

# Lapis Lazuli

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**In conversation with Masih Alinejad**Joyita Shaw

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**In conversation with Masih Alinejad: A woman who stirred the whole of Iran by her simple act of letting her hair free in the wind.**

**About Masih Alinejad**

“If you let fear win, the darkness can devour you, I told myself. Don’t be afraid,” I said quietly, over and over again, like a mantra,” writes Masih Alinejad (P-1) in her recent memoir, narrating her fight against compulsory hijab as a symbol of suffocating darkness. She is a voice of modern Iranian women who believe in freedom of choice in terms of clothing. From standing against her father to remove hijab to imprisonment, teen pregnancy, divorce, dramatic entry in the field of journalism, exile for speaking on behalf of human rights, her memoir is a true account of stifling existence of modern Iranian women under the rule of the Islamic Republic. Masih Alinejad is an Iranian American Journalist, a human rights activist and an author of five books, including her recent memoir, *The Wind in My Hair: My Fight for freedom in Modern Iran* (2018) by Little Brown. Born in a small village in northern Iran, Masih an ordinary woman, placed

in an extraordinary circumstance, got imprisoned in her earlier life for her political leaflets. She entered into the world of journalism in 2001 and soon became famous for her unbiased articles, revealing the corruption of the Iranian government at the very core. At present, she is working for the VOA Persian Service as a presenter/producer a correspondent for Radio Farda a frequent contributor to Manto television, and a contributing editor to Iran Wire. She is forced to live in exile in New York after her extreme criticism of the Islamic Republic government of Iran. In 2014, she started a campaign called *My Stealthy Freedom* through Facebook, urging Iranian women to remove their hijab in the public sphere to oppose the repressive rule of the present Iranian government. The amount of support Masih has got from women not only from Iran but internationally is phenomenal and is still increasing. She has got several awards, including a human rights award from UN Watches 2015 Geneva Summit for Human Rights, the Omid Journalism Award from the Mehdi Semsar Foundation, and a "Highly Commended" AIB Media Excellence Award.

#### **Excerpts from an email interview**

**Joyita-**In your book you have written, “Women become powerful agents of change when they start living their own lives.” It is relatively easier to resist intervention of the external world if it tries to curb individual freedom, but the situation gets challenging when one’s own family works as an agent of oppression. How did you win the battle of differences of opinion within your family to realize your true self?

**Masih-** Standing up to my family was never easy. I remember one day, as a teenager, I had taken off my chador on my way home from high school and then when I turned a corner, I bumped into my own father. He was packing his wares from the street corner (he was a street peddler) and I hadn't expected to see him in that part of town.

He was so shocked to see me without chador (which is a long loose sheet covering the whole body) that he spat in my face and stormed off.

He didn't speak to me for months but eventually thanks to my mother came to accept my ways.

I love my parents but I also realized that I have to stand up for my own rights. I don't want to have any regrets. Sometimes we have to stand up to our own parents, remind them that they were young once too; other times we have to stand up to other men or

even the whole society. Indian society has many such people who stood up to tyranny and we should learn from their examples.

**Joyita-**Your mother is a feminist in the true sense without being conscious about it like most women in the east. Why do you think that women in the east never could congregate like western women to stand up for their rights?

**Masih-**I think for many reasons the "family" plays a larger role in the east than it does in the west. Maybe because the industrial society breaks up the nuclear family. My mother learnt to be a feminist, without knowing what it means, by her actions and standing up for herself and her family. Yet, her actions are not enough. I had to go beyond my mother and the new generation of Iranian women will go beyond me. We are all a platform for the new generation.

**Joyita-** Your journey from a small town of Iran to New York is awe-inspiring as well as intimidating. Did you ever fear that your opposition to the existing laws of Iran regarding compulsory hijab could put your family in danger?

**Masih-** I never planned on moving to New York or starting a campaign against compulsory hijab, even though those laws repressed and suffocated me. I just do what I think is right at that very moment. I never expected my family to be in danger. Perhaps that was naive but I never thought my fight for my own body, for my own rights to become so popular in Iran and around the world that my family have been threatened and forced to appear on state-controlled TV to denounce me.

**Joyita-** Today, more and more Iranian men are coming out wearing hooded dresses to extend their support to women. How do you think that is going to help the cause for which you fight for?

**Masih-** Our fight against compulsory hijab received added momentum when the men also came out in support. We need the support of our fathers, brothers, uncles and husbands. It is their support that gives women comfort and strength. We cannot win this fight alone. It is a cultural shift and we need men and women to work together to bring about a better future. In my family, my brothers are all on my side as is my mother. My sister and my father are less so.

**Joyita-** What was your reaction when in recent times, two Indian athletes named Soumya Swaminathan and Heen Sidhu, refused to play in Iran, saying compulsory hijab is a violation of their human rights?

**Masih-** I was so proud of my Indian sisters. Of all the players, I had hoped that my sisters from India would rise to the challenge. Geographically, historically and culturally, Iran and India are very close. My Indian sisters have fought against all kinds of discrimination and to be asked to give in to compulsory hijab was one step too far. Many Western chess players didn't have that sense of injustice because their struggle for equal rights is so far back in history that they take it for granted.

**Joyita-** Why do you think time and again Islam has been misinterpreted to keep women always on the margin?

**Masih-** Islam needs its own reformation but that is an area that I do not have an expertise in.

**Joyita-** How does it feel to create a home beyond home in New York? What were the difficulties you faced while going through the process of adoption and adaptation in the UK and USA? Do you see yourself as a woman in exile or as an immigrant in America?

**Masih-** I never intended to settle in the West or emigrate to the US. Initially, I thought I might return to Iran after a few months in 2009, after the political turmoil surrounding the 2009 presidential elections had been resolved. But as I reported on post-election human rights violations and crackdown on dissent, it became obvious that return to Iran during Ahmadinejad tenure was impossible. After all, I had exposed too many misdeeds.

After Hassan Rouhani was elected president, I had hopes of return but it became quickly evident that I was not welcome back. I was even prepared to face a 5-year jail sentence but government insiders told me to expect a much harsher treatment.

I had to face the reality that I could not return home and had to make a new life for myself. The hardest thing for me is getting used to the idea that I may never return home and not see my mother's beautiful face.

**Joyita -** It really pains me a lot that you have been deprived to see your mother for so many years. I would like to thank you Masih abji for throwing light on some grave

issues regarding the current situation of women in Iran and sharing your precious time with me. I wish you all the best for your memoir. I hope your memoir becomes a bestseller of this year, which it deserves.

**Masih-** Thank you. Best wishes.

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#### BIO-NOTE

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Joyita Shaw is a Lecturer of Bidhan Chandra College, Department of English, West Bengal, India. She has recently finished her doctoral research from Banaras Hindu University, India. Her areas of interest are Short Fiction, Women's Writings, Diaspora Writings, Indian Writings in English, and Gender Studies. She has presented papers in various conferences and seminars across the country. She writes poetry in English as well as in Bengali. Her poems have gotten published in some reputed magazines and journals. Her research articles related to women's writings have gotten published in several international journals. She is passionate about photography and love singing Rabindra Sangeet.

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