

# Irshad Manji: *Risking utopia*

*Empathy, agency, and accountability in today's society*

BY SARAH K. MURPHY

Irshad Manji, said to be one of tomorrow's 100 leaders by Maclean's magazine, was a guest of this year's Third Annual Interdisciplinary Undergraduate conference on women's issues at UPEI.

Author of *Risking Utopia*, and host of CBC radio's *Index*, Manji bombarded her audience with provocative thoughts and examples to reinforce the notion that everyone should "approach life with the idea that everything is possible."

This was Manji's second visit to UPEI. In 1992-93, Manji witnessed and assisted the establishment of the UPEI Women's Centre.

"Real change starts with awareness," she said. "The centre brought the issues home." She gave the centre rave reviews, adding that she believes that now young women on campus are giving honest and straightforward input about events that may and do occur on campus during September's Orientation Week, including sexual harassment. This education is resulting in a somewhat safer environment.

Many topics were brought forward during her presentation, intended more as a dialogue with the audience than as a monologue by the speaker. The discussion revolved around empathy, agency accountability, social insecurities, and labels.

"I'm a Muslim, a feminist, and a lesbian," Manji remarked. "Labels reduce us. We therefore become less than who we are."

Manji suggested that these labels only tell us of her, not about her. Manji believes that we have to care about one another to move beyond labels which can lead to torment and violence.

"Radical democracy starts with the individual and ripples out to others. It sheds

light on the marginal line to the mainstream," Manji said when explaining her views on understanding radical democracy. She claims that an improved democracy would be one with accountability, agency, and empathy at its core.

"Negotiation is the only none negotiable," she said, and added that we must make the best of what we have.

Manji observed that PEI is the only province without a right to information law.

Because of this, she says

"Islanders are at a major disadvantage when it comes to accountability."

This point raised several questions and reactions from the audience. Several seemed worried at the lack of interest of their fellow Islanders and the lack of effort from their provincial government to improve on the present conditions.

Enhanced by a video report, her most striking and touching story of empathy,

agency and accountability was that of the Food for Thought program. This program was put together by Norman Edwards, who is HIV positive, and his partner, Russell Conley, both of Vancouver.

The video featured the story of Edwards and Conley, who had realized that the lower income of HIV positive and AIDS patients often resulted in poor eating habits and lifestyles. They decided to put together a Cafe/Bistro-style

free restaurant where these people could come together to eat a healthy meal and discuss their affliction.

"The pill can't work if they have no food to work with," claimed Edwards who believes that programs like his will save "big bucks" to the health care system.

After the video, Manji closed with "that is my utopia in action. We all want to live life with passion and that is what radical democracy is."

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