



AN INTERVIEW WITH  
AIDA  
MORADI  
AHANI

We first heard of Aida Moradi Ahani's trip to Oysterville, Washington through a February 7th article in the *Chinook Observer*. The young Iranian novelist had been barred entry to the United States to attend a writer's residency at the Willapa Bay Artist-in-Residence due to the brash rollout of the Trump Administration's travel ban on January 27, 2017.

With the help of founder and director of Willapa Bay AiR, Cyndy Hayward, Ahani had spent more than a year obtaining a visa following her acceptance to the program only to be turned away days before she was to board a plane in Tehran for the Pacific Northwest.

Ahani was born in Bandarazali, Iran, in 1983. She studied electrical engineering at Azad University in Tehran, where she still lives, and has been publishing stories, novels, and essays since 2005. She published a collection of short stories *The Pin on the Cat's Tail* in 2011. Her debut novel, *Golfing on the Gunpowder*, about a girl forced into making black market deals for the regime, garnered some international attention and she was invited to speak at Stanford University.

Ahani did arrive in Oysterville for her March residency once the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals upheld a Seattle federal judge's order to halt the ban. She took time off from revising her second novel to speak with *RAIN* just days before the Trump Administration launched a second attempt at a travel ban.

RAIN: **Tell us a little bit about your first novel, *Golfing on the Gunpowder*.**

It was about sanctions in Iran during [Mahmoud] Ahmadinejad's time. American and European governments sanctioned [Iran], as you know, and after a while the sanctions became a big punishment for just the people, not for the government, and it was a bad idea, and the people were suffering from sanctions and they were in a bad economic situation. After they put up the sanctions I don't think we saw many differences [with the Iranian government] than we did in the time before sanctions because sanctions ruined everything just for people and not the government. And it was so sad. I was trying to show the truth. How some regime people used this for taking money, for creating a black market. That book—as you know we have some censorship in Iran—when that book was published everyone was shocked.



I like the book I am working on now because I think that it is more mature and it is more about different people in different cultures. It is so important to me to say, How can an American person and an Iranian person relate? How can they have a relationship in love or in other ways with some differences about politics or something? Maybe they can't. Maybe they don't want to care about these differences but they have to consider them. Sometimes they will be affected by these differences. In some sensitive moment every person can have their point-of-view and in crucial moments everybody has their country's back.

I remember I was in Italy when Ahmadinejad was in power and a Brazilian person, he was so nice, but he told me, 'Oh, Iran? Yeah, you have a crazy and stupid president.' In that moment, I felt I needed to defend my country. I wish he could know my people because I really, really believe that people are so different from the government.

RAIN: **Generally, have you enjoyed meeting people during your international travels?**

For me, meeting people in other countries has always been so good. I remember when I came to America for the first time—the last time I was here for six months—everyone was so kind and warm to me. I wanted to go to New York and some people told me, 'Oh, be careful because people in New York are always in a rush and some of them are so angry.' But I was there for six months and everyone was so kind to me. I love New York. When I was there my friends and family wanted to take me around and show me the city, but I told them, no, I want to discover this town, because the characters

in my [new] novel have been left over there for ten years so I should discover the streets by myself. Every day from noon to night I would walk the streets and, for me, I was discovering a new place. After three months I had lost weight and my friends said, 'Okay, now let us take you someplace you haven't seen,' but everywhere they took me, I had already been there.

RAIN: **So, as you were mentioning, there are not a lot of American literary agents that deal with Farsi literature?**

Yeah, I am so curious about that. Why American agents aren't curious about my literature. Not just my literature, but Persian literature in general, especially the young generation. You know, because the last generation didn't care about something like that, to have a bridge between them and other people in different countries, but the new generation does [want this] and we don't have any connection and finding a way is difficult for us. And sometimes I say it is a problem with us because our last generation didn't care about it and I don't want the next generation of writers to say the same thing about me so I wanted to try and do something, maybe not for me, but maybe I can find a way for the next person, so that the next generation can be important. In Iran, we have two or three writers from the next generation that are so important, so good.

In the cinema we have Asghar Farhadi or Abbas Kiarostami that are so great that they are known to American people and people all across the world. In theater we have internationally known people. In

music and painting. But it's weird that we don't have any bridge with literature with the Americans. My people know your culture from your books and your movies. Because American books, American fiction is translated into Farsi and we have read many of your books, even new books. I don't know why my publisher doesn't partner with an American publisher.

RAIN: **Is one of the reasons you wanted to come back to the United States because you are writing about characters in America?**

When I got close to the end of this novel, I thought I needed space for myself to finish it. I hadn't tried a residency and I wanted to try it. I started to search about it and the first pages I found on the internet listed the ten best residencies in America and the first one was Willapa Bay AiR. So I filled out the form and I just threw in the work and said, 'Okay, forget it,' because I didn't have any hope about it. After awhile I got an email from Willapa Bay AiR that said, 'We saw your work and it is amazing and we want to invite you.' And, you know, I was shocked. It was one of the great days of my life.

It was before the election and after one or two weeks [owner Cyndy Hayward and manager Jeff McMahan] helped me get interview time in the American Embassy in the United Arab Emirates, you know, because the Americans don't have an embassy in Tehran. Many Iranians have to spend a lot of money and time to get to Dubai and end up waiting for two or three months for just interview time. Most of them end up rejected by the

American Embassy in interviews. Many of them want to see their children, their parents—I think it's not very fair for Iranians. Europeans don't have to pass this process and they can get visas very easily. I don't know what the solution is for it, but I think it's not fair to Iranian people.

I saw one of them waiting with a child who was a patient, who was sick. Even they were lucky because so many people are turned away. This was before Trump. I started [the visa process] before New Year's.

**RAIN: So around the beginning of 2016? Like December 2015?**

Yeah.

**RAIN: Well, that's a long process to go through. And so when you first crossed our radar it was because of the travel ban which happened in February of 2017. Where were you when you heard that your visa was not going to be honored?**

The first time? Every day I checked for some notification. I checked the news and they said something about 'Trump bans . . .' and I was shocked. I can understand that there are some security things, but not like that. You know, I didn't care about myself, but I felt so sorry for some of my people because they needed their parents, their children, and medical [treatment]. My people were suffering because of medical sanctions and sanctions on something like that, on medical [supplies], it doesn't make sense. It's not good for the Europeans' and the Americans' story. We should consider the people when we make rules on things like that.

**RAIN: Trump has a new travel ban that's going to start in two or three days. They've changed a few things. So, technically, you would be allowed into the country because you had a pre-existing visa, but another Iranian novelist, who was just starting the application process right now, would not be allowed into the country. How does this make you feel?**

Sometimes I feel like I came here and if people can stop this ban again I would be so happy. As you saw some people who really need to be here, they can't be. I can understand putting some rules in place in the right way. But with this, they have omitted some countries and kept other countries. It's an old idea about every country, and I mean every country—it's stupid. Iran, Syria, every country. It doesn't make sense and everybody knows that. Sometimes I feel shame because I think maybe I shouldn't have come here. Because it's about my people. When I hear something from this man about my country sometimes I think he doesn't know anything about us, or any country.

I hope the American people can stop him. You know, I'm sure—it's not just hope—I'm sure the people can stop him because the American people are so different from the new government and they know what is going on. They know it is not fair and that makes me happy.

**RAIN: What is one thing you would like the American people to understand about Iranian culture?**

I wish the American people understood more about my language and the art and



history of my culture because we have a great history. We have a big history. People think that [during the 1979 Iranian Revolution] all of these people came in and said, 'Okay, music and dance and everything in your country is banned.' But the people didn't care. People don't know that we still have them. We have dance. We have music. Persian dance, Persian music, Persian art. I wish the American people knew about them more. When I am talking about literature as a bridge, the novel, fiction, it is so good for learning a culture. For me, I knew New York before I visited that city—through [E.L.] Doctorow, through Woody Allen.

**RAIN: Tell us a bit about your new novel.**

I am working on my second draft and the second draft is kind of my final draft. It is so important to me that [Willapa Bay AiR] gives me the opportunity to work on it and I hope I can finish it by the end of March when I finish my residence. I'm also working on a summary that I can send to some [U.S.] publishers. What I can tell you about my novel is that it is about revenge and forgiveness. People in our world are so engaged with these two concepts. They don't know when they will get revenge or sometimes be forgiven. And sometimes with forgiveness we are actually seeking revenge against the other person or even ourselves. Of course, it's better to choose forgiveness because we are human and we need to for ourselves. This novel helped me find a way to be more patient about many things. It's like a lesson for me. It's like my novel is teaching me and I am learning from it. ✍️