

YEAR OF AWARD: 2015

Farzaneh Milani

Raymond J. Nelson Professor of Persian
Literature and Women Studies

former Chair of the Department of
Middle Eastern and South Asian
Languages and Cultures

former Director of
Middle East Studies Program

former director of Studies in Women
and Gender (currently, Women,
Gender, and Sexuality Studies)

Years of service at UVA:
1986-present



Farzaneh Milani completed her graduate studies in Comparative Literature in 1979 at the University of California in Los Angeles. Her dissertation, “Forugh Farrokhzad: A Feminist Perspective” was a critical study of the poetry of a pioneering Iranian poet. A past president of the Association of Middle Eastern Women Studies in America, Milani was the recipient of

the All University Teaching Award in 1998 and the 2020 Cavaliers’ Distinguished Teaching Professorship Award. She was nominated for Virginia Faculty of the Year in 1999 and 2021.

Milani has published over 100 articles, epilogues, forewords, and afterwords in Persian and in English. She has served as the guest editor for two special issues of *Nimeye-Digar*, *Persian Language Feminist Journal* (on Simin Daneshvar and Simin Behbahani), *Iran Nameh* (on Simin Behbahani), and *Iranian Studies: Journal of the International Society for Iranian Studies* (on Simin Behbahani). She has written for

The New York Times, *The Washington Post*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Ms. Magazine*, *Readers Digest*, *USA Today*, *The Daily Progress*, and NPR’s *All Things Considered*. She has presented more than 250 lectures nationally and internationally. A former director of Studies in Women and Gender and Middle East Studies Program as well as former Chair of the department of Middle Eastern and South Asian Languages and Cultures, Milani is Raymond J. Nelson Professor of Persian Literature and Women Studies. She was a Carnegie Fellow (2006-2007).

WHY DID YOU COME TO UVA?

I came to UVA in search of a job but to my delight found a welcoming home. As an Iranian, as an immigrant, and as a writer whose books—all about Iranian women in literature and in cinema—are banned in her own country of birth, I did not—do not—take for granted the privilege of sharing my thoughts openly and freely with my students, colleagues, and readers. I consider it a privilege to be able to write and teach without the ever-present fear of governmental censorship.

I came to the University of Virginia in 1986. I came up for tenure at the height of one of our university's worst budget crises. It was also a time when many universities, in the face of declining enrollment and the unfortunate political hostilities between my country of birth and my adoptive country were shutting down their Persian Programs. The Dean of Arts and Sciences at the time, Ray J. Nelson, could have done so too. But he chose not to. I will never forget his impeccable sense of justice, his boundless dignity, his visionary leadership.

WHAT WAS UVA LIKE WHEN YOU ARRIVED? HOW HAS IT CHANGED AND/OR STAYED THE SAME?

Let me confine myself to the issue of the birth and evolution of the Women Studies Program at this institution. It all started, as it often does, with the activism and foresight of our students. In the late 1970s, 2,500 students signed a petition requesting “a Women's Studies alternative.” An article published on April 11, 1979, in *The Cavalier Daily*, announced that “After two years of planning, a Women's Studies program will become available to students this fall... Preparation for the program began in fall 1977 when College Faculty Dean Edwin E. Floyd appointed an ad hoc committee to study the needs and possibilities for such a program...” Four decades later, Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies is one of the most vibrant departments at our institution. Of course, this proud and remarkable growth was a process. It was incremental. It was communal and a confluence of students' engagement, the visionary wisdom of some administrators, and the boundless devotion of faculty members. I want to mention in particular the names of Sharon Davie and Anne Lane, who were staunch advocates of Women Studies and under whose passionate guidance Women Studies grew by leaps and bounds at UVA. I had the good fortune to work closely with and learn from both of these inspired and inspiring leaders.

HOW DO YOU THINK DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF YOUR IDENTITY, INCLUDING BEING A WOMAN, IMPACTED HOW PEOPLE RESPONDED TO YOU IN YOUR POSITION?

“Identity” is fluid, multiple, contextual. Let me share an interesting experience with you. On the first day of class, I often tell my students “Picasso could paint a portrait with a few lines. If you could evoke your portrait with just a few words, what would they be?” To invite participation, I begin with my own self-portrait. The words I choose to identify myself are in flux and have changed over the years. “Iranian,” however, appears and reappears with fascinating consistency. I believe if I were to ask the same question in Iran, I would have omitted “Iranian” from my list. Admittedly, I became an “Iranian” after I left Iran. I do not mean to suggest I was not Iranian when I lived in Iran. I was. This constitutive element of my identity though became more visible, more distinctive when I left my country of birth.

continued

In Her Words | Farzaneh Milani

WHAT SUPPORTS DID YOU HAVE?

My parents devoted their lives and everything they had to their children's education. No words can express my love for them or my admiration for their many silent sacrifices and deep commitment to education. They instilled the love of learning in their five children. The unconditional love, the kindness and intellectual sustenance and unwavering support of my husband of forty-two years, my brothers, my son and daughter and their families, my teachers and mentors have nourished me and sustained me in various ways. And now, my greatest legacy is my children and grandchildren.

When I moved from California to Charlottesville in 1986, I became the lucky recipient of the friendship of several colleagues. From the first days of my arrival, many colleagues (soon to be cherished friends for a lifetime) opened their hearts and their homes to my family and to me. They helped me explore and expand my horizon and led me in new directions. The help, the insight, and the cherished companionship of these people are woven into the fabric of my life.

I hope I will be remembered as an individual who loved her family, beauty, and truth, who did not subscribe to absolutes, resisted binary modes of thinking, found shelter and refuge in the arts in literature.

WHAT KEPT YOU GOING IN MOMENTS OF ADVERSITY?

From my ancestors, from poets and philosophers, I have learned that change and impermanence are facts of life, that beneath all the twists and turns of life, its ups and downs, its good and bad days, one truth remains undisputed and, paradoxically, constant. Nothing lasts forever: neither success nor failure; neither sorrows nor joys; neither good fortune nor adversity.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO A WOMAN IN A SIMILAR POSITION TODAY?

Although I would say the same if my interlocutor was a man, these are the mottos of my life: Listen to your heart, it never misleads. Dust off the mirror of your soul, it needs constant care like a garden. Don't rely solely on the logical mind, believe in magic and mystery and chances. Be true to your dreams and listen carefully to your nightmares. Accept transience. Respect imperfection in yourself and others, but strive for excellence. Listen to the eloquent poetry of nature.

IS THERE SOMEONE YOU ARE PARTICULARLY PROUD OF HAVING SUPPORTED OR HAVE ENJOYED A MUTUALLY SUPPORTIVE PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH?

I have had the good fortune to be the recipient of the support, the mentoring, and the guidance of several family members, teachers, friends, colleagues, and students. I have accumulated great debts over the years. You know, for thousands of years, millions of Iranian storytellers have begun their stories with a short statement: “There was one, and there wasn’t one.” The enigmatic sentence at the threshold of every story is a warning that truth is elusive, that there is always another story, that there is always another side to the story. More important, it is a reminder that behind every storyteller stand several unacknowledged storytellers. Similarly, some of the most exquisite expressions of Iranian artistic talent do not carry the name of an artist. I believe there is great wisdom behind this deliberate refusal to credit a single artist for an artifact, and to acknowledge the collective and collaborative nature of any achievement in life.

WHAT LEGACY ARE YOU LEAVING THAT YOU ARE MOST PROUD OF?

First and foremost, my children and grandchildren. I hope I will be remembered as an individual who loved her family, beauty, and truth, who did not subscribe to absolutes, resisted binary modes of thinking, found shelter and refuge in the arts, in particular in literature. I hope that I will be remembered as a seeker after truth and beauty and love, that I refused to be defined by conventional boundaries and constraints, immured by disciplines and dogmas, that I knew the consequences of my actions and bold dreams but did not fear them, that I remained loyal to my dreams and ideals and the people I loved.

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS:

Meet Me at The Threshold (Book in progress)

The Literary Biography of Forugh Farrokhzad with Unpublished Letters (Persian Circle, 2017); translated into Arabic (Beirut: daralrafidain, 2018)

Words, Not Swords: Iranian Women Writers and the Freedom of Movement (Syracuse University Press, 2011)

A Cup of Sin: Selected Poems of Simin Behbahani, with Kaveh Safa (Syracuse University Press, 1999)

Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers (Syracuse University Press, 1992)



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