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A Responsible Parrhesia? A Review of The Price of Secrecy

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A Responsible Parrhesia? A Review of The Price of Secrecy

Abstract

The Price of Secrecy immerses the listener in stories of individual trauma, of child abuse and rape, yet also draws lessons from them of wider social significance. It includes moments of narrative catharsis, interspersed with repeated reminders that the stories are unfinished and open-ended—that the solutions lie out there, in social action, rather than in the stories themselves. The series also gestures towards structural critique, especially of ‘the legal constraints’ it identifies, yet it places greater importance on changing the wider culture through challenging the culture of secrecy and shame around victims’ stories of rape and abuse. This centrally means engaging with ‘family constraints’ in the shape of ‘family honour’. Yet it is also families who are presented as being able to ‘find the best resolution or action plan’, ideally with the aid of ‘someone like a therapist in a position of authority’. ‘Responsible listening’ in this context, does not invite the kind of frank and fearless truth-telling, or *parrhesia* that aims at tearing down hierarchical power relations. On the one hand, the podcast series deliberately invokes the authority of psychiatrists and therapists as sources of prestigious ‘modern’ medical and therapeutic knowledge—inevitably associated with the West—as a way of countering the defensiveness engendered by patriarchal honour codes. On the other hand, the series also shows how the key protagonists in its stories—mainly women—can both challenge and draw on the intimate resources of knowledge and support that family structures can afford, and that neither secrecy, nor a ‘will-to-truth’ that ignores social and cultural context, is productive for the victims.

Keywords

parrhesia, medical authority, child abuse, rape, trauma, solidarity

The Price of Secrecy is a series of podcasts exploring the trauma of child sexual abuse in the context of Iran. Produced, directed, narrated, and largely written by British-Iranian artist and academic Zoha Zokaei, the 2019 series is composed of five episodes, ranging in length from 18 to 29 minutes. The podcasts were first broadcast on Telegram, a popular social media platform in Iran, and are intended, in Zoha's words, to address 'some of the legal, social, cultural and familial constraints that contribute to the silence around the issue of child sexual abuse' in the country. At the time, *The Price of Secrecy* was a pioneering initiative, exploring the issues of child sexual abuse and rape over a year before the #MeToo movement surfaced in Iran.¹ It sought to exploit the discursive space opened up by then recent horrific and high-profile cases, including the rape and murder of Atena Aslani, a 7-year-old girl from Ardabil in the north-west of Iran, whose attacker was publicly executed.

The three stories narrated over the five episodes are all fictionalised and set in Tehran. The stories interweave the narrative voice of Zoha Zokaei with the voices of actors, as well as Zoha's interviews with real-life experts—two psychiatrists from the Iran University of Medical Sciences, a family therapist, and a lawyer and women's rights activist—based in Tehran. At times, Zoha plays herself as a researcher interviewing the characters played by the actors, while the experts comment on what the characters are going through as if the latter were real people. Yet the blurring of fact and fiction has a clear purpose; the formal experimentation is only a means to a civic end. The structure of narration, followed by reflection, seeks to immerse the listener in the problems experienced by fictional abuse survivors and their families in order to make concrete and vivid the lessons drawn by the experts, and impel the audience to act in solidarity with actual survivors.

Each story explores the cost of keeping secret victims' experiences of abuse and how best to allow these experiences to be voiced: in the first two stories, the main characters, along with the narrator-researcher herself, model what Zoha calls 'responsible listening', that takes 'the responsibility of breaking the silence away from the victim and introduces it as a social responsibility' (Episode 1), or as she tells us in the last episode, a form of 'solidarity with the victim'. In the first story, accordingly, the focus is on the choices made by the mother of the victim, and the support she eventually gives to her daughter; in the second story, we never hear directly from the abuse survivor, but only from their distraught family members, partners, and friends. In the third story, delivered in the final, longer

episode, titled 'Lonesome Donya', we become immersed in the interior monologue of the abuse survivor. Paradoxically this device only emphasises the victim's isolation—we hear nothing from her husband or family, only from a real-life psychiatrist in dialogue with Zoha about Donya's case; the apparent intention is to challenge us, as audience members, to act as responsible, solidaristic listeners to real-life Donya.

In her *Third Podcasting Manifesto*,² Jess Shane denounces the commercial format of podcast narratives which seek to comfort and distract their listeners with 'conclusions of reconciliation or catharsis', rather than addressing social issues. She rejects 'stories propelled by symptoms of individual traumas' in favour of 'critiques of their source'. It is difficult to situate *The Price of Secrecy* definitively in terms of these distinctions.³ The series does focus on individual traumas, yet also draws lessons from them of wider social significance. It includes moments of narrative catharsis, in the first two stories, interspersed with repeated reminders that the stories are unfinished and open-ended—that the solutions lie out there, in social action, rather than in the stories themselves. The series also gestures towards structural critique, especially of 'the legal constraints' it identifies, yet it places greater importance on changing the wider culture through challenging the culture of secrecy and shame around victims' stories of rape and abuse. This centrally means engaging with 'family constraints' in the shape of 'family honour', as Zoha shows with her first two stories. Yet it is also families, the therapist interviewed in Episode 2 suggests, who can 'find the best resolution or action plan', ideally with the aid of a third party, 'someone like a therapist in a position of authority'. Broader social recognition of the prevalence of child abuse, Zoha and her experts argue, will in turn enable campaigners to address deficiencies in the law and legal system.

One might feel frustrated by this approach. 'Responsible listening' in this context, does not invite the kind of frank and fearless truth-telling, or *parrhesia*,⁴ that aims at tearing down hierarchical power relations—unlike, for example, some of the practices of the Iranian #MeToo movement from 2020 onwards.⁵ On the one hand, the podcast series deliberately invokes the authority of psychiatrists and therapists as sources of prestigious 'modern' medical and therapeutic knowledge—inevitably associated with the West—as a way of countering the defensiveness engendered by patriarchal honour codes. On the other hand, the series also shows how the key protagonists in its stories—mainly women—can both challenge and draw on the intimate resources of knowledge and support that

family structures can afford, and that neither secrecy, nor a 'will-to-truth' that ignores social and cultural context, is productive for the victims. This intricate navigation of conflicting and overlapping territories—those of medical institutions, the law, family, and the wider culture—is performed in microcosm, as we shall see, in the conclusion to the second story.

In the first story, spread over two episodes, and titled 'Righteousness', Zoha, playing herself as a researcher, seeks to understand what caused a 15-year-old girl, Tannaz, to accuse 18-year-old Sina of rape. In Part 1, we are present at the police station as the anxious parents of both teenagers seek to understand what has happened. The voice of Razieh Raeesi, the lawyer and women's rights activist, intervenes here, telling us that proving rape is 'hard', and that plaintiffs often come under pressure to withdraw their accusation, since the penalty for rape is death. Moreover, we are told the word of the victim is insufficient to prove rape, that they are not automatically entitled to the services of a pro bono lawyer, unlike the defendant, and that plaintiffs may have counter-suits brought against them by the accused or their family for attacking the family's honour—which, as Razieh Raeesi points out, creates 'an additional layer of trauma for the plaintiff' (Episode 1). The patriarchal bias of the criminal justice system is evident from the bored police detective's interview with Shahrzad, the mother of Tannaz: after confirming her divorcee status, he asks her: 'do random men come around [to the house]?' Finally, he tells Shahrzad that the forensic report shows no evidence of rape, and, to her surprise, that Tannaz is not a virgin. Zoha also interviews Shahrzad, and discovers that she 'blames herself', but is unable to find out why. When Zoha interviews the parents of Sina, they are both defensive about their son's actions, even though the father initially mediates doubts about his son's innocence. Again, patriarchal norms are in operation—the father wishes to protect the family's reputation, while the mother refuses to countenance the idea that her 'darling son' could have done anything wrong. Neither of them, Zoha thinks, has talked to their son about the incident.

Eventually, given the forensics report, Shahrzad feels that she has no choice but to revoke the complaint, but in Part 2, she appears, unlike Sina's parents, as a 'responsible listener', someone who supportively encourages her offspring to share their secret. In this episode of 'Righteousness', Tannaz, the girl who called the police, finally appears, in deep distress, asking her mother why she revoked the complaint. The problem, we learn, goes beyond what happened between Tannaz and Sina. Through Zoha's interviews with her fictional mother, but also

through her interactions with real-life psychiatrist Shabnam Nohehsara and family therapist Shahrzad Hashemi, we are invited to understand Tannaz's call to the police as a 'shout out for help' addressed by Tannaz to her mother, a way of coping with the memory of the abuse she suffered between the ages of 8 and 12 at the hands of her uncle, while her mother and her father were splitting up and getting a divorce. What happened between Tannaz and Sina is left unclear, but her mother tells Zoha that what Tannaz 'was going through had nothing to do with anything she might have experienced with her boyfriend'. I found this framing unsatisfactory: while, at one level, the narrative provides a searching critique of the patriarchal police and legal systems, connecting the stigmatisation of rape victims with the culture of shame and secrecy around child abuse, at another level, the narrative tends to downplay the connections and continuities between victims' experiences of rape and sexual assault at various life stages, continuities that are shaped by gender hierarchies. Even the choice of title for this story, 'Righteousness', seems to flatten the differences between the respective grievances of the families involved in the legal case, implying that their standpoints are somewhat equivalent, and that both parties see the matter in overly 'black and white' terms.

The second story in the series, titled 'The Deep and Old Root', is also divided into two episodes. It explores the unacknowledged vulnerabilities of adult men who are victims of child abuse. Zoha tells us that when she broaches the topic of her research at a small gathering of friends, there is 'an awkward silence' in the room. This is a great problem, she is told, among 'runaway girls and child labourers'. The topic of abuse within families is carefully avoided, as is the notion that adult men can be victims. A few days later, Zoha is rung by Amin, who was at the gathering. Amin tells Zoha that he was abused by his great uncle Manouchehr when he was 7 or 8. This abuse continued until Manouchehr left Iran with his family. A few days later, Zoha is rung by his worried sister Mina: Amin has disappeared. This clearly has something to do with the fact that Manouchehr has died, his funeral is imminent, and Amin will be expected to be there to celebrate the life of his well-respected and much-revered uncle. Mina and her partner frantically search Tehran's hospitals for the missing Amin, fearful that he has committed suicide. At the end of Part 1, listeners are left on tenterhooks. Only at the beginning of Part 2 are we given to understand that the body Mina and her partner have located in one hospital is not that of Amin. In Part 2, Mina's search continues, but eventually she cannot keep the news of Amin's disappearance

from her parents, or the reason for it. Mina is surprised, however, by their reaction—they believe her when she tells them about Manouchehr's abuse of Amin. Later, the father confesses to the mother that the great uncle had been accused by the family's domestic help of abusing their child, also aged 7 or 8. The father had persuaded the domestic worker not to go to the police ('poor man, who would have believed him?'), with the result that Manouchehr was free to abuse Amin. 'If you had told me'—the mother furiously shoots back—'I would have known what to do'.

This sharp observation reinforces the overall narrative of the podcast series as a whole. Those with affective skills within the family—primarily though not exclusively women—have the capacity to navigate and mitigate cultural and social constraints for abuse survivors. The last scene at Manouchehr's funeral offers a moving and ironic tribute to this affective capacity. Amin turns up at the funeral, looking dishevelled, but his appearance, as Zoha sympathetically notes, perfectly conforms to the expectation that he should be in deep grief. Throughout the funeral reception at the family home, as Zoha describes it, the movements of Mina and her parents 'resembled a choreographed dance', 'at the mercy of a single move from Amin that could expose [the performance]'. Through Zoha's narrative, we are invited to understand this intricate dance as about much more than keeping up appearances; it is a work of care and solidarity, materialised precisely through impression management—Amin's family are protecting him both from unwanted curiosity, and from the burden of fulfilling social duties. They are also protecting Amin from himself, from his parrhesiastic urge to tell everyone his story, which would only result in his stigmatisation, as Zoha suggests, for 'jeopardising family honour'. As a work of care and solidarity, then, 'responsible listening' makes possible a controlled *alethurgy*, a process of truth-telling which does not always require a frontal challenge to social practices or legal-judicial structures.

In the fifth and last episode of this series, 'Lonesome Donya', the narrator asks: 'what prevents us expressing solidarity with a person who has suffered sexual abuse?' This episode focuses on the story of a young woman who is pregnant with her first child. Donya has married young to escape a violent family environment: she was sexually abused from the age of 6 or 7 by her brother. When the little girl Donya tells her mother, expecting to be believed, the mother rejects her story, shouting at her that she is a 'bad girl'. The narrator seeks to understand Donya's emotional journey from when she found she was pregnant

to the birth of her child. In this story, no other characters appear directly. We become eavesdroppers on Donya's dramatized interior monologue—or rather, what the narrator tells us are 'my interpretations of what I imagine must have gone through Donya's mind'. Donya fears that she will hate her child, that it will look like her brother, but she also hopes that the child will 'save' her. At the very end, we are returned to the narrator's voice, telling us that these issues don't have black and white answers, and posing the question she posed at the beginning: 'how can we be more responsible listeners and reduce the negative effects for survivors?' In other words, again, how can listening function as a form of solidarity? How can we create a space of trust in which the abuse survivor can share their pain?

In Jess Shane's argument, the promise of a horizontal solidarity based on listening is vitiated by the hierarchical structure of mainstream radio programmes and podcasts, where listeners are diverted from, rather than directed to, projects of social change. The intimacy of the podcast format, inherited from legacy radio broadcasting, may serve to immerse the listener in the story, and allow them to identify with the characters, but the narrative structure of the hero's quest for an answer, a quest which eventually leads to 'reconciliation or catharsis', distracts the listener, in this argument, from a re-engagement with reality that might lead to social change. The first two stories, as noted above, do provide a partial catharsis: emotional tension is released when we find that Tannaz's experience with Sina has triggered an older trauma, but she is able to share this with her mother, and when we are told that Amin has turned up, and is physically safe and well. But the narrator also asks us to be patient with ambiguity, incompleteness, and ongoing process. We do not know whether Shahrzad will help her daughter to work through her experience, nor whether Amin will come to terms with his. In that sense, we become aware of our responsibilities as listeners to allow the process of sharing and narrating trauma to continue. Or as the *Third Podcasting Manifesto* puts it—'YES to upholding that the podcast is unfinished until it encounters receptive ears and feeds conversation geared to action'.

In reviewing this podcast series, I frequently turned to Orkideh Behrouzan's *Prozak Diaries* (2020), a work of medical anthropology which seeks to contextualise trauma and how it is addressed in an Iranian context. Behrouzan studied the trauma narratives of the generation who grew up during the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, in the wake of the 1979 revolution, the *jangzadeh* or 'war-struck', who lost parents on the frontline or suffered as Iranian cities were

subjected to missile attack. She argues that when members of this generation self-consciously use high-prestige medicalised terms, such as *toroma* and *depreshen*, they become, not passive objects of medicalising narratives, but empowered self-diagnosticians, deploying a language of therapy that may at times evoke institutional power hierarchies, but is also part of popular culture. To use terms such as these, redolent of progressive scientific modernity, makes it more likely that one's pain would be socially validated. Thus, for victims to share stories of trauma, Behrouzan argues, meant they have the potential to become agentic narrators of their own suffering. However, unlike the pain of rape or abuse survivors, the pain of the 80s generation carries little social stigma and breaches few social taboos. This perhaps allows us to understand why *The Price of Secrecy* gives such weight to expert testimony. Framing the experiences of abuse victims in authoritative medical or therapeutic terms may enable the victims to share their stories more easily and allow listeners to accord these stories their due recognition. Such hierarchies may, up to a point, enable rather than stifle horizontal solidarities.

[*The Price of Secrecy*](#), podcast, 5 episodes, 2019.

Produced, directed, and narrated by Zoha Zokaei, written by Zoha Zokaei (except for Episode 5, co-written with Saleh Tasbihi).

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- ¹ Tafakori, S. (2020, September 1). Iran's MeToo movement challenges patriarchy and Western stereotypes. *Open Democracy*.
 - ² Shane, J. (2020). Toward a Third Podcasting. *RadioDoc Review* 8(1) <https://ro.uow.edu.au/rdr/vol8/iss1/4/> .
 - ³ In fairness, Jess Shane recognises that 'the notion of categorising podcasts' in this way 'is inherently imperfect, incomplete and unstable'.
 - ⁴ Lorenzini, D., & Tazzioli, M. (2018). Confessional Subjects and Conducts of Non-Truth: Foucault, Fanon, and the Making of the Subject. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 35(1), 71–90. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276416678291>
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