



Ban beat: Iranian novelist makes it to Oysterville

Aida Moradi Ahani overcomes censorship and Trump on her way to writing residency

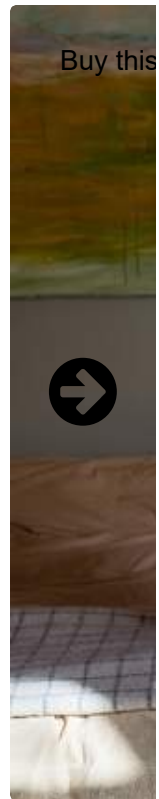
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Aida Moradi Ahani, an Iranian writer working on her second novel, rested in Oysterville last week after taking a chance that she could make it to America before the President imposed a travel ban.



Aida Moradi A

OYSTERVILLE — An Iranian writer made a beeline from her home in Tehran to Oysterville, not knowing if President Trump's ban on travel from seven Muslim-majority countries would stop her from coming into the U.S.

Aida Moradi Ahani, 34, needed to get here to start her month-long artist residency on March 1.

The author and novelist kept checking her smartphone for news updates from CNN and BBC. But it wasn't clear if a federal appeals court would uphold a Feb. 3 decision by a federal judge in Seattle that temporarily halted Trump's ban. The ban barred visitors from Iran, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, Sudan and Libya from coming into the U.S., and stopped the resettlement of refugees.

Moradi Ahani had already put a lot of time and money into getting her visa for the trip by the time Trump handed down his Jan. 27 order. She'd received her visa 10 days earlier after flying to Dubai for an interview at the American embassy.

"It costs so much for an Iranian every time they want to travel to America," she said.

So she decided to take her chances. She started her trip, boarding an Etihad Airways flight from Tehran to Abu Dhabi.

After she landed, she learned a federal appeals court had upheld the block on Trump's travel ban. The Feb. 9 decision meant she could catch her connecting flights to New York and Portland, and make her way to Oysterville.

Moradi Ahani arrived at Willapa Bay AiR on Feb. 12, two weeks ahead of the five American artists who have now joined her for the March residency.

"She is bright as a new penny, quite conversant in English and overall charming," Willapa Bay AiR director Cyndy Hayward wrote in an email after her arrival.

As Moradi Ahani was settling in, the White House started devising another travel and refugee order that is expected to be released this week. It's unclear how Trump's team plans to tweak the ban to avoid future legal snares.

Art in Oysterville

Moradi Ahani hopes to finish her third book and second novel during her stay at Willapa Bay AiR. The nonprofit gives artists, writers and musicians from around the world a chance to work uninterrupted at its secluded, 16-acre spot in the woods near Oysterville.

"Aida is lovely," manager Jeff McMahon said. "The artists are all excited about the opportunity to do their work."

The residency accepts about one in 10 who apply for coveted spots offered at no cost to six artists each month from March to September, he said. Every effort is made to avoid disturbing the residents while they work, including having their lunches delivered.

Moradi Ahani is using the time to work on the final draft of her novel about an Iranian woman and an American man who fall in love but run into unromantic political pitfalls and cultural divides.

Becoming a writer

Moradi Ahani grew up under the confines of the Iranian regime. She dares to publish descriptions of life in the Islamic Republic, despite a government notorious for censorship and punishing dissent.

She was born in Tehran during the country's eight-year war with Saddam Hussein's Iraq. The bloody battle that lasted longer than either world war came after the Shah monarchy was overthrown during the 1979 Iranian Revolution.

"I remember the sound of the alarms when it was time to go to the shelter," Moradi Ahani said. "Yes, it was sad. It was horrible sometimes. But it helped me to understand we can all get through those dark days."

Although men control the country and have absolute authority in many families, she said, her parents gave her freedom. They encouraged her to tell the truth as she sees it when she started writing while studying at Tehran's Azad University.

She earned her degree in electrical engineering, her father's profession, in 2007 but found writing better suited her. She published her first book in 2011. Her debut novel came out in 2013.

Writing the truth

Moradi Ahani said she was surprised the Iranian government allowed the uncensored publication of her book, a collection of short stories called "The Pin On Cat's Tail." The characters in the nine stories struggle with past experiences after the Islamic Revolution. Ahani said they face different troubles that stem from the same problem — their father's control of their family.

"It's about the role of power in our society," she said. "Why should we accept everything from one power? I've always challenged that."

Moradi Ahani said she didn't expect her first novel, "Golfing on the Gunpowder," to get past government censorship either. But she felt she couldn't let the fear of being silenced stop her from writing the story of a girl who was abused after she was forced to make secret deals for the Iranian regime.

"I don't think about that," Ahani said. "I think about writing the truth."

The Brooklyn-based Akashic Books in 2014 published her writing debut in English. "Tehran Noir," a collection of short stories by Iranian writers, featured "Lariyan's Day in the Sun" by Moradi Ahani.

After reading her words, a professor at Stanford University invited her to the prestigious California campus to speak about the new generation of Iranian writers. She's part of the first generation after the Islamic Revolution to enjoy looser government restrictions.

Her hope

Like many Persians, Moradi Ahani hasn't published much of her writing in English. She hopes making connections with U.S. artists during her residency will help her change that.

Moradi Ahani said Americans and Iranians can share their cultures through literature and art, despite political problems between their countries. She blames government propaganda and the media for making the people of the two countries seem like enemies.

"I know it's a big lie and I wish Americans knew the same," she said. "People are different from their government. They're just people. They don't have any main role in the decisions of their government."

After finishing her residency, Ahani is scheduled to speak about her work at the University of California, Irvine. She also plans to visit New York City and Ohio.

She's determined to break into the world of literature so she can share Iranian culture and the challenges her people face with Americans and the world.

"There's a way for everything," she said. "Always, I think about hope."