Simin Behbahani, 87  Poetry defined ‘lioness of Iran’

by Emily Langer

Simin Behbahani, a towering figure in Persian literature who became known as the “lioness of Iran” for poetry in which she elegantly and courageously laid bare the suffering of the destitute, the marginalized and the oppressed, died Aug. 19 at a hospital in Tehran. She was 87.

The cause was a cardiopulmonary ailment, said her daughter, Omid Behbahani.

For decades — from the era of the Western-backed shah to the rule of the ayatollahs that followed the 1979 Iranian Revolution — Ms. Behbahani was one of her country’s most celebrated writers.

She was 14 when she published the first of her hundreds of poems and was in her 80s, and nearly blind, when she wrote her last. Her work was collected in 19 volumes that were translated, read and honored around the world. At times, her name surfaced on lists of contenders for the Nobel Prize in literature.

For millions of Iranians inside the country and abroad, Ms. Behbahani was the “eloquent voice of conscience,” said Farzaneh Milani, a scholar of Persian literature at the University of Virginia who translated many of Ms. Behbahani’s works into English.

Readers of her poetry encounter a prostitute who uses rouge to mask a face “withered from sorrow,” a woman stoned to death for her alleged adultery, a child who steals the pistachios his family is too poor to buy, and a mother who, grieving the loss of her son in the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, laces together her dead child’s boots and wears them like a necklace.

“I have said again and again that my poetry is the poetry of the moments of my life,” Ms. Behbahani once told the publication Guernica. “I’ve experienced years when the sky over me was blackened with the smoke of missiles and the ground on which I walked turned into ruins under exploding bombs. I’ve seen convoys of war martyrs on their way to the cemeteries. I’ve seen lorries carrying the bodies of executed prisoners, dripping with blood . . . ”

“I’ve stood in long lines,” she continued, “in the rain and under the sun, just to buy a pack of butter or a box of paper napkins. I’ve seen mothers running after the corpses of their martyred sons, oblivious to whether their headscarves or their chadors or their stockings and shoes were slipping off or not.”
Although Ms. Behbahani rejected political ideologies, her work became increasingly dissentious after the Islamic revolution that installed Ayatollah Khomeini. One of her most noted poems was written in 1982 and published the following year. The poem begins:

*My country, I will build you again,*

*If need be, with bricks made from my life.*

*I will build columns to support your roof,*

*If need be, with my bones.*

*I will inhale again the perfume of flowers*

*Favored by your youth.*

*I will wash again the blood off your body*

*With torrents of my tears.*

Government authorities often attempted to intimidate Ms. Behbahani and other writers who sought to defy censors, whether explicitly or through metaphor.

In the 1990s, while visiting a German diplomat, Ms. Behbahani was blindfolded, taken to prison and released the next day in the street with the blindfold still over her eyes. At an International Women’s Day event in Tehran, she told The Washington Post, a police officer beat her with a club that delivered electric shocks.

State authorities reportedly shuttered a publication that printed one of Ms. Behbahani’s poems. In 2010, as she prepared to travel to Paris for an International Women’s Day event there, she was stripped of her passport.

The next year, in a statement on the Iranian new year, President Obama recited from “My Country, I Will Build You Again” and hailed Ms. Behbahani as a woman “who has been banned from traveling beyond Iran, even though her words have moved the world.”

While many intellectuals left Iran after the revolution, Ms. Behbahani chose to remain — to be close to her people and the language they shared.

“I want to live there,” she told The Post, “and die there.”

Siminbar Khalili was born July 19, 1927, in Tehran. Her father, a prominent writer and editor, was exiled for a period by the shah. Her mother was a poet and women’s rights activist. Both parents, who were divorced, encouraged her educational development.
Ms. Behbahani received a law degree from the University of Tehran but did not work as a lawyer. Instead, during the 1950s, '60s and '70s, she taught high school while composing poetry.

Besides her poems, she wrote three autobiographical volumes, two collections of short stories, copious literary articles and essays, and lyrics for well-known Iranian singers. Many of her poems were set to music.

Among students and scholars of Persian literature, she was recognized for her command — and renovation — of the ghazal, a poetic form that is often compared with an English sonnet. Traditionally, a ghazal expressed a man’s feelings for a woman. Ms. Behbahani reversed hundreds of years of literary practice by making men the objects of love.

In one poem, called “Old Eve,” she described the abiding desire of an 80-year-old woman who is still “busy / Offering apples.” The poem ends:

Adam! Leave behind objections and denials
Come! Take a look!
The Eve of eighty
Rivals girls of twenty.

She was divorced from her first husband, Hassan Behbahani. Her second husband, Manouchehr Koushyar, died in 1984 after 14 years of marriage. Survivors include three children from her first marriage, Ali Behbahani and Hossein Behbahani, both of Tehran, and Omid Behbahani of Canberra, Australia; a half-sister; four half-brothers; six grandchildren; and three great-grandchildren.

Thousands were reported to have attended Ms. Behbahani’s funeral in Tehran on Aug. 22.

“You may wish to have me burned, or decide to stone me,” she once wrote, “But in your hand match or stone will lose their power to harm me.”