Visualising Power, Documenting Resistance

Interview by Nina Somera

Persistently harrassed by the government, Iranian film maker Mahboubeh Abbasgolizadeh has found her mode of resistance in her craft. Her films have not only dealt with women who are oppressed by a fundamentalist regime. Behind the otherwise simple plots are real relations of power, that tells us much about Iran.

How would you assess the way media projected the “people power movement” around the time when the elections was severely contested?

In Iran, we do not have private television or radio. All media are run by the fundamentalist part of the government. So they control the news. They deliver their own messages and change public opinion. They own the policy.

They also control digital spaces. Nokia and Siemens sent Iran some eavesdropping instruments, so the government can control even text messages. The Ministry of Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) also controls all internet service providers and satellites. It can check the mailboxes of people. Most international websites like Youtube and Facebook are also filtered.
This is the reason why our website Meydaan has changed its domain several times. In fact, most Iranian women’s websites have been filtered so many times that they also have to change their administrators’ keys.

But people, especially the young, know ICTs very well. They could get around the filtering systems even those of Youtube and Facebook.

Though the government has developed strategies to control information and media, civil society creates new strategies everyday.

Then some parties also own media outfits outside Iran and broadcast information in places like Dubai, London and Washington. Because of censorship, people become more interested to hear the news from the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) or VOA (Voice of America), regardless that the latter follow Western policies. So the lesson here is that had Iran opened the media to the private sector, this would be better for democracy and people would not have to follow British or American news.

**How have the people used media to deliver their own messages?**

After Almadinejad’s first term, most civil society, especially women’s organisations were shut down. The regime would not allow women participate in the public sphere. So we changed our strategy, shifting from real spaces to digital spaces. We used new technologies such as video for documentation. This way, we managed to continue our advocacies.

During the green movement, people use digital cameras through their mobile phones in spreading their messages especially as the...
Not Another Stoning Story. In 2008, Mahboubeh produced a seven-minute documentary on stoning, a penalty that is imposed for adultery. In Waiting to be Stoned, Mahboubeh narrates the case of Mokarameh, who had been in prison for 10 years. Her partner, Jaafar, was also arrested and stoned to death. Both have a son, who was born in prison. Mokarameh was previously married but her husband abandoned her and her two children. The film also featured Shadi Sadr, a feminist lawyer who eventually took up the case of Mokarameh. Waiting to be Stoned and the other films of Mahboubeh can be seen on Youtube.

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When the video that documented the death of Neda was uploaded, it was spread in just one or two hours and reached CNN, BBC, Al Jazeera and others. Presently we have good documentaries about the green movement but all the footage came from Youtube.

What inspires you in making films on women using simple tools?

We are activists, first and foremost. We need our own agencies. When you have campaigns like stop stoning or end polygamy, you do a lot of things but somehow you wait for somebody to come and document these things. And this is like a disability. Sometimes, we have lots of meetings, where we invite camerawomen and directors. But sometimes, they fail to come. Or if they ever came, they missed the message.

But when you make your own video, you have agency, you have the ability. So through the camera, you can help women empower themselves. You can send your message, your perspective to a wider audience.

My main motivation in making documentaries is to change the situation of Iranian women and strengthen feminist agency in Iran.

Right now we are in a digital world and we need to use different types of media.

What are your favorite topics whenever you make documentary films?

The topics of my films are not mine. They are those of the women’s movement. We have campaigns to end polygamy, change the family law, stop the stoning of women and many others. I am committed to send the messages of the women’s movement.

But the process in creating the message is totally individual. It is not just an ordinary
reporting or a lecture. When you do documentaries, you think of a main idea, you select a subject from the women’s movement’s activities. So in the Stop Stoning campaign, I focused on Mokarameh, the character who is waiting to be stoned.

But there is really a difference between professional and feminist videography. The latter is part of our solidarity with the women's movement’s demands. So when I showed my films to my friends, they were excited because my films reflected their own dreams.

*How would you describe the situation of Iranian feminists, especially with the kidnapping of Shadi Sadr and others?*

This is a turning point in the women’s movement in Iran. For 100 years since the institutionalisation of the revolution, our activities have concentrated on legal reforms such as divorce and stoning. This time, we are challenged on how to reconcile women's movement’s demands and the green movement’s demands.

I cannot say, “you go with the green movement so you can democratise society while I go to feminise society.” So how do we negotiate between green movement’s demands and women’s movement’s demands? We say that through women’s rights, we can democratise society. This, while we engage democratisation rights. But this is just one challenge.

The other challenge lies in the pressure from fundamentalist government and the military system. They want to control the green movement, civil society and individuals who have the capacity to organise people. They arrest leaders from the student’s movement to the feminist movement to the reformist
I started my feminism through a non-governmental organisation (NGO). If I had the chance to turn back the time, I would not go back to the NGO. I don’t believe we can only have a real movement through the “NGOisation” of the women’s movement. In Iranian society, many NGOs are created by the government. But NGOs should be created by ourselves.

At that time, we did not have enough structure and framework, so it was a big fault. If you don’t have any framework, principle or discourse, if you go to work for an NGO, you cannot really say that you are working for women’s issues. You are just an agent of development programmes.

You are harassed all the time. Do you have any regrets about being involved in this very vibrant but precarious movement?

Being a feminist is not a profession. You do not actually have a choice. Being a feminist is me. There is very famous sentence, “The personal is political.” So all my activity is me. I cannot change my life as a feminist. It just came from my heart, my personality. It is my identity.

I don’t believe also that people have multiple identities. Feminism is the main part of one’s identity and one just builds on this identity.

I don’t have a choice in being a feminist so I am not sorry about anything. But feminism is not static but it is dynamic. So everyday is a different feminism, a different feminist.