

Soraya M., Stoned to Death for Being an "Inconvenient Wife"

2009-06-07 23:43:19 by Southern

Carl M. Cannon

In the mid-1980s, an Iranian-born, France-based journalist named Freidoune Sahebjam was traveling in his native land, assessing the impact of the Iranian Revolution, when he came upon a rural mountain village and learned of a ghastly crime. It had been committed by an entire community against a local woman. It was a crime that indicted a nation, a movement, and a religiously inspired ideology.

The victim was Soraya Manutchehri, a 35-year-old mother of seven who, in her own prophetic words, had become "an inconvenient wife." Bartered away in an arranged marriage at 13 to a petty criminal named Ghorban-Ali, who was 20 years old at the time, Soraya bore nine children over the next two decades, enduring two stillborn births and regular beatings from her husband, along with his insults, his consorting with prostitutes, and his campaign to turn her two oldest sons against her.

On August 15, 1986, with the complicity of a local mullah who had been imprisoned for child molesting under the Shah, Ghorban-Ali showed himself to be more than a garden variety sociopath and town bully; he was a sadistic monster, and Islamic fundamentalism was his enabler, his aider, his abettor.

In the anarchic days of the Iranian Revolution, Ghorban-Ali had found work as a prison guard in a neighboring town. There, he met a 14-year-old girl whom he wanted to marry. Polygamy was encouraged in Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran, but Ghorban-Ali didn't want to support two families, and did not desire to return his wife's dowry. How to rid himself of his "old" wife? That was the easy part. Accuse her of infidelity. No matter that her husband had not actually seen anything untoward, or that Soraya was completely innocent, or that her husband's cynical accusations were only backed up by his cousin, who as it turned out had been coerced into concurring with the vaguest of accusations: a smile here, a brushed hand there.

What court of law would find someone guilty on such flimsy evidence? A "sharia" court is the answer. And so Soraya was convicted. The sentence was death-death by stoning.

That was the story relayed to Freidoune Sahebjam by Soraya's brave aunt, Zahra Khanum. His riveting and spare account became an international best-seller. Critics compared "The Stoning of Soraya M." to Kafka, but actually nothing in the western canon of literature is comparable to the inadvertent self-parody -- the simple lunacy -- of a system of law that maintains that if a man is accused of infidelity by his wife, she must prove his guilt, but if a woman is accused, she must prove her innocence. Thus, in a single sentence, is a belief system codified. It is a system that rejects modernity, justice, equality and rationality -- and treats female sexuality as a vice.

Apparently, you can get away with this kind of madness in much of the world by simply inciting crowds to chant, "God is Great," while you throw the stones.

It's a fitting image, rock-throwing...fitting for the Stone Age, that is. Such show trials pay no heed to the natural rights we presume to be universal in a 21st century society: The right to be present at your own trial, to testify in your own defense, to cross-examine the witnesses against you, to be represented by counsel, to have an impartial arbiter of fact, to appeal the judgment to higher courts. None of these were present in rural Iran in the drunken days of "the Islamic Revolution." For women and girls in Iran and in many other parts of the globe they are not present today.

The verdict against Soraya M., was carried out in a village called Kupayeh, but it could have been almost anywhere in rural Iran. It could happen, and does still, in Somalia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Nigeria, or anyplace where sharia is the law of the land. More common, by far, in the Muslim world is the perverse practice of "honor killings" -- the slaying of a woman or girl by male members of her own family on the basis of some presumed sexual indiscretion. The barbarity of this practice is mirrored by its Orwellian description, for it is one of the most dishonorable practices in the world.

Soraya M's brutal execution occurred more than two decades ago, but it was only last October that a girl barely into her teens was stoned to death in a stadium in the Somalian port city of Kismayo. Initially, her "crime" was said to be adultery, and her age given as 23. Actually, according to Amnesty International, she was 13 years old, and she came into the custody of an Islamic militia when she had the temerity to report to authorities that she had been gang-raped. Her three attackers were not charged. The girl was publicly murdered before 1,000 cheering spectators. Her name was Aisha Ibrahim Duhulow.

In the religious traditions of the West, free will is offered as an explanation for such depredations, but that rationale seems grossly insufficient. When packs of armed men shout "God is Great" while disfiguring, abasing, or killing women, surely God is weeping.

Cyrus Nowrasteh, a Colorado-born film director of Persian descent, said, "When I read the book, I thought, if this is really happening all over the world, someone needs to shine a light on it. The world has to become more aware of it."

Now he has done that. I watched the movie version of *The Stoning of Soraya M.* at a private screening earlier this week, and have been unable to concentrate on much else since. The film will make its debut on June 26 in 10 American cities, including Washington, D.C. I'm sure its backers would like reviews to run closer to the movie's public premier; I hope they understand: I feel compelled to write about it now.

The Stoning of Soraya M. opens with a dilapidated car breaking down on

mountainous road, as the radio announcer intones that everything is so much better in the new Islamic Republic. Meanwhile, an old woman chases away a dog that is picking at bones beside a stream. The old woman carefully, lovingly, washes the bones. We, the viewers, wonder in horror: Can those bones be... human? Who would discard a body for wild dogs?

The sense of menace begins immediately, when our stranded motorist -- Freidoune Sahebjam himself, played by James Caviezel -- bumps into Kupayeh's mayor and mullah. Sahebjam, who died last year at the age of 75, didn't live to see the film, but I imagine would have been honored by the subtle way he is portrayed by Caviezel, who played Jesus Christ in Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ*. Which is not a coincidence; Nowrasteh and his wife Betsy, listed here as a co-screenwriter, travel in the same, small, conservative Hollywood circle as Gibson, and their script for *The Stoning* wound up in the lap of John Shepherd, president of Mpower Pictures, the outfit founded by Shepherd, Stephen McEveety, and Todd Burns.

McEveety worked with Gibson on *Braveheart* and *The Passion of the Christ*, both of which were "message" movies that grossed hundreds of millions of dollars. It's doubtful that *The Stoning of Soraya M.* can duplicate that kind of box office success. But I do agree with McEveety, whose reaction upon seeing Nowrasteh's script was that this story "absolutely had to be told."

Sahebjam's book was banned in Iran, of course, and undoubtedly this movie will be as well. Will it be vilified by various radical mullahs around the world, or will it be ignored? That is an interesting question, although probably not one that will keep these filmmakers up at night. Nowrasteh was previously the victim of a kind of liberal fatwa, apparently issued by William Jefferson Clinton, or his supporters: Nowrasteh's two-part television miniseries *The Path to 9/11* was pointedly critical of the Clinton administration for its tepid interest in capturing or killing Osama bin Laden. Some 25 million people watched the mini-series, and although it cost ABC \$40 million to make, the Disney-owned network never released it on DVD. (The explanation provided by company suits was that they said they didn't think it would be profitable to re-release it; a more plausible explanation to some company critics is Disney CEO Robert Iger's support of the Democratic Party.)

Getting the rights to produce this film was not easy, either. Freidoune Sahebjam had been approached previously, but the hurdles he erected were not easily overcome -- until Nowrasteh came along. The Iranian-American filmmaker never actually met the Iranian-French writer, although the men did speak on the phone to hash out the details of the project. Sahebjam wanted the movie to be made in Farsi, the language of Iran, and with Persian actors. Nowrasteh agreed; that was how he wanted to shoot the movie, too.

Mozhan Marno, the Iranian-American actress who plays Soraya, said the subject matter became so real to her that she had nightmares during the filming of the graphic final scenes; in her dreams, crowds of angry people were surrounding her

menacingly until she could no longer breathe.

The dialogue in the movie is faithful to that in the book, although those who have read *The Stoning of Soraya M.*, will notice that Soraya has four children in the film, instead of seven, for example. In real life, her sullen oldest sons were 18 and 16, and well on their way to repeating their father's thuggish ways. On film, they are considerably younger -- and the younger of the two is deeply troubled by what is happening, even as he follows his father's lead.

The expressions of hatred on the older son's face are deeply disturbing; it's alien, this virulent brand of sexism, this genuine loathing of women. I understand that it is fueled by religion and by misplaced national pride and by feelings of impotence in a rapidly changing world. But the sheer unnaturalness of it left me unsettled. We certainly have remorseless and evil men in our society, who hurt, and even murder, their wives. But the difference is that we hunt these men down and imprison them, and we revile their names: Scott Peterson, and now Drew Peterson. We don't help them kill their spouses.

I do not know, as I told one of this movie's financial backers, whether Americans will sit through a film this sad and grisly. I only know that they should. It has been said many times since 9/11 that we are in a war of ideas -- and a shooting war as well -- with men who are confident that one day all the world will be governed by this kind of law. It would not be a world worth inhabiting. I am haunted by Soroya and her sisters.

[PoliticsDaily](#)

<http://www.southernwolf.net/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=1390>