

Don't Ban Dan Brown

Iran's censorship of western books belies its own literary heritage, argues Azar Nafisi

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While western governments are confused and obsessed with the threat of Iran's WMDs, the Islamic regime is facing up to threats of its own and increasing its repressive measures against workers, women, students, gays, minorities, and now publishers and writers. Western analysts might doubt the subversive influence of books, wondering how William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, Sadegh Hedayat's *The Blind Owl*, Iraj Pezeshkzad's *My Uncle Napoleon*, Tracy Chevalier's *Girl With a Pearl Earring* or even Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* could influence politics in Iran. But the Iranian regime is well aware of the danger of works of imagination and thought, restricting them in the words of its minister of Islamic guidance and culture, to prevent the publishers from "serving a poisoned dish to the young generation".

What is obvious is that this particular "poisoned dish" is not a threat to Iranian youth but to the officials of the theocratic state. After 27 years of the revolution, the Islamic government has failed to convince its citizens, and in fact many within the religious hierarchy, of its victory in the cultural domain. The two groups on whose loyalty the regime had relied - the younger generation, the children of the revolution who were to preserve its values and strengthen its ideological base, and the former ardent revolutionary youth, some of whom had given their lives to guard the revolution - ironically are now using works of imagination and thought to challenge and resist the ideological impositions.

The young revel in the sensual and erotic poetry of the late feminist poet Forough Farukhzad and the 80-year-old feminist and human rights activist Simin Behbehani, or the novels and poetry of James Joyce and Gerard Manley Hopkins; while former revolutionaries like Akbar Ganji quote Hannah Arendt, Kant and Spinoza alongside Hafez and Rumi to demand an open and secular democracy, or to renounce the current repression in the name of their culture and traditions. Only recently, President Ahmadinejad admitted that the revolution over the past decades has failed to root out the secularism and liberalism dominating Iranian academia, asking students to help purge the already cleansed universities from the influence of secular and liberal elements.

Officials have claimed that some banned books deliberately give Iranians a sense of inferiority and induce them to become "lackeys of the west". But this charge is nonsense. Reading western books is not a sign of inferiority but an acceptance of the universality of thought and imagination, a tradition that in Iran can be traced back centuries to when men like Alfarabi translated Plato and

Aristotle into Arabic and helped the revival of Greek thought and philosophy in Europe through the spread of Islam.

It is not a sense of inferiority, but a sense of curiosity and a desire to connect and converse with others that is the main reason for the young Iranians' passion for books from other parts of the world. For those deprived of their rights to free association and exchange with other countries, books, films, music and art have become a way of re-connecting and re-claiming their place within that forbidden world on an equal basis. On one level, the Iranians' reading and re-interpretation of western texts resurrects a passion and appreciation for them that has largely been lost in their native countries.

But perhaps more dangerous than their enthusiasm for western books is the Iranians' affinity and close sense of identity with their own literature, especially works of Iran's classical poets, who for centuries have offered an alternative viewpoint to that of both absolutist kings and reactionary clerics. Over 700 years ago Omar Khayyam, a scientist, poet and atheist, wrote about the transience and fickleness of life and its remedy through wine and love; Hafez chastised hypocritical clerics who flog citizens in public and drink wine in private; Rumi claimed that for him it matters not where he worships - in a mosque, church or a synagogue.

The pioneers of modern Iranian literature at the start of the last century, such as Iraj Mirza writing in a most sexually explicit language, exposed with biting satire the hypocrisy and corruption of the religious hierarchy; while Sadegh Hedeyat, the father of modern Iranian fiction wrote against superstitions and dangers of Orthodox religion and created the most important masterpiece of modern Persian fiction in his profane novella, *The Blind Owl*. The list is long: from classical masterpieces to modern poetry. Each work becomes a testament to the fact that Persian culture, whether pre-Islamic or Islamic, is represented by its best poets and writers and not by those who have confiscated religion, using it as an ideology to gain and maintain power. Their sensuality, their celebration of love, erotic as well as spiritual, their rejection and criticism of tyranny of politics and hypocrisy of religion, and their demand for a various and multi-vocal world rejects all the claims of a colorless, angry and narrow-minded Iran.

Censorship in Iran reminds us of the importance of books as channels for communication and creation of open spaces transcending the limitations of politics, nationality, race, gender, religion or geography. Democrats around the world need to support Iranians by condemning censorship. They can also show their solidarity by rejecting the simplistic and degrading views on Iran that do not differentiate between the cultural claims of a modern theocratic state and the genuine culture and literature of an ancient people. Remembering the honoured tradition that blossomed through Fitzgerald, Goethe, Edward Browne and Louis Massignon in the past and is continued by scores of others today who celebrate and connect to Iran through its literature, this is a good time to show our

appreciation of that other hidden and confiscated Iran through reading and celebrating its best and most trustworthy representatives: its poets and writers.

- Azar Nafisi is the author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (Fourth Estate £7.99)