



Interview with Azadeh Parsapour

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KENNEALLY: In 1979, a mostly nonviolent revolution in Iran toppled the shah and led to formation of an Islamic republic. Almost overnight, Iran changed dramatically from a pro-Western, authoritarian monarchy to an anti-Western theocracy. The political and social earthquake from the revolution drove many Iranians into exile. Forty years on, tremors continue far beyond Tehran.

Welcome to Velocity of Content. I'm Christopher Kenneally for CCC. Estimates vary, but at least 3 million Iranians have emigrated since 1979. The United States has the largest such community, centered in Los Angeles and fancifully called Tehrangeles. Many other Iranians and their families live in Turkey, Germany, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

In publishing, a dozen independent Persian publishers operate outside Iran, including Nogaam e-Publishing in London, which uses crowdfunding to publish censored Iranian authors. In 2016, Nogaam managing editor Azadeh Parsapour organized the first-ever Persian book fair outside Iran, Tehran Book Fair Uncensored. In December 2020, the fair went virtual in light of the coronavirus pandemic.

Azadeh Parsapour is a three-time nominee for the International Publishers Association award, the Prix Voltaire, recognizing a significant contribution to the defense and promotion of freedom to publish in the world. In 2018, the Association of American Publishers presented her with the Jeri Laber Award, honoring a book publisher outside the United States who has demonstrated courage and fortitude in defending freedom of expression.

Azadeh Parsapour joins me now from London. Welcome to the program. *Salām, chetori?*

PARSAPOUR: Hello and thank you. It's my pleasure to join your program.

KENNEALLY: We look forward very much to learning about the situation for writers in exile from Iran, but also about what it's like for Iranians in country to write, to publish, and to read. You have written that every book must go through the scrutiny mechanism of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance Book Office in order to get a permit, and that failing to get that permission and still publishing a book puts the author – and presumably the publisher – in jeopardy.



PARSAPOUR: Yes. We were familiar with censorship even before the revolution, but the red lines were maybe just like political, and it was about maybe if you were criticizing the monarchy, you had problems in publishing things. But after the revolution, the censorship just covered everything in life, because the government wanted to promote, as they mentioned, ideologic, Islamic and revolutionary values. Every book – and it actually concerns other creative products as well, like music, films – everything that you produce needs to go to the ministry, and they need to just review it and give you permission.

So many products are getting censored or maybe banned or just altered. They just give you notices, and they call it corrections, and you need to correct them as per their guidelines. They don't have any printed or official guidelines, but when they review your book, your magazine, your music, or your film, you need to just pay attention to the notes that they give you, and then you change them.

KENNEALLY: These taboo subjects – they're far-ranging. There's some of the obvious ones – swimsuits, men and women swimming together, friendship or love between members of the opposite sex, of course, sadly, any hint of LGBTQ relationships. But it so far more than just those.

PARSAPOUR: It's like everything, because they want to control your way of believing and way of thinking. Anything outside of that, anything outside of their own policies and ideology, they don't tolerate it. So it's not just a list. When people ask me to give them examples, I can't just give you some examples. For example, in every book, in translation, if somebody drinks wine, you just translate it to maybe orange juice. (laughter) So you know in the book if you go to a bar, it translates to they went to a café and drank coffee. I can give you these examples, but it's like a really broadened area, and it's really a direct control from the government on everything that is going to publish.

It started from just maybe political issues, but they just expanded to everything. And as people progress in the world, as new issues come up, like international issues – discrimination, even scientific issues come up, they notice things don't go in line with their policies, so they start new red lines as we go further and further.

KENNEALLY: One of the areas where red lines have been drawn much more sharply recently is in textbooks. You have written about the restrictions that minimize the role of girls and women in textbooks to promote or reflect revolutionary and Islamic values. What does this mean? What is the impact for educational materials and for schoolchildren and others?

PARSAPOUR: Basically, discrimination is embedded in the educational system in Iran. All the textbooks, everything that you learn in the schools and in university, needs to go by these



revolutionary and Islamic values. I mean, the Islamic values I say is like the translation of the Islamic Republic of Iran. So it's not even an Islam that maybe other states believe in.

When the policy is that women are born to obey and to have families, to raise children, it doesn't go with anything else, so anything else is the red line. It's a no-no for women. But if you watch how Iran's society evolved over the past 40 years, the number of women going to university – I think over the past 10 years, sometimes even more than half of the students were women. Now, they work in different fields. But still, they don't promote anything in the schools. So when you're a child, because our schools are segregated, so girls go to girls' school, boys go to boys' school. They never mix. The first encounter is in the university that they see each other. They can sit in a class – like the right side women, the left side men. They don't like women to think they can be anyone, they can do anything. So the movement that you see outside the world of Iran is like a culture shock. When people immigrate, they go and see how the world works, just exactly the opposite of what is happening inside Iran.

I should mention that the private sector in Iran – I'm just talking about the publishing – the private sector is trying to make up for it. So there are many private small publishing houses that are trying to produce new material for a new generation to promote gender equality and to just promote women and girls' empowerment. But is not enough. When you compare it to the power that the educational system has and the national curriculum has, it is not enough. But I can be hopeful that people in the new generations are trying to make up for it.

Sometimes, they get stopped. For example, I was chatting with one of the authors that writes for young adults and children about, for example, evolution, about animals. He said that since a couple of years ago, evolution now joined the long list of red lines, so you cannot talk about it. God created men and then women – that's it. You cannot talk about evolution and how does it work.

KENNEALLY: You have done a great deal to enable the independent Persian publishing community outside of Iran to make itself better known. And in 2016, you helped to found the first-ever Persian book fair outside of Iran. It was called Tehran Book Fair Uncensored. Tell us about some of the highlights of the most recent program.

PARSAPOUR: Since 40 years ago, many independent publishers in exile formed, first in the US and Europe. But the thing is that I have to emphasize that what we do is more like a political act than business. So all of us struggle. We have financial problems, and we have small and fragile businesses. But we try to publish material that cannot be published inside Iran. Or if we publish outside Iran, they cannot go inside the country.



Having only one month to just prepare the virtual ones in 2020, this will go as a success. A couple of things happened that gave us really good experiences as well as like a learning curve for us. These independent publishers in exile come from different backgrounds – for example, age differences. We are from different generations. So we could encourage the older generation to come and use new online technologies. For example, I had one-to-one training with my older colleagues to use Instagram Live, to use Zoom, to just have these online talks or book lunches or interviews and Q&As with the writers and translators. It was really successful. They picked it up and they loved it. I mean, they are actually doing it on like a monthly basis, even after the book fair.

The other thing is that when we started this book fair, we started small, from around seven or eight publishers. Then, we joined in with other publishers that we knew in the world. This time, one of the highlights was we collaborated with some other organizations, like freedom of speech organizations, with other foundations, with online magazines that are active outside of Iran. They have books. They create really important content about philosophy, society, sociology, or political or even literature. And these collaborations really gave us perspective, and I am sure that the next one, if we can have a physical book fair in Europe and the US, we can have a stronger presence in online and virtual programs as well, because now we know how we can do it better and how we can just communicate with the diaspora and even people inside Iran.

KENNEALLY: It sounds like the works that you publish and the programs you organize are able to penetrate the Iranian government's internet firewall, then.

PARSAPOUR: Actually, many websites and many social networks in Iran are filtered now. So the thing is that even my 70-year-old dad knows how to use a VPN. So they all have access to the circumvention tools, and people are just bypassing internet censorship. It is part of everyday life in Iran now.

Our websites, for example, are all filtered in Iran. But like 70% of my audience come from Iran. What we do in Nogaam that is a bit different from my other colleagues is that every title that we publish in Nogaam comes with a free ebook for an Iranian inside the country. Then we have the print version that we sell, and the money that comes from selling these printed or ebooks outside of Iran, the money goes to produce more books for Iran for free.

KENNEALLY: I have a last question, one that interests me as an Irishman. In May, Nogaam will publish a second volume of a six-volume project translating *Ulysses* by James Joyce into Farsi. Tell us how you came to work on this and why you think it's significant.

PARSAPOUR: *Ulysses* published around 100 years ago and never was translated completely in Persian in Iran. One of the main problems was censorship. The censorship is not just that



couple of sentences or words. It would mutilate the book, because some of the chapters really cannot be translated.

There were other attempts, actually. Some scholars translated and published, for example, the first two or three chapters. But then I read an interview that one of the news agencies made with Dr. Akram Pedramnia. She's a translator. She is a writer and translator, and she was famous with her previous work that she translated *Lolita* by Nabokov.

So when I read that she has started translating *Ulysses* by James Joyce, I contacted her. And we both have a common cause. It was a really nice, united project that we were both interested. She was actually looking for a publisher outside of Iran, because inside of Iran, she was sure that the book cannot be published.

And we have started working, and we contacted Literature Ireland, the foundation that promotes Irish literature. One of the significant things about this is that this is not merely translation. For that reason, the translation comes in six volumes, because it's like a mixed project that is research and translation. Dr. Pedramnia is translating thousands of references and anecdotes just to have this complete work for readers to read *Ulysses* and understand one of the most important classics ever published in the world.

Now, Literature Ireland supports us on this project. We published, actually, the second volume in London in November 2020. It was the printed version. The ebook is now – we are now preparing this for the end of May 2021 that it will be published for free for Iran and for all Farsi speakers.

KENNEALLY: Azadeh Parsapour, thank you for joining me today on CCC's Velocity of Content.

PARSAPOUR: Thank you for having me.

KENNEALLY: The producer for our program is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. You can follow Velocity of Content on Twitter and Facebook. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Goodbye for now.

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