

And here, virgins don't die

An eye-witness account of the torture and massacres in the Islamic Republic's prisons, by **Shahzad**

We heard the guard making a noise. He was bringing food. He opened the hatch and turned on the lights [1]. Through the opening a large head with dishevelled hair poked inside. He first stared at everyone of us. He then opened the door a little and sent in two bowls of food and a package. Lunch was a meatless stew with rice. The package was for me. Soraya had sent me some clothes, two shirts, one pair of trousers and a toothbrush. I immediately changed and breathed a sigh of relief [2].

I had scratched so much, my skin was split in many places. During meals or sleeping, the itching did not leave me for a minute. The cell was infested with lice. The girls were inflicted with female ailments and fungal skin diseases. Lack of light, absence of sunshine and living in a cell without any air current had left a severe and debilitating effect on our body and soul. Joint pains were universal.

Parvaneh and Mojdeh

Simin [3] used the fleeting opportunity of light and said:

"This is Nasrin. [4] do you see her eyes, it is like grass. Reminds you of the jungles in the north. But she is a southerner."

Nasrin gave me a beautiful wink and said nothing. Simin laughed and said:

"Parvaneh [5] is also a southerner. See her dark skin and hair like a raven's wings." Parvaneh came over to me and we kissed.

We heard the noise of Sadeghi the guard from other corridors. Guard Sadeghi was a buffoon. When he brought food he would lewdly scan the cell first with his eyes before opening the door. The guards in the basement consisted of: Pasdars Sadeghi, Abbasi, Fallahi, Abuzar, and two others who would appear from time to time. All the Pasdars were illiterate and from villages around Isfahan. The strong and firmly held motive for all of them was to get to heaven by killing revolutionary forces and the opponents of the regime. Women guards never ventured into the basement. If there was an important task, guard Sedigeh, who was in charge of the cell block, would come down.

Guard Sadeghi had brought the food. As usual he was eating too. He left the food and but soon came back. He opened the hatch and with food spurring out of his mouth said:

"See, I nearly forgot. Parvaneh and Mojdeh, come for interrogation. God willing they will be back for lunch. Don't eat their share, do you hear".

Parvaneh and Mojdeh [6] were preparing to leave when guard Sadeghi shouted: "hurry up! Do you thing I am your servant (kolfat = servant girl)? I have been waiting for an hour."

Simin went by the door and said: "Pasdar Sadeghi, how many times have I told you, you are not a servant -as you are a man. If you were to serve or something you are a man-servant (nowkar). Of course not our nowkar, but that of your master".

Guard Sadeghi said nothing and took Mojdeh and Parvaneh with him.

The next day, before breakfast, Mojdeh and Parvaneh were returned to the cell, weak and with wounded

feet. Mojdeh's ears were full of blood. She bound a handkerchief over her eyes and slept. We joined our hands in a circle to receive the wounded body of Parvaneh. She let herself down into this circle and said:

"Girls, we were smeared in spittle again (sexually assaulted)." [7] and then roared with anger "I spit on this regime!"

She was intensely upset. She shook from anger. With fists clenched she spoke rapidly. It was as if she was not just addressing us - joined by the same chains and pains - but the whole of humanity. I took her clenched fists in my hands and kissed them. My whole existence could be condensed in that kiss. She pulled her clenched fists from my hands and wiped away her tears. She then gave them back to me and said:

They took us to the room of Haji Agha Rahmani, the prison governor. The interrogator was there. When the guard closed the door the interrogator shouted:

"Face the wall you imbeciles!"

We were standing by each other. The interrogator came over and took hold of my arm and took me to the other side of the room. He then began pacing between us two, swearing, cursing. He then stood next to Mojdeh and asked:

"Now, what decision have you reached?"

"About what?"

"You Mojdeh have an insolent tongue. You are also without emotion. Have you no pity on your parents who day and night outside the prison are breathing dust and being pounded by the sun. And here you are having a good time with Parvaneh and the other murderers".

"You are the murderer. They are revolutionary."

"You call yourself revolutionary but oppose the revolution".

I, who had been silent until then said:

"there is no revolution left now. The revolution buried itself and its children.

"You shut up!"

"It is you who should shut up. You have also no right to insult"

"We don't have gratuitous bread

to give the counter-revolution. Be quick and settle your account to the system of Allah. God will accept repentance."

Mojdeh answered:

"Our position is clear. It is the regime that has to make up its mind about us".

This angered the interrogator and while he was beating Mojdeh with all his might kept on repeating:

"Will you repent or no? Will you repent or no?"

"I have done nothing to repent. It is you who should repent, you and Khomeini and the rest of you".

The interrogator was pounding Mojdeh with his fist on the face and head. I shouted:

"You have no right to hit her!"

He came towards me. He beat me so much that I could no longer speak. Then he sent us to the torture room. We were both tortured, and then we were both raped.

Parvaneh spoke and wept. In the last minutes her tears had become agitated and more intense.

Smearred in spit (sexual assault)

From my enquiries from other prisoners as well, rape took place in three ways.

1. They would take a woman who was resisting into a dark cell for interrogation. She would be kept blindfolded facing the wall. Two interrogators would fire questions at her. If the women continued to resist, the two would stand in opposite sides and pass the prisoner with Karate-like movements from one to the other. The prisoner will try to shield her body with her hands, so that the more sensitive parts of her body would be safe from their savage clutches.

They would then bind her hands behind. She would then bend her legs forward like a bird whose wings are tied from behind and is using its beak, that is precisely the posture the revolutionary woman takes on. One interrogator would then take her bound hands from behind and throw her to the other. The one opposite buries his bloody claws into her body, and clenching his teeth with

utmost savagery and lust throws the prisoner back to the other. And in order to speed up her capitulation, beats her with his fists. This goes on until the prisoner falls to the floor. It is then that the higher rank has priority over this trophy of war [8].

2. A prisoner is lying in her cold dark cell. The sound of an iron gate above is heard in the basement. Prisoners, everyone in their own way, prepare for a new incident. They all recognise footsteps and know that this person who is approaching with measured steps is not a guard. The interrogator descends quietly, using a torch, two bowls of blood visible through the black mask of his face. He opens the door. The prisoner who was lying sits up. He enters the cell. Closes the door. Shines the torch in the prisoner's face. Her eyes smart, the light is directly in her eyes. Which ever way she turns the torch follows her. She holds her hand in front of the light and protests.

The interrogator says: "are you ready to speak to other prisoners in the prison exercise hall tomorrow?"

The prisoner: "never".

Interrogator: Are you ready to cooperate with the prison?"

Prisoner: "no".

Interrogator: "are you still anti-Imam and against the system of Allah?"

Prisoner: "yes".

Interrogator: "you deserve to die".

Prisoner: "death on the road to freedom is life".

The interrogator kicks the prisoner's legs hard with his boots. His boots are bigger than usual. The prisoner changes her position and protesting says: "you have no right to beat me. You have no right to enter my cell in the middle of the night. I will complain at this".

The interrogator laughs: "complain to whom?"

Prisoner: "yes that is true".

The interrogator brings out a carpet knife in front of the torch-light and says: "you are fighting the system of Allah, yeah? You want to make a stew with the meat of an ant?"

The interrogator kneels in front of the prisoner: "Your only escape

from justice is to repent. Repent. Only as a Muslim can you leave the prison and these cellars. First you, must write down the name of everyone you know. Second you must accuse your husband of treason. Third you must be prepared to cooperate with the prison office, pray and speak to prisoners about Islam."

The prisoner says: "I will never".

The interrogator pulls the carpet knife on her clothes. Cuts open her clothes and starts to beat her. The prisoner shouts such slogans as death to Khomeini. This angers the interrogator more. Seals her mouth and says: "I will do something that would make you regret you are a woman."

The prisoner is raped. The interrogator cuts her breasts with the blade saying: "so that Islamic justice will always make your body shiver. That is if I don't kill you first".

3. The resisting prisoner is brought into a dark room and immediately bound, gagged and blindfolded. Then they release their complexes by beating, using filthy swear words and raping her. They threaten her with death and keep in her cell for a long time.

Mojdeh goes

Next morning guard Sadeghi opened the hatch. He poked his head inside and shouted:

"Mojdeh you have interrogation".

But Mojdeh's ears hurt so. She could not hear. The girls had to draw her attention. Mojdeh answered she does not feel well and could not go. The guard left and after a while guard Sedigheh, in charge of the block, came. The guard opened the door a little and said: "Mojdeh, get up and come to the door. You don't have to go out." Mojdeh got up with difficulty. She was swaying from the intense pain in her feet. She got herself to the door.

"What is it guard?"

Guard Sedigheh opened the door wide and grabbing her, pulled her out and slammed the door shut. She was dragged away screaming: "girls, they are taking me. Shame on Khomeini. Shame on the regime!"

There was noise of a struggle in

from single salaries alone are upwards of £100,000, that the full impact of the dual income is most apparent.

14 Although, in relation to the dominant class, working-class masculinity has become more "abject" as the last refuge of machismo, ethnographic study shows that working-class women continue to experience their femininity as a burdensome responsibility (Skeggs, 1997).

15 Skeggs again points out that "class has almost disappeared from feminist analyses, even those claiming a materialist feminist position" (1997:6).

16 This is a shorthand for a variety of different class fractions which occupy a position of superiority as regards control over, and appropriation of, resources on the market.

17 This research emphasises numerous strategies in realising aspirations for housing such as delays in having children, acceptance of certain undesirable types of work, etc. The authors restrict their analysis to conscious decisions, although they accept that it would be possible also to include unconscious strategies based on cultural transmission. Bourdieu's concept of habitus allows us to dispense with this dichotomy. It should be noted that this research did not study the service class (or *grande bourgeoisie*) specifically, although it does distinguish between manual workers' options (eg staying in the parental home longer than liked) and middle class options (eg moving together earlier than planned) (1994: 671).

18 Although Runciman notes that the improvements of the manual working-class didn't end the poverty of 5.4% of the whole pop. and was compatible with the top 10% owning 79% of the wealth (1954) Runciman (87; 89), he states the significance of middle-class responses in these terms:

"Given this general belief, and what was certainly an advance on the part of manual workers, there is nothing surprising in the resentments voiced by members of the middle classes. The knowledge that manual workers, however few, could now earn upwards of £20 a week and be the

possessors not merely of television sets but of motor cars, was enough by itself to exacerbate their fears of a decline in terms of traditional middle-class standards." (89)

19 "[T]he working-class might not feel themselves to be the equal of the rich but they did not feel themselves to be their servants either" (Runciman, 109)

20 They remark that the fact that "[O]ver a third of middle-class households employ domestic waged labour in some form or another seems to testify to the crisis in daily social reproduction within middle-class households in Britain and to the reconstitution of domestic work on class lines" (1995:155). They also point out the consequences of the changes:

"Such observations suggest that we may be witnessing the collapse of the post-war association in Britain between all women and all domestic tasks. Indeed, our research provides evidence for — the transfer of the dirtiest, heaviest and most physically-demanding and/or labour-intensive tasks to working-class women... a class-mediated hierarchy of domestic tasks is once more being constructed." (1995:159).

I would agree with these remarks, although it is of course an empirical question as to whether women's experience of jobs in the commercialised service or production sectors is more favourable, and there are of course a diversity of personality patterns and consequent needs. There is no necessary engine of history ensuring that women workers in the service sector will always have access to significantly greater material and power resources than in domestic service, although that has been the more general experience when such work has been contrasted in the past.

21 To this picture of cross-class activities, we should mention the frequent experience of "burn out" amongst teachers, social workers, nurses and drugs counsellors, who represent the compassionate, "feminine" "left hand" of the State against its neo-liberal, masculine "right hand" (Bourdieu, 1998a:95).

22 Armstrong's weakness is to also

display the tendency of Foucauldians to eliminate the elements of dissidence and tension within such "discourses".

23 Bourdieu remarks that Butler seems herself to have given up the view that gender transformation is like putting on a new set of clothes, citing her *Bodies that Matter*, (1998a:110n)

24 The absence in his work of any extended analysis of contemporary cultural production which has operated as a transformative weapon for change does not alter this point. The exception is his affirmation of the work of the performance artist, Hans Haacke (see (with Haacke) *Free Exchange*, 1995).

25 See also Lovell's opposition of Bourdieu and Butler and her skilful navigation of a passage between their incompatible accounts of masculine domination (Lovell, T.(1997) *Passing*, Bourdieu Conference, Glasgow [I am grateful to Terry Lovell for letting me see the full version prior to publication])

26 Armengaud also condemns Bourdieu's *Distinction* and the *Actes* article on *La Domination Masculine* for appropriating the work of many French feminist scholars, without citation. This may be due to a distancing of his scholarly work from some of the practices current in French philosophy and social science which have permitted the spurious, or even meaningless, inclusion of references to formal logic, mathematical theory and theoretical physics. It might be noted here that Bourdieu - and other French scholars - are thanked for their support in the critique of such sometimes spectacular misuses (Sokal and Bricmont:1998:xiii).

27 At the risk of comparing dissimilar histories, I would argue that there is a parallel between the disenchantment typical of the "mentalité" of the baroque and the disillusionment of *Distinction* (and other contemporary texts) as they depict the "baroque stage" of late capitalism, a development of the market analogous to the seventeenth century Spanish monarchs' instrumental use of mass culture (Maravall,1985).