the pain. I caught a glimpse of the face of the man they were torturing. My heart felt like it had been stabbed when I realized that it was Behrooz. His whole body was covered with blood. I watched as his body fell like the trunk of a tree to the ground. I could not control myself. In a second I found myself in the middle of the room, trying to hold Behrooz, yelling out “You killed him, you murderers!” They jumped on me, threw me to the ground and began to kick me. They threw me out of the room and dragged me towards the stairs. One of them threw me on the bed and the other one started to whip me. I do not know if my screams and cries were due to my own pain or for Behrooz. When they left the room, tears continued to pour down my face. It was late at night when I was brought back to my cell.

Behrooz was a brilliant organizer with lots of connections and information about many people. For the rest of my life, I will continue to be proud of him; he resisted all techniques of intolerable torture and did it heroically. Within a month, they had murdered him. I received news of his resistance from some of my cellmates who had seen him during their torture and interrogation. A pregnant woman who became my cellmate later told me that she had seen Behrooz in the torture chamber. “He gave me”, she said, “all his food and empowered me with his courage and promoted my morale by his kind words”. I came to know about his execution after one year when my parents were allowed to see me for the first time.

I experienced the worst and most sordid types of injustice in the years that followed. They put me through the most torturous interrogations for around eighteen months before taking me to an inquisitional court blindfolded. I removed my blindfold and told the judge that I did not want to be tried with closed eyes. The judge, a clergyman called Nayeri, gazed at me with outrage. It was a summary trial, and he asked me only two questions:

Do you agree with your group's political views?  
Do you believe in Islam?

He then accused me of being politically active in jail working with other prisoners. He told me that a heavy punishment was awaiting me. I had no lawyer and was not provided with any means to defend myself. The only person present in the court was my torturer, who was sitting behind me. I could not see him because I was not allowed to look back. I could, however, feel his presence due to his shadow and by the way the judge was staring at a specific point behind me. At the end of this sham trial that took less than ten minutes, I was blindfolded again and was pushed out of the courtroom.

Initially, they sentenced me to execution, commuted later to life imprisonment. Altogether, I spent eight years in jail. They released me due to international pressures following the massacre of political prisoners in 1988. Throughout those years, I felt doubly pressured as a prisoner and as a woman. Patriarchal prison authorities spared no time to humiliate us. As a woman, I was subjected to sexual harassment and gender related torture. I had to resist torture like other political prisoners as well. My torturers, whether male or female, hated women political activists. They insisted that women should be subservient as a wife and mother. Despite the difficulties of hearing such comments, I felt proud of myself as a woman. They did not lose any chance to make derogatory comments as follows: "you must be in the kitchen; give birth to children; you're involved in politics because of your husbands' or brothers' indoctrinations; some of you did it for the sake of finding a husband". As if this was not enough, the guards used to invade the jail in a sudden way and beat prisoners for trivial violations of the prison rules or even for no reason at all. We were not allowed to read together. We could not weave or make handicrafts. They made life highly tedious for us. They forced us to listen to the monotonous religious sermons and lamentation songs. They had brainwashed a number of prisoners and used them to torture us.

Imprisonment, bereavement, torture, degradation and harsh life: that was the price I paid for justice. I lived in a society full of injustice. I suffered in my journey for justice. We have not yet achieved justice, but one day we will do it. I strongly believe that my struggle has not been in vain. History is like a field: if we sow a good seed for justice it will produce fruit one day. I am happy that as a political prisoner, I contributed towards laying the foundation for a just society and as a woman for gender justice. Justice will come if all of us work for it.

Upon my release, I suffered in a society that had become extremely

patriarchal. I was stigmatized as a widow and as a non-believer. I finally escaped Iran in 2001. In my first country of asylum, Turkey, I had to face the challenge of living as an illegal alien while I applied for refugee status in Canada. I came to Canada as a government assisted refugee in 2003. I am happy that my struggle for justice was finally recognized, even if it was not in my country of origin. The Canadian tradition of hosting refugees is quite meaningful to me. Despite all its shortcomings such as racism, hidden sexism, lack of social security for women and xenophobia at workplaces, Canada provides me with a venue to continue with my struggle against injustice.

Years of imprisonment and exile have changed my idea of justice. From a young activist who supported violence against the enemy, I have matured into a woman who works towards the promotion of people's awareness about their rights and the best ways of obtaining them. Back in those days, I supported the death penalty against the enemies of the people. Today, I oppose the death penalty. I strongly believe that a justified goal needs justified means. The ruling class and the government of each country are responsible for the practice of violence and torture in their societies. When people do not have the legal tools to express their views under oppressive regimes, how can we expect them to protest and show their objections? It is through fighting or armed uprisings that opposition groups cry out loud that we are here and that we must be heard. The only way for abolishing violence and torture is the creation of a just system that respects every human being and listens to each and every voice.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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