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© Fariba Hachtroudi, Sian Robyns

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Iran's Twelfth Imam's A Woman?

The Twelfth Imam's a Woman? satirises a central belief of Shia — a messianic strand of Islam whose believers are waiting the coming of the *Twelfth Imam*, to save the world. Iran's president Ahmadinejad, states that the Imam is hiding in a well in the village of Jamkaran, where he waits for the opportunity to reveal himself. Hachtroudi's novel, *The Twelfth Imam's a Woman?* creates this moment and questions what might happen if the *Twelfth Imam* turned out to be a *Woman*.

The heroine of the story, Anahita is a journalist, living in Tehran. Anahita is the same age as the Iranian revolution. Sceptical, mocking, ironic, disillusioned, not a good Muslim, Anahita considers herself very much a member of generation Y. She aspires towards a full and meaningful life and she feels let down by the values of her parents and by the Iranian society at large. Above all she wants to be treated with dignity and respect. Convinced that the accounts of miracles at Jamkaran are fraudulent, she sets out to expose the corruption behind them – and finds herself face to face not with a *Hidden Imam* but with the *Hidden Imames*, Fatimah, daughter of the prophet Mohammed.

Among a growing library of books that tackle the Iranian regime, no other but Hachtroudi's novel *The Twelfth Imam's a Woman?* presents satirically a comprehensive understanding of the current situation in Iran and calls for action. Considering, that the recent Middle East uprising events originated by Iran's hopeful youth, it is no wonder that Hachtroudi's brave use of her pen provides us with this gem of a novel.

Key elements in this courageous and unique novel include:

- Shia Islam, the state religion, is characterised as a pollutant, a sickness, a drug poisoning the Iranian DNA.
- To denounce, to inform and to amuse, the dénonciation is primarily of the Iranian government.
- The structure, factions and economic interests of the regime are discussed.
- The regime is using religious fables to dumb down and infantilize the public.
- A whirlwind and irreverent history of Shia is punctuated with flashbacks to the Iran-Iraq war and to the murder of dissidents.



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- The government has appropriated the story of the *Twelfth Imam* to gain acceptance and legitimacy.
- The Iranian people in general, and the young people in particular, are ridiculing the government because they no longer believe their allegations.
- Critique of the status of the education of girls and the repression of young Iranians as well as Christianity and Judaism's treatment of women.

About the Author:

Born in Tehran, resident currently in France, Fariba Hachtroudi is the daughter of a leading Iranian intellectual. She is an archaeologist by training, a long-time human rights activist (president of the Mohsen Hachtroudi Association), freelance journalist, writer and novelist. Her novel *Iran, les rives du Sang*, won the French Human Rights Prize for Literature in 2000. *The Twelfth Imam's A Woman?* is the first of her novels to be translated into English. Ms. Hachtoudi as an expert commentator and long standing critic of one of the world's most repressive governments, the current Iranian government.

Author is available for appearances and interviews during her upcoming trip to USA starting January 26th, 2012 and can be reached through The Key Publicity, Heather Smith, e-mail: media@thekeypublish.com, Tel: 416-935-1790.



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Author Q & A

Q. What inspired you to write *The Twelfth Imam's A Woman*?

A. The sheer absurdity of everything I'd read and heard about Jamkaran and the increasingly irrational positions taken by Iran's religious leaders.

Q. What surprised you most while researching information for this book?

A. Since the book was published, the increasing vigor with which the regime has claimed that Iran's Supreme Leader, the Ayatollah Khamenei, has a direct relationship with the Twelfth Imam. The same claims are made for Ahmadinejad. Outrageous claims have been made over the past year in Iran.

Q. What were the challenges (research, literary, and logistical) in bringing this book to life?

A. It's a novel. Even though it's based on religion and Twelve Shia, I've invented a lot, especially in imagining the Twelfth Imam as a woman.

Q. What are the most important points that you would like readers to have gained and appreciate after reading your book?

A. I'd like them to have developed an interest in the ancient culture of Iran. And to understand that culture has nothing at all in common with the Mullahs and their Islamic republic.

Q. Why is this story unique?

A. The novel takes a female and feminist view of Islam – in the very name of Islam's Prophet. It's not an attack on Islam but on patriarchy, machismo and phallocracy, and the abuse of power in the name of religion.

Q. What is your response to those who are surprised that the Twelfth Imam is a Woman?

A. Just wait and see... Women throughout the world are increasingly exerting their influence, resisting the abuse of power against them and their communities.

Q. What is the most controversial issue in your novel in relation to the current political circumstances in Iran?

A. I imagine a miracle – profound change in the attitude of the Supreme Leader. For the moment the miracle is, alas, only fictional. Iran's leadership is becoming increasingly hard line and the end of the novel is a long way from reality in Iran today.



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Q. How did you organize the book?

A. It's a basically linear narrative, setting out important historical information about Shia and the Iranian political system – which is a republic in name only, showing no trace at all of true republicanism.

Q. What advice would you offer your readers so they can make the best of the information provided to them in the book?

A. Read more about what's been happening in Iran since the revolution.

Q. How has been the response in Iran to your novel?

A. I had a strange email from one of the senior people at the Mosque in Jamkaran. I'm going to translate it and publish it on my website. Basically he hadn't read the book but went on at some length about the damage, the harm I was doing to Islam. I've also heard from someone claiming to have good connections in the top levels of government, saying he'd heard the grand ayatollahs were all aware of the book but had decreed that nothing be said about it to avoid turning me into an Iranian Salman Rushdie

Q. What are your hopes for regime change in Iran? Will the influence of the Arab spring spread, will change require another revolution?

A. The protests by young Iranians in 2009 were the start of the Arab spring. I think there's a tendency now to forget that, to think of the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia as the start. But the regime has responded with a vicious crackdown, the repression since has been terrible. Thousands of young people have been imprisoned and hundreds are dead. But the public's opposition, the resistance movement remains strong. The government will not be able to maintain the repression forever. Sooner or later Iranians will free themselves. I simply hope that when the time comes, the change will not be too violent.

Q. Comment on the use of the novel as a political weapon? Which is the more effective - documentary writing or fiction?

A. They are both effective – it all depends on what you want to achieve and how. But I do think there is something about a novel, about fiction, that allows us to reach people in a different way, to reach more people, and to touch them more deeply.



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The Twelfth Imam's A Woman?

Fariba Hachtroudi

Title: The Twelfth Imam's a Woman?

Author: Fariba Hachtroudi

(<http://www.faribahachtroudi.fr/bio/uk.html>)

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Synopsis:

In this novel, Fariba Hachtroudi returns to Iran, after 30 years of exile to take the country's pulse. She paints a picture which is surrealist, magical and darkly funny – but also appalling. Black humour makes her pen a redoubtable weapon. Her heroine and narrator, Anahita, is a journalist living in Teheran, thirty years old, the same age as the Iranian revolution. She is sent to report on the pilgrimage to Jamkaran: a center of beliefs and superstitions from another age. The focus of her enquiry is the mosque's well – supposed to be the hiding place of the Twelfth Imam whose return the Shiites eagerly await. And to her surprise, the young woman discovers that in a country where women are stoned, where machoism holds sway, the famous Imam is... an Imameess and a feminist. The colourful, blackly funny narrative blends wit with anger, satire with rage, while the vivid depiction of young Iranians' lives is also a call for political action. The novel also provides a key to understanding the current situation in Iran, a country in the grip of a millenarian culture where Shia Islam has been a force of resistance against foreign invasion as well as powerful weapon in the hands of some of the region's most repressive despots.

Endorsements:

In her new book, *The Twelfth Imam's A Woman?* Fariba Hachtroudi evokes the coming of the Muslim Messiah. And what a surprise, this saviour of humanity proves to be a woman! In this sometimes hilarious novel, the French-Iranian novelist describes the secrets of the Iranian powers that be, with an unabashed feminism. She also conveys her faith in the future, in Persian culture, and in women, who for her will be a driving force in establishing democracy in Iran.

Femmes Universelles, 2010

On the spiritual sickness the author calls 'imamism', on the infantile myth according to which the twelfth imam is on the point of returning in order to set Iran and the world ablaze, on the poison of fanaticism symbolised by the non-elected president of Iran, on the charlatans who surround him, on the atmosphere worthy of Ubu which reigns at Qom and Jamkaran, these days you won't read anything cheekier, wittier or more farfetched, and therefore more effective. The Art of Farce applied to ideological warfare.

Bernard-Henry Lévy, *Le Point*, May 2010