

exiled ink!



The Landscape of Exiled Women
poetry • prose • articles • reviews

Summer 200>

price £3

Editorial

This issue is dedicated to Ilya Kormiltsev: Russian poet and visionary, who performed his work so courageously while lying prone on a couch at the Exiled Lit Café evening in January 2007. As a dissenting poet, songwriter and publisher, he was a household name in Russia.

Our main section is on the landscape of exiled women from both the male and female perspective. The poetry, essays and short stories focus on a range of countries and cultures – Somalia, Iran, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Ireland and the female exilic space in general. The suffering of Iranian women being whipped, stoned and imprisoned in Iran is depicted but so too is the increasing literary output of Iranian women, both at home and in exile. However, female writers who subvert the accepted norms of their culture find themselves endangered. Nawal Al Saadawi stands accused of apostasy and disrespect of religion, following the publication of her play *God resigns at the Summit Meeting* in January 2007 in Cairo while Taslima Nasrin is being ostracised and hounded in India because of her views on Islam and Sharia law and in favour of women's rights and equal-

ity. Likewise, the Dutch Somali woman activist and writer Ayan Hirsi Ali, is generally considered notorious by the Somali community and a Somali exiled woman ponders on her ideas. Women are depicted as victims punished by men in the poem 'Lot's Wives'. However, in a short story by a male writer, a woman avenges herself on a man for all the female circumcision women have suffered. Reza Baraheni articulates the enormous difficulty of writing about a forever internalised prison experience: an encounter with a pregnant woman about to be killed whose concern is with her butterfly, her moving unborn baby.

The dilemmas faced by the exilic space are represented. The Congolese women writers, Maguy Rashidi-Kabamba and Céline Kula-Kim adopt a positive attitude towards immigration given their view that it provides new possibilities for women. Nevertheless, they stress the importance of maintaining their African culture in parallel. In exile even constructs of idealised beauty are challenged with a Somali male poet's traditional image of beautiful Somali women conflicting with their own new westernised perceptions.

Editorial Committee

David Clark
Lynette Craig (Poetry Editor)
Janna Eliot
Miriam Frank
Ziba Karbassi
Jennifer Langer
Isabelle Romaine

exiled ink!

Exiled Ink! is published by Exiled Writers Ink
registered as Charity No. 1097497

Editorial Office

Exiled Writers Ink
31 Hallswelle Road
London NW11 0DH
Tel: +44 (0) 20 8458 1910
jennifer@exiledwriters.fsnet.co.uk
www.exiledwriters.co.uk



Design and Layout

Angel Design.net

The cover image is by the Iranian artist in exile in Germany: **Shahrokh Reisi**, and is entitled 'Only Ziba's Shadow'
Back cover image: Rebwar. Designed by Marketing Services UEL

© All work is copyrighted to the author or artist. All rights reserved. No part of this magazine may be used or reproduced without permission of the publisher. Views expressed in the magazine are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of this magazine.

ISSN 1744-149B

Contents:



The Landscape of Exiled Women

- 4 Lash • *Mehrangiz Rassapour*
- 5 Stoning • *Mehrangiz Rassapour*
- 6 A Somali Woman on a Somali Woman • *Keena-Diid Caynaane*
- 8 Broccoli • *Abdullahi Botan*
- 9 Crossing Borders • *Jennifer Langer*
- 11 Iranian Women Writing in Exile • *Rouhi Shafii*
- 13 A Woman • *Reza Baraheni*
- 15 Democratic Republic of Congo:
Women Writers: Migration and Women's writing space • *Isabelle Romaine*
- 17 Lot's Wives • *Pireeni Sundaralingam*
- 17 Citizenship • *Pireeni Sundaralingam*
- 17 Evening • *Pireeni Sundaralingam*
- 18 A Night in Dalston • *Sulaiman Addonia*
- 20 Nawal Al Saadawi • *Fathieh Saudi*

The Poetic Exilic Space

- 21 Boxing Day • *Shanta Acharya*
- 21 Easter Message • *Shanta Acharya*
- 22 Mules on the Tube • *Yuyutsu RD Sharma*
- 23 Going Grey in Exile • *Mark Hill*
- 24 Seeking a Shelter • *Mir Mahfuz Ali*
- 24 Wisdom Came in the Cold Winter • *Mir Mahfuz Ali*
- 24 The Eye of an Exile • *Nkwachukwu Ogbuagu*
- 25 Birth of a Language • *Fathieh Saudi*

Russian and Chechen Spaces

- 26 Ilya Kormiltsev: Russian poet and visionary • *Miriam Frank*
- 28 It's Hard to be a Chechen • *Anna Gunin*
- 29 *I Am a Chechen!* by German Sadulaev • *Translated by Anna Gunin*
- 30 Andrey Platonov: Utopia, Exile and Orphanhood • *Robert Chandler*

Balkan Past Times

- 33 Kosova • *Valbona Voca Bashota*
- 33 My Suitcase • *Valbona Voca Bashota*
- 33 Home is where the Sun Rises • *Valbona Voca Bashota*
- 34 The Kiss of the River Banks • *Mirza Mustovic*
- 35 The Clown • *Sonja Besford*

- 37 The Making of a Dissident Writer • *Shereen Pandit*

Reviews

Books

- 39 Look, we have coming to Dover by Daljit Nagra • *Janna Eliot*
- 40 Bells of Speech by Nazand Begikhani • *Lynette Craig*
- 40 The Myrtle Tree by Jad El Hage • *David Clark*
- 41 The Reluctant Fundamentalist by Mohsin Hamid • *Nia Davies*

Film

- 41 Mahnaz Mohammadi: Women Without Shadows • *Cristina Viti*
- 42 Film and Censorship • *Nathalie Teitler*

Biographies

The Landscape of Exiled Women

Mehrangiz Rassapour

(M. Pegah)

Lash

Translated from the Persian by Robert Chandler

Confess... lash!
Confess... lash!

Where is the stolen morning?
In the continent of blood!
Trying to be provocative?... lash!

In what state were you arrested?
I was stamping morning's passport
Smuggling contraband?... lash!

Where is your husband!
He's lost in his dark wedding-suit.
Wanting to ban marriage?... lash!

Where did you steal your fever?
Eh... Eh... From the wounds of day.
Coughing an ancient cough!... lash!

Display your dreams!
They've escaped.
Seize them!
They've sought asylum

Where?
In the navel of a star.
Which star?
The star of a fortunate tomorrow.
Trying to instil hope?... lash!

Your dreams have been seen.
Your thought clamour has been heard.
What do you have to say?
My fever... must have betrayed me.
Still don't surrender?... lash!

Say out loud what you're murmuring!
I can see you clearly in the darkness.
We'll take out your eyes... lash!
I can see with my skin.
We'll peel off your skin... lash!
I'll see with my bones.
We'll burn your bones... lash!
I'll see with my ashes.
We'll cast your ashes to the winds... lash!

You will multiply my eyes.
The sky will be full of my eyes
What will you do with the new buds?
With the birds?
With the water?
With yourself?
Put the air in quarantine?
Trying to be clever?... Lash!

Where have you hidden your destiny?
In what follows on from day.
Needling night?... Lash!

Where have you stored the power of your hate?
Yesterday I sent it off to my child.
Your child? Ha-ha. Ha-ha.
We snuffed out his life... the day before yesterday!
...?! ...?! ...?!
May ligh...
May light... shine...
May light shine... on his place.

What was your father's job?... lash!
He ran the length of his ill-fortune.

Where is your mother?... lash!
The moment I was arrested, she left.
Where to?... lash!
To visit the grave of her hopes.
Where are her hopes?... lash!

Under your lash!
Laughing at us?... lash... lash... lash

lash
la...sh
la

* * *

Ha-ha Ha-ha Ha-ha
Her spirit laughed
Opened the stolen morning
Put her head on the horizon
And rolled
onto the surface
of light!

Mehrangiz Rassapour

(M. Pegah)

Stoning

Translated from the Persian by Robert Chandler

Throw stones

Throw stones

At lewd

debauched

criminal me!

Throw stones!

I was all in red

stone me

My clothes were the colour of my blood

stone me

Blood- red is rude

stone me

My long hair longed for air

stone me

But we can't have air here

stone me

My footsteps called out

stone me

Sound excites lust

stone me

My eyes

fell upon

a man

stone me

Seeing is forbidden

stone me

Kissing is forbidden

stone me

Drinking is forbidden

stone me

Sobriety is forbidden

stone me

The past is forbidden

stone me

The future is forbidden

stone me

I'm a woman

stone me

I have eyes

stone me

I have a tongue

stone me

I have a brain

stone me

You who were not born of a mother!

stone me

stone...

stone...

stone...

A Somali Woman on a Somali Woman: Talking about Ayan Hirsi Ali

Keena-Diid Caynaane



A

Ayan Hirsi Ali is a Somali born Dutch feminist and prominent and controversial author, film maker, atheist, and critic of Islam. She was a member of the Dutch Parliament for three years. Hirsi Ali wrote the script and provided the voice-over for *Submission*, a film directed by Theo van Gogh, which criticised the treatment of women in Islamic society. The film's release sparked much controversy, and became violent when radical Islamist Mohammed Bouyeri, murdered Van Gogh in 2004. A letter attached to Van Gogh's body with a knife was primarily a death threat to Hirsi Ali and as a result of further death threats, she was given protection. After controversy about her status in Holland, Hirsi Ali left for the US to take up a position at the American Enterprise Institute. She also published her autobiography, *Infidel*, (English translation, Feb. 2007) and is currently working on another book, *Shortcut to Enlightenment*.

Discovering Ayan

I have read Ayan's autobiography, and I must say that I enjoyed reading most of it, up until she began talking about religion and politics. I had not followed Ayan's story much until the end of last year, until one day I went to Camden Town with another Somali woman. There I saw a group of vagabond Somali men gathering around in front of a derelict building, yelling in loud voices and holding an old Somali newspaper. What is this place, I asked my companion. *Makhaayad Soomaaliyeed ayaa inta ku taala*, a Somali community centre, she said. Then, suddenly I felt nostalgic, craving some *Canjeela*, do you think that they have *Cajeela*? Yes, even though made it is made by men she replied, Shall we go inside and have it, I haven't eaten it for ages.

As I entered the Makhaya centre, I saw a Somali newspaper, lying on a table, for sale and on its front page there was a photo of a young Somali woman. The caption triumphantly said: "The Infidel was kicked out of Europe". I got a sense of sudden shock and said: "Oh Good Lord, who is she, what has she done to merit such hate, poor woman?" I picked up the paper to read the story in more detail. But before I finished speaking, an old woman, who was praying in a corner, in the women's segregated area, gave me a furious look and began yelling at me.

In the shop there were four other Somali women; apart from me, they were all wearing the *Jalaabiib* or hoodies, in the traditional manner; indeed, appearing the very opposite of the way in which Ayan was represented. An old Somali peasant woman, who owns the shop, jumped and looked at me with a furious look, saying: "Do not say that you have not heard of this evil woman? The mother of all Evil and Satan himself?" No I said, I never heard of her, what has she done that is so bad, worst than Mooryan? "Don't say that you didn't hear of her, the one who shuns us and all good Muslims, who turned into a faithless Infidel. May her dirty blood be spilled on the ground!" "What has she done? She has left God's Zero", said another woman. "Hah, I see, so she is a convert to Christianity, is that why you want to kill her?" I was now feeling intimidated, especially as I was not covered, and feared those women might even attack me. Another woman who had been praying now joined in the discussion and said. "You know what, as I was praying I saw a light from heaven (*Samada*), and I think that I am the chosen and honoured one to kill that Infidel woman". Then the eldest of the women said: "No, you are not going to kill her, it will be me who will kill her, God has already spoken to me in dream, and told me to carry a knife at all times. One day I will have the chance to meet that woman and I will slice her body and flesh into pieces. And in exchange I will go to heaven with my shoes on."

Before I only felt intimidated, now I was really terrified, as I saw the passion in these women's faces, wising to murder some one. "So you think that you have a God given right to murder if a Muslim person converts to Christianity? And then you think that you will go to heaven for that?" "No, it is worse than that. She crossed all the lines and frontiers and even went into the grave of the Prophet Mohamed and insulted Allah," said the woman yelling historically. At that point I was still not convinced that Ayan indeed deserved the Fathwa against her, but obviously I knew that I could not reason with these kinds of people. Instead I began to find out more about Ayan's story.

Then, a few months after this episode, I bought her autobiography, and I could not put it down. All I wanted was to read the

book even whilst waiting for the bus. However, as I reached half way through, I lost interest.

Ayan's style of writing and herself

First of all when I read Ayan's story, and learnt something about her ability, courage and free thought, I was really so proud to find that a Somali woman like her can exist in this world. Before that I never believed that there could be a single Somali woman who could resist wearing the *Jalaabiib*, even in exile. I do admire Ayan's courage and intercultural level of thinking. I also agree with her when she talks about some immigrant communities not appreciating the kindness and generosity of the host nation. This includes those Somali immigrants living in the West who maintain extremist views, dislike non-Muslims and do not respect the values and way of life of their adopted countries.

I do believe that Ayan can be a role model and an important figure for immigrants to follow, as well as her fellow Muslim women, because of her courage and her outspoken ability, if she uses it in a sensible and balanced way.

I also liked the simplistic writing style; her story is clear and easy to follow. In addition, she includes a lot of historical and factual background on Somalia and as well as details about life in exile.

Where I Disagree with her Opinions

Some of her opinions, particularly about immigrants, religion and politics I found rather too radical, provocative and offensive. I agree with her when she talks about mistakes made by immigrants not appreciating the host country. Ayan points out that ignorant parents raise ignorant children. This is true enough, but her solution is too radical; to educate immigrant children as fully integrated and merged into the host society. In a way, she sounds out of touch with immigrants, with their children and their lives as immigrants. She focuses too much on errors committed by immigrant communities, but this is unfair and overlooks the fact that there are many decent and hard working people amongst the immigrants. Ayan fails to take into account the hardships faced by immigrants and should be more supportive of them, rather than criticising those already in vulnerable and disadvantaged positions. As a result, she has alienated her own community, instead of winning their trust and approval. For instance, Ayan finds it unacceptable that immigrants should resist integration with the natives; yet, she does not mention the other side of the coin, namely that often the natives do not welcome such integration either. Ayan fails to mention the suffering and hardship, discrimination, unemployment isolation and degradation that many, even well-educated, Somalis face everyday in exile.

Religion

In my view, religion is a delicate and sensitive topic. Religion is a faith and a basic way of life for most Muslims and so I think that Ayan went too far in offending and provoking many Muslim people. She could have softened her harsh criticism of religion by pointing out that religion is not at fault but has been misused by certain sections of the community.

As for Ayan blaming many of the beloved and ancient saints, respected by millions of people all over the world, it was not a good thing to do. For example her script for the film made by Theo Van Gogh was offensive and provocative to Muslims. While it maybe true that atrocities and persecutions are carried out in the name of religion, it is contemporary human beings who are carrying out these deeds, not the Prophet Mohamed, who died



many centuries ago. Of course I do not condone or agree with fellow Muslims who incite others to kill those who dare to criticise Islam. This too is going too far. In addition, we are currently at a time of tensions and hostility between Muslims and the West, and so especially under the circumstances it is best to approach the topic of religion softly and with a balanced perspective.

Theo van Gogh

I do not know much about Theo Van Gogh, I just heard that he was a provocative and controversial film maker. And I feel sorry for his son and family, I think that his death was unfair and a misfortune. He was a Dutch man, living in his homeland, a country known for its liberal and non-violent approach. So it is scary to hear that an immigrant killed such a man just because of his views. Immigrants came to Europe seeking a better life, but also seeking protection of their human rights. Such a killing goes against everything that we should be protecting, human rights and the sanctity of human life. However, Theo Van Gogh had underestimated the seriousness of the offence his film had given in regard to Islam. Such a film can create a lot of damage, stirring hatred and hostility between natives and immigrants. Maybe Van Gogh had not fully realised how distorted a picture of Islam his film was presenting.

Ayan's Opinion

In conclusion I think that Ayan's opinions in relation to Islam and immigrants are too negative and radical. Her disregard for religion causes her to treat the subject with great insensitivity, thereby creating antipathy and animosity amongst her fellow immigrants, as well as greatly harming the women's cause, which becomes tarred by the same brush.

Note: canjeela is a kind of pancake.

Abdullahi Botan

Abdullahi Botan and Rob Inglis are grateful to Asha-kin Duale for the preliminary translation on which the following English versions are based. English version by Rob Inglis

'In Somalia an attractive woman would traditionally be likened to a tree such as the gracious acacia or to a well-formed camel or horse. Young Somalis born in Britain who like a girl's appearance might call her 'fish and chips' or 'broccoli' – especially if she is not in the Somali mould of full-bodied, voluminously clad womanhood.'

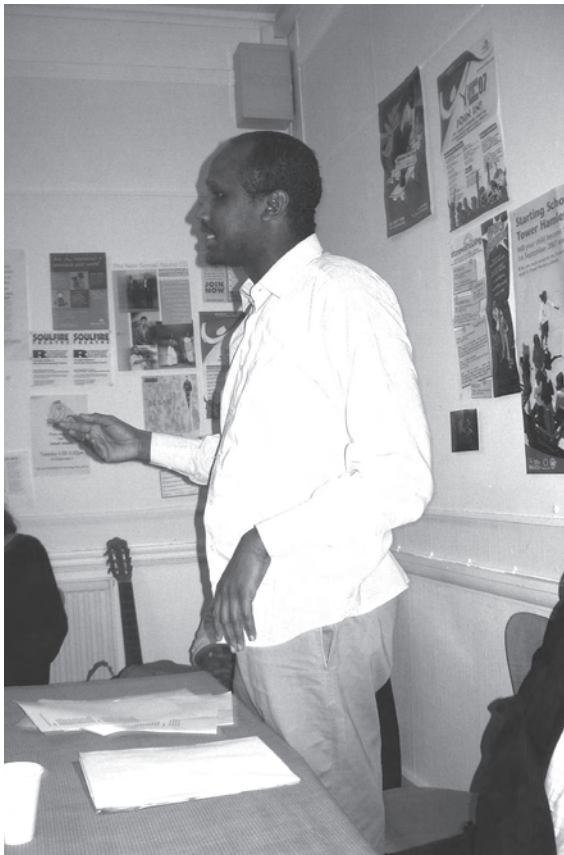


Photo: Jennifer Langer

Broccoli

Beautiful Somali girl in Britain,
no longer happy to be plump
always struggling to be slim,
shunning food and drink
as you pursue your diet

With stomach tightly drawn
and no bottom at all
you seek the perfect image,
dressed like a baby
shirt shrunk up your midriff
and tight stretch pants

O my lanky broccoli
mature mushroom stem
Scottish new potatoes
ladies fingers
how I need you
can't live without you
Come with me to the bar –
I pray God you won't go there alone
nor ever run wild
smoking and drinking beer

Exiled Women Crossing Borders

Jennifer Langer

For some exiled women writers border crossings are more than metaphor. To what extent have exiled women adapted to their new Western diasporic space? A distinction has to be made between the internal, created space of the literary text and the lived experience of the author but these are frequently blurred.

Does exile represent rebirth for exiled women writers? Exiled women writers generally write them selves in accordance with theories postulated by the scholar, Hélène Cixous. In *Laugh of the Medusa*, Cixous writes about her theory of 'écriture féminine' which enables the woman's voice to be articulated to retrieve absent female identities and voices without the control of male patriarchal discourses which she calls 'phallogentrism'. In fact, Cixous perceives this as the disruption of patriarchal culture. She states: 'She must write her self because this is the invention of a new insurgent writing which when the moment of her liberation has come, will allow her to carry out the indispensable ruptures and transformations in her history.' (p. 250) Despite originating from Algeria, she does not explore the particular perspective of Arab women writing 'themselves'. However, in the home country it was extremely dangerous for women to transgress or subvert the code and the symbolic order. Males disrupted female free expression so that women writers risked their lives and in fact replacing the metaphor of Cixous' women's milk, is the blood of man splattering women's writing and condemning her to silence. In terms of exile, Mahnaz Afkhami in *Women in Exile* makes the point that:

Along with the loss of their culture and home comes the loss of the traditional patriarchal structures that limited their lives in their own land. Exile in its disruptiveness resembles a rebirth for the woman. The pain of breaking out of a cultural cocoon brings with it the possibility of an expanded universe and a freer, more independent self. (p.45)

However, I suggest that the new exiled space is a conflicted one so that this notion is quite idealistic and is certainly a long process with enduring tensions between the conscious and unconscious. It is questionable whether the statement can be reconciled with the feelings of isolation and rootlessness articulated by so many exiled women writers who have also voiced feelings of conflict between their traditionally accepted role of the disempowerment of the female voice and the freedom to express themselves in the West. In exile, there is to a certain extent a reproduction of social relations for women writers in terms of gender and power. At gatherings of exiled

writers in London, for example some of the women writers told me they were concerned about reading their work on their innermost experiences because of the men present from their communities and because of the strong honour and shame ethic. Social taboos are still strong leading to a process of self-censorship by women and censorship by the family. It seems that traditional gender power structures within cultures are maintained, so women remain within the social, cultural and religious codes to preserve the given boundaries. In addition, some women feel frustrated, isolated and terrified in an alien culture with their experiences in exile often marginalised because they are generally inarticulate in the public domain, reflecting the history, culture and traditions of the female voice and its disempowerment in the male dominated society. Many of the writers have proclaimed with emotion: Our voice is not heard, our voice is silenced; we haven't got a voice.

Are patriarchal systems transferred? I had certain expectation about the themes that would be pre-occupying exiled women writers, namely the experience of having been persecuted in a war situation and of displacement. However, given that the power structures, oppression and conflict connect in so many of the countries, I should not have been as shocked and horrified as I was, to find that so many of the writers were focusing on being victims of the patriarchal society, within the family, society and state. In *Daughter-in-Law*, a story within a story, by Aydin Mehmet Ali, a young Turkish mother who has been in London just a short time, is raped by her father-in-law. However, this fact is not revealed to the Turkish speaking audience of women in the story but only to the British reader as it is deemed too shocking and painful within the community. A number of the women writers in particular deploy literature polemically and didactically to expose the iniquities of their patriarchal societies and the connections with state policy. In her short story, *The Journey*, Samia Dahnaan from Algeria, describes the victimisation of herself and a friend in Algeria by male 'fundamentalists' who finally shoot her friend because she refuses to cover her hair. Nazand Begikhani from Kurdistan, has written a poem *Man the Sinful God* in which she describes the ingrained attitudes of men towards women.

Oh Man!
You are for me
Father
Brother
Lover
Son
But I am for you only shame

The similarity of experience is surprising and shocking and the anger expressed by the women writers is palpable. So much of the literature illustrates the depths of the women's pain and despair. This is therefore politicised literature, which tries to change the status quo and would certainly be banned or censored in many of the writers' countries and put the writer's life at risk in the home country. I sense a fear by the writers because of the enormous pressure on them to conform to the norms of society; to deviate from these norms is to place themselves in danger. In spite of this, many of the women writers are courageous in that they write about being victims in the patriarchal society inextricably linked with state policy and religion. Is this Cixous' 'écriture féminine' manifesting itself in exile? I suggest that the women's discourse is an essential part of the process of searching for some kind of agency in exile.

However, there are contradictions: many women writers in exile continue to have difficulty in writing openly partly because of fear of retribution in exile. The fear is caused by the repercussions their writing could have on their families still living in their countries and by spies in the UK. This may manifest itself in caution when writing about politics and the deployment of allegory in the use of a pen-name.

Censorship is one of the serious threats to the freedom of the writer and in many cases, in order for a writer to remain in her country there was a compulsion to operate a system of self-censorship or to veil one's ideas in allegory and imagery. Valbona Luta, a Kosovan writer, has explained that because of the censorship operated by the Serbs, she still finds it difficult to write openly after years of self-censorship. In many countries the power of the pen was respected and often the only means of opposition and therefore extremely dangerous for the writer and so in Iran poetry was known as the 'symbolic language of political dissidence'. Many writers in exile continue to have difficulty in writing openly partly because of this. Also in Iranian culture a concept called 'sharm' applies to women and involves both an internal state and an external behaviour. It accompanies feelings of embarrassment, shyness or self-restraint and a women's public self-erasure. At a conference about Arab women, Arab women academics postulated that some Arab women possessed a second layer of complexity and that in a non-democratic society various devices such as deviousness, madness and exorcism ('zar') were deployed by women to gain their freedom. One Iranian writer has described the issue of adjusting to freedom given that in Iran there was the tension of living democratically inside the home but having to adopt different covert behaviour outside the home because of the secret police. Similarly in the case of Iraqi writers in exile, Haifa Zangana has described the difficulty for exiled writers in liberating themselves from ideological slavery, struggling with political independence and expressing themselves freely. Fawzi Karim, the Iraqi poet, suggests that no Iraqi writer was a free thinker because they were instilled with ideological beliefs such as nationalism, communism or Islam with a large number of writers having been allied to the Communist party. Writers had

three choices – to openly follow the accepted ideology, to choose silence or to continue writing through allegory and mystification of history.

Is exile as a safe space to write about gender specific persecution and the body? It may be many years before female exiled writers externalise the events of persecution. I suggest that it is more difficult for the woman writer because of the honour and shame ethos prevalent in most of the communities and because of taboos around the woman's voice. Generally the silence of the women in this area is significant. There are clear gender differences here in terms of the silence of the women compared to work by male exiled writers. Whereas the male writers in my first book, *The Bend in the Road* (1998), describe the detail of torture and suffering, the women avoid this kind of detail. Valbona Ismaili Luta has said 'Where we come from, it is better to die than to be raped.' Few writers have written about the mass rape in Bosnia, although there were tens of thousands of rape victims with rape being used as a war strategy to terrorise and eliminate a population. Denial may also be a way of dealing with atrocities too terrible to confront. Generally, women who write about gender specific persecution, usually do so in exile and even then, would not generally write in detail about the atrocity because of the community in exile's link with the home country and the honour and shame ethos. Therefore, Asiye Guzel is unusual in terms of her book on her experience of being tortured and gang-raped by the security police in Istanbul, being published in Turkey, her country of origin. A journalist and activist whose best-selling book was one of the first detailed accounts of state-based violence to emerge, she says 'It had a big response, especially from women, because rape and sexual harassment are very widespread there and women would keep their experiences hidden.' She also states that however enlightened some women may be, because Turkey is feudal, women inevitably take on the feudal view in terms of adopting a judgemental perspective towards women who have been raped. However, as a result of her book being published, she has fled to exile in Sweden. Haifa Zangana is also unusual in that she writes almost openly about her time in prison where she was ill treated by males. She has stated a reason for writing:

'Is it my charm for curing the leprosy that permeated my body on the day it was touched by whatever I hate; my charm for warding off forgiveness that comes with passing of time, for repelling widespread failing memory, repelling the return to a country where they still practice insulting rituals, repelling the conscious emptying of memory or its rage, repelling oblivion, oblivion, oblivion?'

A fictitious character may be deployed as in the case of the novelette *Une Femme en Exil* by the Congolese writer, Amba Bongo, in which she describes her prison cell and the nakedness enforced on the main character, Anna, by the male perpetrators. The victimisation of women by men is also described by Shahrnush Parsipur in her short story *The Executions*. Shahrnush Parsipur was imprisoned four times by the Iranian government for her writing and has been exiled from Iran, where all her works are banned, and now lives in the United States as a political refugee.

'On the last day of her life, Shahin had told her friend that she thought she was going to be executed. She knew this because the interrogator had fondled her breasts and that was a sure sign of doom. There was a rumour that virgins condemned to die were married to the Revolutionary Guards before their execution. According to tradition, if a virgin girl is buried, she will take a man with her.'

Apart from the traumatic aspects, the unveiling of the body is problematic for some of the community of exiled women. Cixous states in *Laugh of the Medusa*

'By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her. Which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display – the ailing or dead figure which so often turns out to be the nasty companion, the cause and location of inhibitions. Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time.' (p.250)

Ziba Karbassi is a poet who has received threats from Iranian women because 'I write about the body'. I would suggest that by imposing restrictions on other women, they are indirectly avenging themselves on the men who

confine them to the private space, thereby colluding with the perpetuation of the system especially the honour and shame ethos.

It can be posited that women have adapted to their new Western diasporic space to a limited extent. Complex feelings are articulated about their interaction with the indigenous society and the extent of the adaptation to the diasporic space is affected by a large range of factors, which are to some extent deeply internalised. The length of time the women writers are in exile affects their perspective in that the writer may feel her identity is evolving and changing from feeling wholly alienated from the mainstream culture to absorbing mainstream influences and being involved in a process of dialogue. Exiled women writers are engaging in the creative process in the borders between the self and the other, thus producing literature with novel and different insights and perspectives so that the border becomes wavy and fluid. As a result, existing borders are questioned and shift. *Crossing Borders* is a meeting point of the exiled writer and the new reader/listener in the exiled land.

Iranian Women Writing in Exile: An Overview

Rouhi Shafii



Iranian Feminism by Arvin Mad

Some three decades ago a revolution occurred in Iran that changed Iranian society at its core. It had a profound effect in the Middle East and perhaps the world. Unlike the early twentieth century Constitutional Revolution, whose primary aim was to modernise the country and bring it up to the present age, the revolution of 1979 went in the opposite direction. This revolution, which overthrew the Shah's regime, was taken over by an Islamic leader with millions of followers who were against modern ideas and modernisation in any form and shape.

To analyse the essence of people's rejection of the Shah's era is beyond the scope of this article, but just to mention the importance of the huge dissatisfaction felt

by the poor and disadvantaged and their resentment of the wealthy minority that had ruled Iran for the previous 50 years. Indeed, while it is fair to say that the Pahlavi Dynasty, and especially its founder Reza Shah, had done much to modernise the country, this had been done under the guise of a strict and repressive dictatorship.

Mohammad Reza Shah, who had the full backing of the west, instituted some reforms in terms of land redistribution, the right of women to vote and changes in the family code. Yet, such reforms came from above, without any real participation by the people and with great opposition from the established clergy, who used their traditional popular power base to turn the people against the regime. Moreover, the Shah relied heavily on a tight security system, with imprisonment and executions as the main means to silence opponents. In addition, he opened the country's doors to the foreign enterprise, administrators and advisors, mainly from the US; a phenomenon deeply resented by the Iranian people.

This is the background to the 1979 revolution, in which almost all sections of society participated. But from its inception, the Islamists, who were well organised and had a charismatic leader, took power into their hands and did not share it with any other political group or individual. They established an Islamic state governed by Islamic laws derived from the Koran, a phenomenon that had seemed almost unthinkable only a few decades earlier. Slowly, people's eyes opened to the fact that in effect they had jumped from the frying pan into the fire.

The first victims were the Iranian women who had participated in their millions to overthrow the Shah. These ranged from Islamist housewives to modern office girls, university lecturers, teachers, civil servants, doctors, lawyers, judges and so on. The first decree issued by the new regime mentioned the compulsory veil that all women were expected to wear. That was the beginning of a long list of rights that were taken from women. The story of the Iranian women's opposition to the Islamic regime is a long battle of heroism and bravery as well as sadness and despair. As recently as June 2006 and March 2007, women activists were beaten up and taken to prison for participating in peaceful demonstrations for equal rights and the abolition of discriminatory laws.

From the early 1980s, the pressure on intellectuals and the educated intensified. As many as three to four million felt the brunt of persecution, mostly educated and professionals, under arrest on various charges, losing their livelihood to the constant harassment and detention, or had members of their family in prison and executed. Some, who were opposed to having their sons sent to the front during the long 8 years of Iran-Iraq war, left Iran en masse. Women constituted a large proportion of those affected simply because they were under more intensified pressure than men. People left the country through the mountains of Kurdistan to Turkey, the deserts of south-east Iran to Pakistan, the north and on to the former Soviet Union, or else to the Persian Gulf. The trauma of such journeys of flight left scars on many, even to this day. The process of becoming a refugee, asking for asylum and landing in a new country and starting afresh.

The first few years of every one's life in exile are the most difficult; difficulties settling down, language barriers and many other problems. One is confused, depressed, frightened and unaware of one's future. As time goes by, women settle down, find jobs and the children start school; they then have time to re-think, both about the past and about the future, and some take the pen to record their history and their memories.

Women's writings after the revolution can be placed in the following categories:

1- Academics who publish books on Islam and the dramatic changes it has brought to the country.

2- Women scholars who research the interpretations of Islamic laws and their incorporation into the modern law. They believed that there is space and opportunity for change from within religion itself. They even interviewed top ranking clerics in Iran to get their approval and find a way out of the stalemate. A number of books were published in this area.

3- Women who were not academics but had a talent for writing, started writing their memoirs. Indeed, we witness an upsurge of this genre amongst Iranians. Thus, women who wrote their memoirs and those who wrote about the history of Iranian women's struggles, in Persian or other languages, have contributed immensely to a better understanding of the Iranian culture in its historical context.

Writing memoirs can be divided into sub-categories:

a- Women political prisoners. This relates either to the period under the Shah's rule or to the Islamic republic; such accounts have been published mainly in Persian and Eng-



*Shahrnush Parsipour at the April 2007 London launch of the English translation of *Touba and the Meaning of Night*. Photo: Miriam Frank*

lish. The first of this kind were the memories of Ashraf Dehghani, a woman guerrilla fighter during the Shah. She managed to escape from prison and leave Iran. Her memories of the notorious SAVAC (Secret Service) and the tortures she endured were an inspiration for many Iranians outside the country, revealing for the first time the true plight of those living under the Shah. A number of other political prisoners have also written their memoirs.

b- Women who were either writers even before exile or those who subsequently found that they had a talent for writing their life experiences. These constitute the greater number of women writers. Among them are Shahnoush Parsipour, who wrote about her five years experience of imprisonment in Iran; Azar Nafisi (*Reading Lolita in Tehran*), Setareh Farmanfarmaian (*A girl from Iran*), Rouhi Shafii (*Scent of Saffron*), Shusha Guppy (*The Blindfold Horse*) and many others. In addition, even the Shah's mother-in-law, Farideh Diba and his wife Farah Diba (*Pahlavi*) published their memoirs.

4- Women novelists. Writing novels, whether by men or women, is a modern phenomenon in Iran. While Iran is widely known as the land of poets, novels only came into existence in the 20th century. A number of women have written novels in the past fifty years. Amongst the vanguard of this genre is Simin Daneshvar whose famous novel, *Souvasphoon*, has been translated into English. Other women novelists are: Goli Taraghi, Pari Mansouri, Ghazaleh Alizadeh, Rouhangiz Sharifian, Fataneh Hajseidjavadi, Monireh Ravanipour, Shahrnoush Parsipour and many others who write in Persian. While the bulk of writings are in Persian, a number of novelists have also written in other languages, mainly English and French.

Writing in a language other than one's mother tongue has its own difficulties, no matter how one has mastered the language. Writing the history of women in a country tainted by discrimination, inequality and suppression, is an additional barrier to exiled writers. One other issue that has an important presence in many women's writings is the imbedded self-censorship that cannot be avoided. One has to read between the lines to reach the depth of Iranian women's history, full of bravery, heroism and sadness, as well as pride.

A Woman

Reza Baraheni

Virginia Woolf said in "A Sketch of the Past" towards the end of her life:

*"And so I go on to suppose that the shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer. I hazard the explanation that a shock is at once in my case followed by the desire to explain it....It is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words....The whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. Hamlet or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven;... we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. And I see this when I have a shock."**

During the last twenty years, I have written, with a burning obsession, many versions of a story that happened in real life, and in whatever manner or form I wrote it, I was unable to exhaust the shock element of its primary happening. I could never fictionalize it. Its reality, far beyond the capacity of any fiction, came back like a facial tic that pesters you when you are unconscious to it, and stops as soon as you become conscious of it. But give it another minute of lapse of memory, and its visual crescendo will creep shamelessly upon you. Here is a recent version of that event. The publication of the text is its first appearance in English.

There are about 30 of us, all men, who sit or lie stretched on the floor of one of the upper wards of this prison. I was brought here blindfolded, and I am still blindfolded, and you will stay blindfolded all your life if you have been blindfolded for more than twenty-two days. And I don't know that this is the same prison in which I had been kept in 1972 for more than a hundred days. All the others are also blindfolded. And if you lie on your back and raise your head slightly, you can see through the crevice of the blindfold between your nose and your cheek the corridor of the ward as the longest narrow tunnel of the world. But surprisingly, you can see the beard of the man a few yards away growing at the kissing distance of your face. Such is the debilitating effect of the blindfold. And the man goes mad after five days, screaming at the top of his voice: "Please come and remove the blindfold! Please! Please! I'll tell you everything! I'll betray anyone!" And someone shouts from the other end of the ward: "Shut up, and shut up for good!" And we are all anonymous. And we communicate with each other only through the chorus of our snoring throughout the night.

The solitary-confinement cells on the right and left of the corridor are occupied by women. As I lie here, stretched out on a blanket on the floor, I can see through my spying crevice between my nose and cheeks, the solemn parade of the women as they are taken to the washrooms at the end of the corridor. Opaque ghosts move heavily away, but when they are coming back, you find that prison authorities are playing a game with your vision. They are staging Shakespearean ghosts through the peepshow of your blindfold. Upright and dignified, they walk in chadors, the traditional Islamic veils, or in scarves and long coats. Not a single tress

of hair is allowed to escape. The scarves are pinned under the women's chins, and in spite of the blindfolds concealing their eyes, there is still something magnificent in the way they carry themselves. They walk heavily, yes, but even in their camouflage, they simply look beautiful. The covered hand of the first holds a truncheon extended to her by the guard, with the others following in an irregular, floating line, each with her left hand placed on the shoulder of the woman ahead of her. The proud parade of female innocence through the crevice of the blindfold. The guard opens the iron door of their cell on my right in the corridor. I don't see them any more. But I feel them. They go in. The door is locked. But suddenly something is pushed on my blindfold and kept there, pressing into my eyes. I fidget under the pressure of the two powerful fingers on my eyes. He keeps me pinned down on the floor with his other hand. "Reza Baraheni, if I catch you once more looking through the blindfold, or peeping through it, I will send you to the torture chamber! Understood?"—"I saw nothing, I wasn't looking."—"Understood?"—"Yes, understood." He pulls the other blanket on my head and walks away.

It is difficult to breathe under the blanket, and when an hour later supper is served, I have to remove the blanket, lean on the wall, have my meal, as usual with the blindfold on, and stay leaning on the wall for as long as I can. Soon the chorus of snoring will start. The usual voices of men and women screaming from the torture chambers come and go. All of us are used to these voices. When I lie down, beyond the blindfold, it is bright as usual, but hazy, as if an overwhelming light has been muffled behind a cloud. Then suddenly, I hear something, fragments of a sentence,

reaching my ears from somewhere, in a female voice: "Mr...Mr...are you...poet...Mr...are...Reza...Mr...?"

The snoring of men is certainly a great help, but the fear is still there that she might be detected. The voice comes back, persistent as before, delicate and anxious at the same time: "Are you...tell me... are you...Mr... are you... Reza...poet?"

"Who are you," I whisper to the void behind the blindfold, and then keep silent, fearing that I might have been overheard by a guard or even other prisoners. You are not supposed to trust anyone in prison. Nothing comes from behind the door. Perhaps she doesn't want to tell me who she is. She is only curious about me. Then the fragments come:

"Pregnant...pregnant...you hear...pregnant."

I turn around, facing the door I cannot see and whisper: "What are you talking about?"

"You hear...don't hear...pregnant...Reza..."

But this is taking a long time. More than half an hour for every fragmented sentence. "What do you exactly mean?" I ask. She only answers: "I cannot...cannot..." I repeat my question. And then suddenly she says: "It moved...move... it just moved..."—"What moved? I asked. There is complete silence, and then I hear somebody weeping aloud behind the wall, and saying and repeating: "butterfly...my butterfly...a beauty." Now, I am dying to find out what is exactly happening. This cannot be poetry. Everything keeps coming in fragments, through the snoring of the men in the corridor, and the woman keeps saying things, and perhaps it is the other women crying. Who knows? I am not in there. We are not human beings. We are beasts divided by an iron door. Only these sentences, all through the night. Then the change of guards, then the walk to the toilets one by one to wash and come back and stand for prayer right there, where one had slept at night, and afraid to watch the women when they are taken to washroom and brought back. I wish I could take a look and find out more about the women. But the conversation starts in the same fashion, only the voice is clearer this time, because the doors of the other cells are being opened and closed, with prisoners taken out for interrogation. And then suddenly, two full sentences:

"All four of us are pregnant. We will be shot as soon as our babies are born."

"What?"

"Yes, Reza. Yes."

And then the place is full of people with voices of authority. I don't know what is happening. I am very tired, I haven't slept the night before, and I fall asleep. I don't hear her voice. I don't hear anyone. When I wake up, the muffled light behind the cloud is there, but also something else. Noises come from the other end of the corridor, from the cell by the washrooms. And then a man screams at the top of his voice: "I am innocent! I am innocent!" It is a hysterical scream interrupted by sobs and beseeches, which go on for more than an hour. And then finally it seems that he is being removed from his cell. And they are bringing him along. They stop a few yards away from where I am lying at my back with my face upwards with the blindfold

on my eyes. "My will is in my pocket. Please give it to my mother." They hold him there, while others go to another cell, open it, and tell someone to come out. A hysterical screaming is heard, this time, not the voice of a man, but that of a woman. And then all the women from all the other cells begin to scream, with the four women in the cell on my right joining them. The whole place is in chaos. But the guards are able to manage. The woman from the cell is removed and taken out, and then the man standing a few yards away is taken out of the ward, and the screaming finally subsides. The ward is left to itself, perhaps with only one guard at the entrance.

"Where are your husbands?" I ask slowly.

There is no answer from the other side. I repeat the question.

"Shot. They were shot. And now..."

She becomes silent, thinking perhaps that someone is coming. I echo the beginning of her sentence: "And now?..." And I wait in silence.

"There are two of us, the one inside me, and myself. So much depends on her birth."

"What is your name?" I ask.

"I don't have a name now, it is hers. I want her to be a girl. A girl with my own name: 'Parvaneh.'"

So she has been speaking all this time of her baby, when she was saying 'butterfly.'

And then she says: "It is moving, Reza. She shouldn't be moving so much. It keeps me moving. Poet! Would you like to feel it? She is moving like mad. We all have our hands on my womb. She is ticklish. Would you like to feel it?"

How can a woman, particularly an Iranian woman, say these things to a man, to a total stranger? But it seems that that she doesn't care any more.

"It is every day now, my butterfly, every day. Every day..."

"Why don't you ask them to take you to the hospital?... Tell them to send you to the hospital."

"They'll come when the time comes. When the pain comes, they'll come and take me away." And then she says: "What have you done? What is your crime?"

"I don't know. They haven't told me yet."

"You think they'll let you go?"

"I don't know." And then I say: "I hope they'll let you live and bring up your child."

"I don't think they'll give the child to my family. They say they send them to the orphanage." And after a pause, she says: "It is moving again. Would you like to feel it?"

Two days later, there are three women walking back from the washrooms in the direction of my spying crevice under the blindfold.

Some time ago, I spoke to a butterfly kept behind an iron door. And ever since, I have been writing the many versions of that single conversation.

Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being*, Unpublished Autobiographical Writings, edited with an introduction and notes by Jeanne Schulkind (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1976), P.72

Democratic Republic of Congo: Migration and Women's writing space

Isabelle Romaine

Exile, has led African women from the Diaspora to focus on a new form of writing: migration and the quest for identity. Today, the new generation of women African writers, in exile and immigrants, address the issues of adaptation encountered by immigrants in the host country: language, education, unemployment and family relationships.



La femme et ses premiers desirs by Congolese artist: Chéri Samba

The Democratic Republic of Congo (RDC), which has undergone cycles of violence from the Belgium annexation to the wars of Independence upto today's political uncertainties, has set off an exodus of writers who have settled in Canada, Belgium and France. Two Congolese women writers, Maguy Rashidi-Kabamba and Céline Kula-Kim, living respectively in Canada and France, focus their works on issues encountered daily by immigrant women. Rashidi-Kakamba and Kula-Kim share a particularity: they do not restrict their description of women's experience to the Congolese community but they take into account other groups of immigrants (Somali, Senegalese, Guinean) who interrelate with one another.

Maguy Rashidi-Kabamba, born in 1960, focuses on communities' cultural practices and emphasises that women often contribute to the perpetuation of their plight. For instance, in *Et la femme se recréa* ('And Woman re-created Herself'), she portrays Somali women and excision. In the same novel, which describes the circumstances of immigrant African women in Toronto, she underlines the conflicts inside groups of the same community: conflicts within family (sister-in-law, mother-in-law), witchcraft, conflicts between husband and wife. One educated woman from RDC is sterile and endures the insults of her husband, who brands her responsible for her situation. Another character from Somalia has just given birth to her fourth child but her husband refuses to visit her at the maternity hospital, because she has given birth to yet another girl. Rashidi-Kabamba's message is clear: it is up to immigrant women to assume responsibility for their future, take advantage of

laws and rights in their host country, and evolve with their century.

Like Maguy Kabamba, Céline Kula-Kim, who has lived in France since 1980, encourages immigrant African women to be more visible, enterprising and above all respected. In her books, Céline Kula-Kim gives voice to African women who migrated to France. Maguette, the character in *Les larmes de Maguette* (Maguette's Tears), 2004, is one of them. Maguette is a Guinean woman brought up in Senegal who migrated with her husband and children to France and relates her life story which is transcribed by Kula-Kim. Oral storytelling, which characterises African tradition, continues to be important among women immigrants and in her transcriptions, Kula-Kim tries to keep as close as possible to the oral tale and the gestures. She is a sociologist specialising in migration and inter-ethnic relationships and also an author interested in African women in the cross-cultural situation: (*Les Africaines en situation interculturelle*, 2000 and *Les Africaines en immigration et la création d'entreprise*, 2004.) *Les Africaines en situation interculturelle* is a collection of interviews with immigrant African women in France. They are from Mali, Guinea, RDC and Congo Brazzaville, and talk about their jobs, family life and difficult times, such as loneliness, language, unemployment, and of their attachment to some values inherited from home. When making an evaluation of the two cultural systems, European and African, they are ready to accept the values which serve their interests best (such as children's education) and let go of values acting against their interests (such as excision). Kula-Kim is aware that in Europe in general, and in France

in particular, employment and participation in civic life are key factors for successful immigration; however the acceptance of the French culture must not lead to a deviation from African culture. Hence Kula-Kim prefers to talk of adaptation to the French culture rather than integration.

Kula-Kim's advocacy of cross-cultural experiences as a means to adapting to a culture, retraces the path paved by her elder, Clémentine Faïk-Nzuji, who envisions links between cultures as essential in the transmission of knowledge and tolerance. Clémentine Faïk-Nzuji is a renowned linguist and specialist in oral literatures and African cultures at the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium. She is the founder and head of the International Centre for African Languages, Literatures and Traditions for Development (CILTADÉ).

Clémentine Faïk-Nzuji, was born in 1944, when the Congo was still a colony of Belgium. Her trajectory towards an advocacy for a cross-cultural exchange is therefore different from the itinerary of the younger generation. While publication of African women writers' work was not encouraged prior to the seventies, Clémentine Faïk-Nzuji pioneered the uncharted territory as she had had three poetry books published by the late sixties (*Murmures* 1967, *Kassala*, 1969, *Le Temps des Amants*, 1969), and she received first prize for her poetry in the President L.S. Senghor Literary Competition in 1969. She describes her interest in writing and her passion for oral languages as a gift passed on to her by her parents. As a child, she loved to listen to her father's tales of animals, myths and legends and remembers him miming the characters in the tales, imitating voices and taking the role of every protagonist. He was talented, she said, and this triggered her interest in languages and oral literatures.

In *Tu le leur diras : Le récit véridique d'une famille congolaise plongée au cœur de l'histoire de son pays, Congo 1890-2000*, published in 2005, she describes how at an early age she transcribed into little notebooks, folk tales, proverbs, oral history, and the history of her ancestors that she collected from evening gatherings. The book is an (auto)biography and in her foreword, Clémentine Faïk-Nzuji states that her initial intention was to create a family record, but in the process she included the voices of people who shared episodes of her parents' life. The outcome of the book is an overall record of different people who have witnessed the changes and mutations of their society.

As a specialist in social sciences, she is interested in the transmission of knowledge which opens up an awareness of the other. She questions a certain 'scientific' interpretation of Africa, seen from a Western viewpoint¹. She also regrets that, while Africans welcome Western specialists in African civilisations onto their soil, the reverse situation still appears inconceivable.

To counteract this ethnocentrism, Clémentine Faïk-Nzuji advocates knowledge and open-mindedness about other people's cultures. Cultural references should be envisioned not only from the viewpoint of the rich countries (North) or developing countries (South), but also by people who live in the 'margins': the exilic space, the immigrant space which are spaces characterising our era. They are the abode of different cultures, not really integrated into the host country. Faïk-Nzuji regrets that neither the social sciences nor the politicians pay sufficient attention to the point of view of these cultural communities who could provide an insight into their cultures as well as into the culture of their host country.

Yet, in France, Kula-Kim put in place the structures to encourage research on African women, culture and family. In 2005, she founded the journal EFA [Etudes Féminines Africaines, (African Women's Studies)] whose mission is to promote the works of academic African women and researchers working on African themes. EFA is a scientific and sociological journal and Kula-Kim is ambitious and optimistic, despite her reckoning that there are not enough women with qualifications, and that some of them are confronted by social and economic difficulties. To alleviate the situation Kula-Kim is organising a sponsor in 2007, to motivate young African women to go to university and do research. Kula-Kim is anxious to demolish the conventional image of the African woman. She wishes her to be more enterprising and more dynamic and she conceives her capable of participating in the politics and economy of her country.

In conclusion, Maguy Rashidi-Kabamba and Céline Kula-Kim examine the phenomenon of immigration as a possibility for women to adjust to and progress in their new environment. In Maguy Rashidi-Kabamba's novels, male protagonists show a marked nostalgia for the past and the country they have left. It is up to the communities of women to move forwards, with immigration seen as a platform for potential transformation. Céline Kula-Kim, sees the urgency of African women learning how to be accepted and respected in their host country while retaining their own culture. Cross cultural relations erase the cultural divide and are conducive to tolerance. Kula-Kim also underlines the importance of African women participating in civic life and being at the forefront of their professions.

Both writers apprehend the immigrant space as a place which allows no illusion of return to the country of origin. In their writings, where they attempt to reconcile the African past and their current experience of immigration, the permeability of the cultural frontiers gives a new meaning to the question of belonging. Maguy Rashidi-Kabamba and Céline Kula-Kim illustrate that the literature of exile and immigration re-invents the cultural space.

¹ She interrogates the cultural impact on our view of the world and the way we perceive ourselves and Others in *Mots Pluriels*, « Réflexion sur l'élaboration et la transmission du savoir en sciences sociales». *Mots Pluriels*, Journal no 8, 1998.

Lot's Wives

We stood,
as women before us have stood,

looking back at our burning cities,
watching the smoke
rise from our empty homes.

It was quiet then. And cold.

We heard their cries, the caged birds
clawing at their perches, our daughters
naked in the hungry mob.

Such death. The smell of justice
drifting on the burnt wind.

We saw it all,
saw the fire fall like rain,

saw our tears
track stiff, white veins
down our bodies,

saw the brine crawl
through salt-cracked skin.

Now, turning in the restless night,
we dream we stand there still,
alone on the hill's black belly.

We, the forgotten,
whose names were swallowed by God.

First published in Ploughshares 2004



Image by Samira Makmalbaf

CITIZENSHIP

They'll have to leave.
Travellers. They came tapping at the door,
the woman's belly sailing before her
as if breaching new land.

I gave them shelter, of course,
maybe not the best but all
we had spare, this evening, and better
than what they call home, no doubt.

But let one in and the rest will follow.

I hear her cry out in the thin, blue night,
the screams of her child asserting dominion,
like a struck match in a darkened room,
like a savage epiphany.

*In 2004, 80% of the Irish population voted in favour of
legislation denying automatic citizenship to children born
on Irish soil, if such children were born of foreign mothers.*

EVENING

Because evening is not just the end of the day
but the drawing together of death's dark forces,

because night is a place through which shadows
stalk
and a dynasty of our ghosts still wanders,

because I am the daughter of your only daughter
when our sons are all dead
and the names of our living have been scattered,

you will weave these dark time prayers for me,
pour water, biting like steel, through my fingers,
place ash, sacred, between my eyes.

Grandmother,
holding a house whose rooms have been emptied,
where the heirlooms have vanished

and the photographs of our men
are garlanded with silence,

you will light these camphor lamps for me,
chant mantras that pull down planets,

name stars that will stay faithful,
following my footsteps,
even into exile.

A NIGHT IN DALSTON

Sulaiman Addonia

As the woman reached with her hands between my parted legs, I never imagined this could happen to me after all these years. The closer she got to my thighs, the deeper I was drenched in agony. In a space of minutes it was all over. The woman emerged with a glowing happiness and a piece of my meat, while I closed my eyes to be conquered by the unbearable pain. The streams of blood bursting from my inner legs could only be matched by the tears that left me at the same time.

As I got dumped in the street afterwards, sweat was covering my whole body. There I was with one hand holding five hundred pounds for an assignment accomplished, but feeling the breath of death sighing heavily down my neck.

The night itself couldn't have been more merciless. Its quietness strangled me. Nothing was moving. The trees arrogantly refused to wave their leaves even though the wind was blowing gently. The dim light in this street of Dalston seemed to have dispersed everyone. I knew it was late, 12am perhaps, but amid this impossible pain how I hoped for someone to find me and take me to a hospital, or just call an ambulance. I shouted, 'Isn't London a city that never sleeps?' There was no answer. I started to curse myself for being lured by a stupid advert. Why didn't I cave in to the doubts I had? Why, did I ever concede to my greed?

*

I spotted the advert in London's Loot. I was desperate for money, having been unemployed for a long time. It was placed on page 187, and the ad read like this: 'We are looking for a man from Africa. Preferably from East Africa. Age not important. Muscularity and good look desirable. Sexual nature involved. Must not be circumcised. Pay very attractive.'

Although I knew I qualified for all the criteria – essential and desirables – the sexual element to the job kept me from sleeping for days prior to calling the agency. But the bit of, 'very attractive pay', did it for me. After all, I thought, this will be a one-off job. Take the money, and leave.

'Good afternoon, my name is Khalid, can I speak to Mr Farouq' I said to the person occupying the single table office off Mile End Road. Asian looking, he must have been in his early 30s.

'Hello, please come on in. I am Farouq'

'Thank you.'

'I have to say, my first impression is nice. Nice face. You have good body. Are you fit?'

'Quite. I play sport regularly.'

'Nice. Nice. Ok let's go through the requirements.'

'Ok. Do I need to strip now?'

'Ah...Nice. Nice. Yeha, clever man as well; taking initiative. I like that. Ok strip.'

As I stood there naked, he walked around my body, and immediately directed his attention below my hip. He ticked his box and continued his observation.

'Mr Khalid, correct me if I am wrong. But your slim and slightly muscular body, soft hands and feminine face, suggest to me that you probably are from East Africa?'

'Yes, you guessed right,' although I was far from pleased about the feminine bit.

'Nice. I like to guess. I must say you fit every single criterion and we will take you on. The pay is five hundred pounds and the client will pay after you do the job.'

When he finally handed me the address, I was surprised. It said, 'Dalston.' I didn't think the type of job and the area matched. I believed this sort of job was for areas like Notting Hill or High Street Kensington, but Dalston! I've never been or lived in Dalston, and only knew about it through my friend Adofo who lived there a long time ago.

I took a bus to Dalston and as I got out of it, I stepped right into an awful smell, the strength of which almost pushed me back on the bus. I couldn't make out what sort of smell it was. Only after I took a deep breath I realised that I was in front of a market and the smell could only be the mixture of meat, old vegetables, and food remains. It was around 11am, and the area was empty bar the odd passer-by.

'Hey man, how are you doing?' I looked to my right hand side and it was the voice of a man who was sitting down, with his backside resting against the wall. He was an African looking man. He had his arms folded and his hat had 'I love NYC' written across the front. I looked at him for a second and he kept staring.

I deliberately decided to ignore him and avoid having a conversation with him. The moment his kind of people realise that you are one of them - 'an African brother'; and perhaps one with money, as I am sure he thought I was, given the tuxedo I was wearing - they immediately overpower you with cries about life's difficulties in this country often followed by, 'can you help me, please?.'

He got up on his feet and moved towards me. 'I said, "Hey man how are you doing?" didn't you hear?'

'Fine,' I said.

He smiled, shook my hand and disappeared down the lane to the right of where I was standing.

As I walked along the market, I remembered a conversation with Adofo. 'Dalston is an area where the variety of its people resembles the collection of a vegetable stall in its market,' he had said.

'Dalston,' Adofo went on to inform me, 'is like an experiment of solidarity between the immigrant communities that went wrong.'

I got interested at that point and asked why?

'Ok. Why would Dalston attract different races whose only commonality with each other is their poverty and a fucked up background in their home country that made them come here?'

'Enlighten me.'

'Simple,' he said with a beaming smile that suggested he was into something, 'very simple, indeed. The Caribbeans were the first into the area. They put themselves right into a deep shit of destitution; then the Turkish community came along and gave a hand of solidarity for their immigrant brothers, only to be pulled into the mess; later came Africans and Asians at the same time and both gave their respective hands. But they too were drowned right into it; as so did the Vietnamese.'

'My friend,' he said, standing up to leave, 'when you've chosen to live in Surrey you resisted being part of the solidarity movement. I respect your selfishness.'

But living in Surrey, an area I lodged in since I came to this country in late 1980s, had its disadvantages. I don't think anyone could have counted the drops of rain that wet my head, as I walked miles and miles every day just to think away my loneliness. How have I longed for a loving touch, but my history does not record any. If a wish would have come true, I would have wanted myself away. The colourlessness of that area had stiffened the flow of my heart.

*

Strange feelings came into me as I passed the market, and walked into Mildmay Road that housed the client's address. I felt a gentle whirlwind had gathered everything beautiful about Dalston and forced them inside my heart. The veins of my heart veered into life. I showed every sign of a happy person to the on-lookers: a smile dug a curve on my face; my body increased its agility as it became boneless, all my arms and legs followed my hips into a wild dance; and I sang, 'no woman no cry.'

By the time I reached the client's door, I had lost my heart to happiness. As I knocked at the door, almost immediately a woman emerged from behind the door. She was like a sun appearing from behind a thick cloud. A breath of fresh light stripped me. Any doubt I had vanished. I could have offered myself for free.

Big as they were, her lips positioned themselves beautifully on top of a face that seemed so imposing on the soul. Her long nose gave a sniff and I swear I thought it then erected further; it was long and masterfully engraved between her high cheek bones. Her dark skin with its chocolate-like colour could only be of eastern African origin. I almost wept. It has now been five whole years since I have lived in this country and I did not see, feel, or touch her kind. A great energy of nostalgia entered my heart. I felt like kissing her deeply and telling her how difficult it is in this country – if only I could lay my head on her chest and talk all night long. I wouldn't mind crying. I know this would have shocked her. Where we come from, men never show emotion, but I am not sure how manly I am any more. The cruelty of loneliness seemed to have eroded my manhood. I trembled over life's hurdles so many times that I must have let go, and my heart must have been tendered this way. This country has made me soft, and I was no longer ashamed of this. But then, I asked myself, 'why is she doing this?' For a woman from my country to do this, is

absolutely scandalous. But I didn't care. I wasn't to judge. Loneliness can do many things to people, I thought. Maybe this was the only way for both of us to find each other. Now that we are looking at each other, we can tell each other everything, I convinced myself. We will kiss each other, and I will make love to her the western way: I will exhibit my body before hers; kiss her toes, and erode her shyness slowly to make up for the time we both wasted overcoming sufferings.

'You must be Mr Khalid?' she asked.

'Yes, I am and I am really happy to meet...'

'Ok, just stand there.'

'Sure,' I said with disappointment. The romance I envisaged for both of us a moment or two ago, was already on strain. She is only testing me, I thought to myself.

'Put one hand on your head and stretch the other one beside you and bend one of your legs'

'Ok, but which one?'

'Doesn't matter. Use your imagination.'

'Ok, I will put my left hand on my head, and my right will...'

'The less you talk the better. And' She interrupted herself as she bent and her head disappeared in an old black box. She emerged with four handcuffs. She looked up and said, 'that's enough. You are fit. Good. Now undo yourself from your clothes.'

As I started to unbutton myself, I couldn't help but wonder about her behaviour. She has changed. I don't know her personally, but every woman from our country is soft, romantic, and considerate. She was talking to me with utter rudeness. But what disturbed me were the handcuffs in her hands. What kind of person has she become? I could only think that this object was for some kind of fetish. But why do this? I don't mind her paying me for sex, but why was she thinking of tying me up? Tears welled up in my eyes. I decided not to cry. I told myself, 'If she has changed for the worse, I will not change for the better, a man never cries.'

She pushed me on the bed, and cuffed my arms and legs. She went back to the box and this time emerged with a medium size blade.

'Are you worried from this blade? Never tried them before, have you?' she asked me.

'No.'

'Don't worry. Now you will, and you will tell me how it feels. I felt their force when I was 6 years old.'

'What kind of fantasy do you have?' I said as I struggled pointlessly to release the pain of the cuffs' grip.

'Just the kind of fantasy your sort of men had when they laid me and took a piece of me when I was 6 years old,' she said. She slowly approached me with her blade between my legs. 'Your likes will pay for mutilating my genitals.'

Only then it occurred to me what she was after. Her attention to my genitals could only have meant she wanted to cut the pieces that cover it. I didn't have the will or the desire to dissuade her. I knew from my mother that when a woman wants something, and set her heart onto doing it, nothing will stop her. And I was on this woman's path for vengeance. She had found a clever way to get between my legs, the same legs that my mother defended with strength when my father wanted the local Sheik to circumcise me.

I didn't say anything, but cry.

Nawal Al Saadawi

Fathieh Saudi



Nawal El Saadawi: International campaign for freedom of thought, creativity and solidarity with the Egyptian novelist and writer

“We must celebrate our similarities rather than our differences.”

The Egyptian writer and novelist, Nawal El Saadawi, well known both in the Arab world and internationally, is facing a political and religious campaign mounted against her by the authorities of Al-Azhar University. She stands accused of apostasy and disrespect of religion, following the publication of her play “*God resigns at the Summit Meeting*” in January 2007 in Cairo.

Nawal explains that this play is a work of fiction and should be judged by those who read works destined for the theatre, and not by religious authorities whose areas of concern are totally different. To bring the writer to trial before a court relying on dangerous accusations of this kind could expose her to real danger.

Saadawi was born in Kafr Taha village in Egypt. She studied medicine at Cairo University and worked for many years in her own village where she was in contact with the daily sufferings of rural women. She herself suffered from female infibulation which was a common practice in rural areas. Her political activities, campaigns for women’s rights, advanced political concepts and beliefs, research and novels, placed her as avant-garde in the Arab world. Nawal was sent to prison in 1981 as a result of her opposition to the politics of Sadat. She wrote: “Danger has been a part of my life ever since I picked up a pen and wrote. Nothing is more perilous than truth in a world that lies.”

Because of her open- minded views on religion she was threatened several times. Indeed, she had to leave Egypt in 1991 and taught at Duke University in the USA for about five years. From 1988 to 1993, her name figured on death lists issued by some fundamentalist organisations. On 15 June 1991, the government issued a decree that closed down the Arab Women’s Solidarity Association, over which she presided, and handed over its funds to the officially-sponsored association, ‘Women in Islam’. In 2004, the clerical authorities at Al Azhar University in Cairo banned her novels, *The Fall of the Imam* and *Al Riwaya*. Yet, despite such harassment, she presented herself as a candidate for the presidential elections in Egypt in December 2004. Whilst facing persecution at home she has gained international recognition. Saadawi has been awarded several national and international literary prizes. Her works have been translated into many languages, and some of them are taught in a number of universities and colleges across the globe.

The Poetic Exilic Space

Shanta Acharya

BOXING DAY

The full moon rises like an aria in the sky,
my thoughts, a flock of geese, heave homewards.

Over the telephone, the voices of Aditi,
Arup and Ashish assure me all's well with the world –
their vowels travelling excitedly over windswept clouds,
buoyed across continents, to shower me with gifts.

No longer cold and restless like the temple monkeys in Puri,
I watch the snow drift across the darkness of my soul.
Through the window I stare at stars shining steadfastly.

All children are the gifts of God,
I remember the words of my grandfather
uttered in a moment of lucidity.
Old age arrives with few gifts,
mostly disease, dependence and suffering.

Crossing the boundary between human and divine,
my spirit swirls like music.

Christ, Krishna or Ganesha, are as much my endowment
as all the children who sleep hungry tonight.

EASTER MESSAGE

Swathed in a dirty shawl, embracing large bundles of
carrier
bags like dead infants in her arms, she sits in the carriage
oblivious to the Underground destinations we tunnel
through.

She speaks to herself in a language I fail to decipher,
her direct gaze into my eyes reminds me of my mother.

Another commuter leans forward as if to answer her
questions,
thinking she asked for directions; a foreigner lost in the
Tube.

Her eyes are nomad, her words nonsense. He listens, she
smiles.
For an instant they try to converse. She is from the
holocaust-lands
of Croatia, Kosovo, Albania; she is a survivor.

We hear the words but do not understand her story.
She pauses briefly and chuckles on her fate
before she starts like a scratched record all over again.

I get off at Victoria while the carriage disgorges
itself and gets stuffed again. She sits there oblivious
to stations and announcements on the Circle Line.

Yuyutsu RD Sharma

Mules on the Tube

“And each man fixed his eyes before his feet...”

T.S. Eliot



Mules on the tube, brown, black or blonde

the loads of their sordid lives
on the weary lashes of their vanquished eyes

swollen from centuries
of intent stare into the growling eyes of the lion kings

living on the margins of a millionaire London's
frugal Chalk Farms, Cockfosters, Edgware and East Ends

silent and stern almost tongueless

struggling to surf
on the invisible silk roads of city's cyber alleys

moving like living ghosts
in long oblong grave-shaped bogies

of Central, City, Circle or Picadilly lines

carrying packs of Prêt A Manger Sandwiches,
Tesco frozen foods, Marks and Spencer cinnamon rolls,

and Sainsbury mangoes as home grown deities

wearing wires of ipods straps of laptops, cyber mobiles
as sureshot weapons of mass success

stoned from Poppies, paperbacks
and perfumes from Boots and Superdrugs

facing free copies of *Metro*
or *London Paper* like profound script of a prayer wheel

moving like emperors
of icecream on the power of the underground *Oysters*

from Tottenham Court Road to High Barnet
Waterloo Station to Battersea, Victoria Terminal to Brixton

risking raids from the imported tigers
of terror in the haven of human rights

stalking the arched corridors of an ashen underworld,
packed like domestic fowls in the early morning trains

mules on the tube
self-made slaves on the footsteps of prodigious Pound

men in a hurry
the third eye etenally on the Abbey of *A Hole in the Wall*

women with history
from the land of dogmas and dictators

people with degrees, portfolios and myspace profiles

on the run to build
a babylon of a fresh space on a new globe

Mark Hill

Going Grey in Exile

In memory of Federico Garcia Lorca who, on the night of his execution, looked up at the sky and was happy to see no moon.



Image: Peter Licence

After many years in exile
I met a friend, we once were close
Despite time and distance, the friendship strong
Felt the same warmth and love
Like an old bottle of wine
My friend's hair no longer black
Like dust on bottles, grey
I have never liked grey
The grey of exile
Grey, a lonely day in autumn
Grey, the journey between dream and logic
Heat and cold, life and death
Grey, my fate, to be far away and a stranger
Grey, monsters' and witches' dirty minds, ridiculing life and hope
I wish my friend's hair was white
The white of a wave kissing a beach
No, I have never liked grey

One stormy night we were lost in memories
A light conveyed a message: wait, wait
Wait for white
White, the heart of an angel
Wait, wait
Wait for white lilies on your grave
Grey, my fate, to be far away and a stranger
No, I have never liked grey
Maybe I should talk of red
Red, the impact of the lash on raw skin,
Or the blue of an empty sky
Empty sky gazed at impatiently by beautiful eyes
Grey, absence from her
Grey, ashes of fires of bombs and bullets
I wish the world were more colourful
Colourful as our friendship, colourful as love
Grey is hopelessness
Grey the death of love
In prison, never was I accustomed to the grey cell walls
Never have I forgotten the prisoners' grey voices and their pain
No, I have never liked grey

One night
Moonlight had drawn a shiny silver road on the ocean's surface
Silver road to the end of the ocean, to the horizon
On that road and on that horizon I saw her
An angel with a basket of flowers
Knew kissing an angel was a perilous thrill
The temptation was great, like one moonstruck
I began to walk on the silver road towards the angel
Never reached the horizon; sank to the ocean floor
The ocean floor no longer shiny silver, it was grey
The grave of fishes

I remembered the great poet: Federico Garcia Lorca
Remembered his death, execution on a grey day
Remembered his moon song: go moon, go, go moon...
Yes, it was a night of madness
In the mad house I was injected with grey medicine
Living with the grey mad, watching the grey moonlight
Grey is my fate, to be far away and a stranger
No, I have never liked grey

Mir Mahfuz Ali

Seeking a Shelter

He is an alien
on this barbaric shore,
gazing into a land
he doesn't belong to,
but he has no where to go
beyond this coast.
Nobody's waiting
with a woollen scarf
to put around his frozen neck.
He has come to the end
of his voyage.
Now he has to decide
whether he drowns or swims.

Wisdom Came in the Cold Winter

Wisdom did not come
with the flower,
in the spring
or with the hot dust,
blowing round the stray paths
in the summer;
or with the lifting of the leaf
in the calm autumn wind.
But in the cold winter,
when food was short,
fire was low
and night was long.

Nkwachukwu Ogbuagu

THE EYE OF AN EXILE

The eye of an exile,
A kaleidoscope of piercy range,
Sees frontiers of distant lands

The blue rim of the horizon
Stretches beyond its beginning,
Haunting spectres of banishments.

The eye of an exile
Reads the blooded refrains of
Satanic hymns hummed from home

And tears drip from the corner
Of the lone eye - a monocle in search
Of venues for communal funerals.

No pince nez for the eye of an exile,
Which forms a globule with an aperture
Of grief, nurtured in the chambers of the sinciput

And the exile follows his own sleuth
From the scent of broken shadows to the
Distorted vistas of truths.

Fathieh Saudi

Birth of a Language



KNEADING

ONCE UPON A TIME, I LOST MY ALEPH,
MY LIFE SHRANK, MY WOMB DRIED OUT.

SITTING BY THE THAMES,
I RECALL THE HANDS OF MY MOTHER KNEADING BREAD,
TURNING THE WHEAT INTO DOUGH,
MELTING DROPS OF WATER IN THE PASTE.

I COULD KNEAD THE ALPHABET AGAIN: ONE, TEN,
TWENTY-SIX OR MORE...

MY FLOATING LANGUAGE IS BORN NEXT TO THE THAMES.

SEARCHING FOR A LANGUAGE

I WANTED TO GIVE A LANGUAGE TO MY FEELINGS,
I THOUGHT LANGUAGE COULD BE BORN OF WORDS!

TO COMMUNICATE LIFE LIKE THE FLOW OF A RIVER,
TO FLY FREE LIKE BIRDS TESTING THEIR WINGS.

THE STRANGER SAID:
*THE WORDS ARE MINE, LANGUAGE IS MY WORLD,
KEEP AWAY FROM THEM!
LIVE YOUR FEELINGS IN SILENCE.*

*LANGUAGELESS I BECAME
MY PARALYZED FEELINGS GO ON HURTING ME!*

THE STRANGER SAID:
*ALL LANGUAGES ARE MY KINGDOM,
YOU ARE MY SLAVE.*

THE PAGE I AM WRITING ON JUST GLIDES AWAY,
EVEN PAPER CAN REBEL!



Russian and Chechen Spaces

ILYA KORMILTSEV: Russian poet and visionary

Miriam Frank



Ilya Kormiltsev was an extraordinary man. He was a chemistry graduate, poet, songwriter, philosopher, translator, book publisher, and a stickler for telling the truth and for freedom of expression no matter what the consequences. Apart from his native Russian, he spoke fluent English, Italian and French, understood Polish and Serbo-Croat, add to that his charisma, depth of interpretation of the world around him and unique vision and voice: these were some of his talents.

He is no longer with us. He died four weeks to the day after reading his poems, along with the English poet and translator, Robert Chandler, at an EWI evening at Covent Garden's Poetry Café. He lay prostrate on a couch and spoke – his voice still strong – into the microphone; sitting up was too painful.

Kormiltsev was born in the Russian city of Yekaterinburg, on the eastern slopes of the Ural Mountains, in 1959. He became known throughout Russia in the 1980s as the co-producer and lyricist of the rock band "Nautilus Pompilius". His songs were on everybody's lips, as they struck a deep chord in those Perestroika days heralding change and upheaval. Among his best-known lyrics were "Walking on water", "I want to be with you", "Alain Delon", "On the shore of the nameless river", and "Tutankhamun". He also wrote poetry and a book of his poems, "Bound by One Chain", was published in 1990.

He wrote a strangely prophetic song in 1982, translated here by Anna Gunin.

Hey you there, on the other side of the hill!
How are you there, on the other side of the hill?
I'm shouting, hurling my words as if they're stones.
I know my shout won't reach the other side of the hill.

The cereal field is covered in weeds.
The fierce flame is blown out by the wind.
A cancer tumour will meet me
On the other side of the hill...

Insidious reason is building walls.
The prices for body and soul are set.
The cold command and the violence of the stage
On the other side of the hill.

An hour of delight for the years of torture.
A dirty plan and its realisation.
Only rain of fire carries purification
To the other side of the hill.

You know this all, yet where is the reason
For the fact that sometimes for no reason at all
You're drawn towards the gaping chasm
Of the other side of the hill?

Hey you there, on the other side of the hill...

By then Kormiltsev was also translating literary and theatre works by English and American writers, ranging from W. S. Burroughs and Irvine Welsh, to Tom Stoppard and C. S. Lewis, and a collection of his own poetry, short stories and plays was published in "Nobody From Nowhere" in 2005. In 2002 Kormiltsev founded *Ultra. Kultura* publishers which he dedicated to transgressive and provocative books. Within a short time his publishing house reached notoriety and was subjected to the highest number of lawsuits per year.

Ilya Kormiltsev and Robert Chandler were invited by Exiled Writers Ink to read their poems and engage in conversation at the Poetry Café, on 8th January, 2007. Both poets and translators: one had lived under a repressive regime, fought censorship, was in difficulties with the authorities over his publishing house aggravated by a publication exposing Putin's business interests, and experienced the loss of home, livelihood and country, while the other had been born and bred in a stable and relatively open society. Yet, though each markedly individual in style, both their voices came together in their concern about the oppression and anguish of the Russian people. Chandler drew attention to a broader interpretation of exile, relating it to separation in heart and mind rather than a physical location, and read his translation of a passage from Platonov's depiction of a child pushed away by his dying mother, "Go away, I don't love you!" in her attempt to save him from the pain of losing her. Kormiltsev, illusion free, yet his underlying faith in a basic humanity still intact, read the following poem:

Distrust

it wasn't that difficult to escape from prison
to climb on the shoulders of your mate
to pull yourself out of the pit
then lend a helping hand to your companion

but they spent a sleepless night
full of suspicious looks

nobody believed that his mate
wouldn't forget about him
as soon as he'd set himself free

in the morning the guards came
and shot them
both

Kormiltsev expressed an entire generation's pain and hope in his songs. Here is one of the most famous, with maybe echoes of his isolation in his last days in hospital.

I want to be with you

I tried to get out of love
I took a sharp razor and slashed myself
I locked myself in the basement, I cut
the skin straps stretched across my feeble chest

I want to be with you
I want to be with you
so badly want to be with you
I want to be with you
and I shall be with you

in a room with a white ceiling
with a right to hope
in a room with a view of the lights
with faith in love

your name long ago became different
your eyes forever lost their colour
a drunk doctor told me you are no more
a fireman issued me a form
saying your house burnt down

but I want to be with you...

in a room with a white ceiling...

I broke the glass like chocolate in my palm
I cut these fingers for
not being able to feel you
I looked at these faces unable to forgive them
for not having you, for being able to live

but I want to be with you...

in a room with a white ceiling
with a right to hope
in a room with a view of the lights
with faith in love

Israel Shamir called his friend Kormiltsev a Sufi poet.
He did indeed exude an aura, a vision beyond.



German Sadulaev

Anna Gunin

“It’s Hard to Be a Chechen”

Of the million or so Chechens scattered across the former Soviet Union, many live in the land of their oppressors – Russia. Unlike London’s kaleidoscope of cultures, where each nationality is free to express its identity, Chechens in Russia live a tense existence. And the pain of a writer who’s parted from his homeland is always especially acute.

Writer German Sadulaev left Chechnya at sixteen to study in St Petersburg and never returned. Since that time, two wars have ravaged his homeland. He no longer knows where he belongs. “We’ve become foreigners there, yet we’ll never be ‘one of us’ here.” Chechens in Russia live under a constant cloud of suspicion, subjected to random stopping and questioning on the streets, everywhere singled out as would-be terrorists. “We don’t even remember – we would have forgotten it long ago – that we’re Chechen, but they won’t allow us to forget it.” Ironically, though the Kremlin claims Chechnya as part of Russia, at the same time Chechens living there are refused their rights to register as residents. As one Russian official told Sadulaev: “We are at war, and you are the enemy.”

Chechen identity is gradually being destroyed, believes Sadulaev. For Chechens, globalisation means the dominant Russian culture swallowing their minority ethnic one. Sadulaev narrates in his novel what it means to be a Chechen:

“It’s hard to be a Chechen. If you’re a Chechen, you must feed and shelter your enemy visiting you as a guest; you must give up your life for a girl’s honour without a moment’s hesitation; you must kill your blood foe by plunging a dagger in his heart, because you could never shoot anyone in the back. You must offer your last piece of bread to your friend; you must get out from your car and stand to greet an elderly man passing on foot; you must never run away, even if there are a thousand of your enemy and you stand no chance of winning, all the same you must take up the fight.”

Sadulaev talks of the loss of the Chechen way of life: “Chechen men knew how to be harsh. Otherwise they wouldn’t have survived the constant wars... Yet I only found out in Russia what true cruelty is. Here a multiracial gang of kids can beat some poor tramp to death with iron rods just for kicks. Perhaps those kids will go on to dodge their army

draft, but should they land in some hotspot, they’d urinate in their trousers, unable to lift their submachine gun and look an armed enemy in the eye. The most terrible cruelty is the cruelty of cowards. Such a situation would have been unthinkable in the Chechnya that I knew. In our modern Chechenistan, unfortunately it has become possible.”

Sadulaev suggests that the émigrés preserve a purer version of their national essence than those who remain in the homeland. “Perhaps I am more of a Chechen than those who stand supposedly for the ‘purity of the Chechen culture’, perhaps in fourteen years they’ve simply forgotten what it means to be a Chechen. ...Chechens have always been free, never accepted the harsh dictatorship of some person...this is the degradation of the Chechen people. We are losing the quality that we were famed for all over the world.” Caucasian societies were historically based on the rule of the clan or teip – there was no medieval feudal hierarchy. The national spirit of the Chechen people has always been one of fierce defiance and autonomy: this is a proud and free people. Miraculously the Chechens defeated the Russians in 1996, but following the second invasion, a regime subservient to the Kremlin is now in place.

Sadulaev’s writing is filled with the haunting memories of his land and countrymen. He details the lives of the people who didn’t survive the wars. It is estimated that more than a quarter of Chechnya’s population has been killed in the recent wars. The conflict continues. Sadulaev explores his memories of a Chechnya that no longer exists: in his narrative, he resurrects those people and places that are now reduced to bones and rubble. Along with memories of his childhood, he enters the collective memory of his ancestors, journeying through dreams and visions into his land’s epic and legendary past.

Sadulaev concludes identity is something we carry within us. And exile can bring us closer to realising the essence of our homeland. “Probably I idealise this land. Had I lived in the sunny valley all my life, started a family and set up a home filled with junk, gone out to work and drunk with my friends in kebab houses, I wouldn’t have felt, wouldn’t have known its wonder. Perhaps that’s why I was exiled, thrown out into the cosmos. So that I’d discover the wondrousness of my homeland.”

German Sadulaev

Extracts from: I Am a Chechen!

Translated by Anna Gunin



*Photographs by Natalia Medvedeva,
from the exhibition "The Chronicles of Hell" -
<http://exhibition.ipvnews.org/>*

They say that an ass who's experienced the shade won't work again in the blaze of the sun. We won't return to Chechnya. The Chechens of Moscow, St Petersburg, Omsk, Yaroslavl, Voronezh, Saratov, Astrakhan, Perm, and God knows where else. The Russian Chechens. We have grown used to life here. Even when dogged with distrust, rejected by employers, unable to register with the police, and then asked to cough up by those same police for not being registered, we'll stay here all the same. And not just those on whom fate has smiled, who have become wealthy and successful in Russia. But also those who drift from rented flat to rented flat, earning each day only enough bread for the morrow.

We have become feminine and weak; we can no longer live under the harsh eye of the faraway mountains. To follow our tribal laws, answer with our lives for every word, weigh each action knowing that our children will be held to account for it, that all will be revealed to everyone, and in a hundred years' time our descendants will be reproached for the ignominious behaviour of their ancestors. To keep one's chastity, practise abstinence, know only one's wife. In Russia's freedom, Chechen men follow different rules: a man has only one mother, and all other women are his wives.

They bring in tanks and armoured infantry vehicles, they have artillery and missiles; they have aeroplanes: fighters, assault planes and bombers. The silly Russians. Women – that's the most terrible weapon of the Russians. Russian women alone can disperse and destroy the Chechen nation.

And here they are, always so desired, the girls who bring happiness, the girls who have golden wheat sprouting straight from their heads. In Russia. Here we have nightclubs, discothèques, bars, alcohol and drugs. And there's always a new girl. We can hold her hand in a café or on the street and we won't be obliged to marry her afterwards; we'll take her home, but only for one night, and in the morning she'll catch a taxi and leave, without a word. We always dreamt of them, of the wheaten-haired girls. And now we have them. But where is the happiness?

There is no happiness; the fair-haired Russian women didn't bring us it. We have ourselves become women along with them.

I'll tell you about the madmen.

Just before the war many madmen appeared in Chechnya. Perhaps the expectation of war begot them, perhaps the earth herself flowed into them, like an amber drop of resin swathes the fresh cuts on a tree, only the tree hadn't yet been cut. Perhaps it was Mother Tusholi² speaking to us through their tongues; she sent us her favourite children – but who listened?

In our district there lived Ibrashka. His full name was Ibrahim. My mamma called him Ibrashka, Ibrashka the fool; that's what everyone else started calling him too. Ibrashka was the most ordinary village idiot. He was very strong and sturdy, beautiful even. For days on end he would work: carrying water, laying up wood, building things; he herded and milked the cows himself. He was, no doubt, the best of sons for his mother; he loved her tenderly and didn't let her do hard work around the house or in the yard. They even tried to marry him off, but after three days the bride returned to her parents. They said that Ibrashka had proved too robust in bed, and the girl simply couldn't take it. Following his bride's departure Ibrashka fell sad for a week; then he forgot it and once more occupied himself with the house, the yard and the cows. In a word, he was a normal halfwit. He spoke poorly, mostly stayed silent, and wore clothes of the wrong size. And there was

² A Chechen goddess

one other peculiarity. Well, all madmen have their peculiarities: that is why they are madmen. Ibrashka was frightened of aeroplanes.

A silver bird had only to appear in the sky, or the faraway drone of a jet engine to be heard, for Ibrashka to fly into a panic, search for somewhere secluded and press himself to the ground, like a child presses himself to the soft breast of his mother. Even the rumbling of the agricultural biplanes in the nearby sky frightened Ibrashka.

Whereas we weren't frightened of aeroplanes. We liked to look at them, holding our palms to our brows as visors, liked to follow these metal angels with delighted glances at their journeys high above the clouds. We especially loved military aeroplanes, which left white trails of vapour in the silky-blue sky. We weren't frightened of anything.

Ibrashka had remained all his life at the developmental level of a child, and we children often played with him. But sometimes, oh the mindless cruelty of children, we mocked the clod in every sort of way. We called him unkind names; we threw lumps of dung and stones up into the sky. Ibrashka would put up with it for a long time, but sometimes even his patience would end. And then, his face flushed with blood, he would tear off in pursuit of the herd of wrongdoers. Silly, witless children. If Ibrashka had managed to catch hold of one of us, he could easily have – without even noticing – twisted the captive blusterer's head and broken his

neck. But we had one trusty method of escaping reprisal. When Ibrashka got too close, someone would shout loudly: "Ibrashka, look! An aeroplane!" And the rest would start to hum, "vvvvvvoooooooooooooooooom". Ibrashka would fall bang on the ground, sometimes straight onto the hard asphalt of the road, and he'd lie there a long time, covering his head with his hands. And we would laugh at him.

Poor, crazy Ibrashka. Aeroplanes weren't what he should have feared. When the air raids began, he patiently sat out all the attacks in the air-raid shelter. But when no aviation was in the sky, he would go out fearlessly onto the street. Other than aeroplanes, Ibrashka was frightened of nothing. One time he went out of the air-raid shelter to bring the children some water just as a mop-up was being conducted in the village. He was shot by the submachine guns of the Russian soldiers.

Following the war, many of the survivors, when they hear the drone of friendly planes – the take-offs and landings of passenger aircraft near the aerodrome – involuntarily press their heads into their shoulders. And some can't keep control of themselves and fall flat on the ground and cover their heads with their hands.

Taken from I Am a Chechen! Ultra.Kultura, Ekaterinburg, 2006
© German Sadulaev 2006
Translation © Anna Gunin 2007

ANDREY PLATONOV: UTOPIA, EXILE AND ORPHANHOOD

Robert Chandler

Becoming awakened to the Orphan is the necessary precondition for hearing the lament of the world, for witnessing its dying, and perhaps, if we are lucky, assisting in its healing.

Robert Romanyshyn, *Ways of the Heart*

The son of a railway mechanic who also gilded the cupolas of churches, Andrey Platonov was born at the turn of a century – on September 1 1899 – and between town and country, on the edge of the central Russian city of Voronezh. A young man in 1917, a believer in the new world to be constructed by Science and Socialism, Platonov gives us a deeper insight than any other writer into the horrors that were to be perpetrated by the regime. Yet he appears always to have seen himself as a socialist, and to have tried doggedly, though with only limited success, to be accepted by the Soviet literary world.

Platonov has often been called a satirist; he himself once wrote that 'satire must possess teeth and claws, its plough must dig deep into the soil so that the bread of our life can then grow.' His own satire does indeed 'possess teeth and claws'; yet it is always so intermingled with tenderness that the word 'satire' seems hardly appropriate. He has also

been called a surrealist; yet the more I learn of Soviet history, the more realistic his surrealism comes to seem. And his stories convey the texture, the smell and feel of everyday life with unusual vividness.

More than Gorky or even Mayakovsky, Platonov is the poet of the 1917 revolution; he shows us the dreams of the builders of socialism in all their inarticulate confusion, his sympathy not lessened by a clear awareness of the consequences of these dreams. But Platonov writes with equal perceptiveness about machinery, nature, and more everyday human emotions; often, with a subtlety all the more striking for its apparent naiveté, he writes about nature in terms of human feeling, or machines as if they are a part of nature: 'the sky went still in exhaustion'; 'On and on raged the loudspeaker, like a blizzard' (it is blaring out propaganda).

Platonov's subject matter is varied, but a theme to which he often returns is the search for utopia. *Chevengur*, set in 1921–22, is about an attempt to establish communism in a small town in the steppe: a memorable image from the novel is that of the quixotic Kopyonkin, knight-errant of

the martyred Polish-Jewish revolutionary, Rosa Luxemburg, patrolling the steppe on a carhorse called 'Strength of the Proletariat'. In his unfinished *Happy Moscow*, Platonov examines the brave new world of 1930s Moscow, a time when the slogan most frequently repeated on posters and banners was Stalin's pronouncement that 'Life has become better, life has become merrier.' The short novel *Soul* (the title of the original is *Dzhan*, a Persian word meaning 'life' or 'soul'), set in the remote deserts of Central Asia, is about an attempt to save the *Dzhan*, a lost nation made up entirely of exiles and outcasts from other nations, and lead it to Communism; Platonov explains that these people are called 'the Dzhan' because their souls are their only possession. The story, 'Among Animals and Plants', is about the dissatisfied family of a railway worker in Soviet Karelia: the radio, and the splendour of the passing trains, lead them to believe that utopia has already been established in Stalin's Soviet Union – everywhere except in their own remote hamlet.

The theme of utopia is intimately linked in Platonov's work to the theme of exile and orphanhood. Orphanhood – exile from home and family – is the most fundamental form of exile, and it is those without home or family, those with no stake in the world as it exists, who are most likely to be seduced by utopian fantasies. Platonov treats these themes in a variety of ways, from the most metaphorical to the most literal. His 1946 story 'The Return' is about a captain who feels orphaned when he leaves the army at the end of the war to travel back home. His homecoming proves difficult and he nearly makes orphans of his two children by leaving them and his wife for a young woman he met on the journey. In the end, however, he decides that the real world represented by his family is dearer to him than the distant utopia represented by the young woman.

The heroes of Platonov's earlier works are, for the main part, orphans in a more literal sense of the word. A Russian writer, Vitaly Shentalinsky, once said to me that the true hero of Platonov's works was the orphaned Russian people as a whole, the Russian people deprived by the Revolution of both their Mother Earth and their Father in Heaven. This thought at once brought to my mind a passage from *Chevengur*, a retort made by an angry peasant to one of the Bolsheviks: 'Very clever. You've given us the land, but you take away our every last grain of wheat. Well I hope you choke on our land. All us peasants have got left of it is the horizon. Who do you think you're fooling?' The Soviet people did indeed have nothing left to them but the horizon: nothing but an ever-receding line of distant light and the webs of delusion that can be spun from words.

Chevengur (1927) and Platonov's earlier works are, for the main part, despairing in tone. *Soul* (1935) and his later works are more hopeful. It is interesting to compare a scene from the childhood of Sasha, the hero of *Chevengur*, with a superficially similar scene from the childhood of Nazar, the hero of *Soul*. In the first part of *Chevengur*, during a famine, little Sasha is thrown out by the family who have adopted him. His

adoptive father, Prokhor Abramovich, makes him a beggar's bag and a staff. On his way to the city, where he has been told he will be able to find bread, Sasha stops beside the grave of his true father, a fisherman who committed suicide. There in the graveyard he discovers a new and bleak sense of himself:

Sasha entered the graveyard, not knowing what he wanted. Now for the first time he thought about himself and touched his chest: *this here is me* – but everywhere else was alien and different from him.

Alienated from everyone and everything, feeling that there is no one close to him in the world except his dead father, Sasha gives his dead father the staff that could have served as a link to his still living adoptive father:

'Father, they've driven me out to go begging. It won't be long now till I come down and live with you – you're lonely all on your own, and I'm lonely too.' The boy put his staff on the grave and heaped leaves on it, so it would be safe waiting for him. Sasha decided to hurry back from the town as soon as he had collected a full bag of crusts; then he would hollow out a dugout beside his father's grave and live there, since he had no home.

To Sasha the only sure home, the only place where he can live in peace, is death.

After returning home with a full bag of crusts, Sasha falls ill. In his delirium he again demonstrates his loyalty to his dead father. Two different dwellings blur together in his mind: the lakeside dugout where he once lived with his father and the dugout he intends to make for himself in the cemetery:

He mumbled about a stick hidden in the leaves and about his father: Father should take care of the stick and wait for Sasha to come to the lake dugout where crosses grow and fall.

After yet another child has been born to his adoptive mother, Sasha is thrown out for good; Proshka, his hard-headed adoptive brother, tells him never to come back. At first Sasha cannot take these words in; he is 'unable to believe they had stopped loving him there'. Then, once again, he finds comfort beside his dead father:

Sasha made his way to his father's grave and lay down in the little cave he had half-dug. Walking among the crosses was frightening, but he fell asleep as peacefully beside his father as he had in the dugout on the shore of the lake.

Nazar Chagataev, the hero of *Soul*, is also thrown out from his home during a famine. He too is given a staff. But even though his mother thinks she is sending him out to die – there is no food, she thinks he is bound to die anyway and she cannot bear to watch him die beside her – she does her best to instill her son with faith. She tells him that he will not be alone as he walks through the world:

His aged Turkmen mother, Gylchatay, placed a tall sheepskin hat on his head (...) then she slipped a thin reed cane into his hand, so he would have a plant

walking beside him in the place of an older friend, and told him to go.

She tells him that he will find a new and better father:

‘Off you go, Nazar,’ she said, not wanting to see him dead beside her. ‘If you recognize your father, don’t go up to him. (...) Keep going until you come to strangers. Let your father be a man you don’t know.’

Nazar does not want to leave his mother. Unlike Sasha, whose meekness is a sign of the depth of his despair, he weeps and rages. His straightforward, natural reaction is a sign of his spiritual strength. First he clings to his mother’s body, not wanting to let life slip out of his grip. Then he defiantly asserts that he will outlive his mother, that he will cling on to life even without her:

Nazar began to cry beside his mother. He embraced one of her cold, thin legs and stood there for a long time, clutching her weak, familiar body (...) The little boy sat down in the dust of the earth and said to his mother: ‘I’ll forget you too, I don’t love you either. You can’t feed a small person. And when you die, there’ll be nobody with you.’

Unlike Sasha, who will remain faithful to his dead fisherman-father, Nazar is determined to find life and companionship. First, thinking that the wind is an exile like himself, he tries to make friends with it. The wind’s disappearance only intensifies his pain:

An inconsequential wind was looking for shelter among the quiet, sandy dunes, wandering about and crying, exiled from somewhere far distant. The boy listened to this wind, following it with his eyes, wanting to catch sight of it and be close to it, but he saw nothing – and then he cried out. The wind had disappeared from him; no one answered (...) Nazar touched his legs and his body in bewilderment: did he exist now that no one remembered him or loved him? There was nothing for him to think now; it was as if he had lived thanks to the strength and desire of others, of people close to him, and now they had gone, and they had driven him away.

But Nazar’s next attempt at friendship is more successful. Meeting a tumbleweed bush, ‘a wandering plant’, which, like him, ‘had no one, no family, no one close, and was always moving away into the distance’, he touches it and says: ‘I’ll go with you, I feel sad on my own. You think things about me and I’ll think things about you.’

Nazar has more in common with this tumbleweed than is at first apparent. Like it, he will have to wander a long way through the desert. Like the tumbleweed – a plant that can pull up its roots when the ground is too dry, roll them into a ball and let itself go with the wind until it comes to a place where there is enough moisture for it to put down its roots again – Nazar has a gift for finding food for both body and soul in the most unpromising of places; as an adult, he will

even prove able to satisfy his thirst by eating damp sand. Friendship with the tumbleweed reinforces Nazar’s trust in life. The wind ‘leads’ the tumbleweed, and the tumbleweed ‘leads’ Nazar to a shepherd who, like Nazar’s mother – and, of course, Platonov himself – has a gift for empathy, for entering into Nazar’s reality. Platonov’s laconic account of this meeting is imbued with an enchanting humour and delicacy:

That day the wandering bush led Nazar to a shepherd, and the shepherd gave the boy food and drink and tied his bush to the stick, so the bush would rest too.

Throughout the rest of the novel, whenever Nazar trusts himself to another person, that person leads him to someone else with whom he will form a still more important bond.

The parallels and contrasts between these two accounts of ‘exile’ are precise. Sasha’s staff, lying on a grave and covered by dead leaves, symbolizes death; Nazar’s staff, on the other hand, is linked to a plant that looks dead yet has a tenacious grip on life, a plant that symbolizes life, movement and the capacity for self-nourishment. The eventual fate of both Sasha and Nazar is prefigured in these two scenes. Sasha, loyal to the vision of his fisherman-father, remains forever aloof from life and ends up drowning himself in the same lake as his father; Nazar strives for intimacy with almost everything and everyone that he meets. He appreciates the value of every form of life. He understands that ‘the blackthorn is imbued with a scent, and the eyes of a tortoise with a thoughtfulness, that signify the great inner worth of their existence, a dignity complete in itself and needing no supplement from the soul of a human being.’ In the last lines of the novel he is holding the hand of a young woman, Ksenya (the name means ‘stranger’). Platonov states that Nazar ‘now knew for sure that help could come to him only from another human being.’

Platonov writes with unusual directness. He confronts matters many of us often prefer not to think about. But in the words of John Berger, the poet, novelist and critic who is one of Platonov’s most passionate admirers, ‘His stories do not add to the grief being lived; they save something’¹

April 2007

[Andrey Platonov is seen by many as the greatest Russian prose-writer of the last century. Works available in English include *The Foundation Pit*, *The Return*, *Happy Moscow & Soul* (all translated by Robert Chandler et al. & published by Harvill) and *The Portable Platonov*, (Glas, available from robchandler@dial.pipex.com). A new selection of Platonov’s works, *Soul and Other Stories*, will be published by NYRB Classics in December 2007. Robert Chandler has also translated Vasily Grossman’s *Life and Fate*, Hamid Ismailov’s *The Railway*, and selections of Sappho and Apollinaire. He is the editor of *Russian Short Stories from Pushkin to Buida*.]

¹John Berger, *A Season in London 2005* (London: Artevents, 2005), p. 87

BALKAN PAST TIMES

Valbona Voca Bashota

The poems by Valbona Voca Bashota were created in the 2006 Exiled Writers Ink-Poetry School Programme funded by the Arts Council.

Kosovo

Each time I return to you
From my travels around the globe
As I watch your green fields
From the airplane window
I suddenly feel my soul reuniting with the cosmos
And everything falls into place

You open your arms to me
As if to console me from the winters
Of foreign lands,
Your sun shines brighter
Than anywhere
Ah, how refreshing, how light is your air

I am recaptured by your smell
So unique, so strong
I feel drunk on your soil
Totally conquered under your spell

You hold me tight in an embrace
I surrender to your Love
Your warmth, your touch Kosovo my dear,
Fills up all my emptiness, melts down my sadness

The voices of my countryman
Are music to my ears
When I walk on your ground
The birds begin to sing

Each time I see the sunset
Disappearing beyond your hills
The red reminds me of the blood
Over centuries spilled
Yet you remain as vivid and beautiful as Picasso's paintings
You are a mystery to me, my Kosovo, my country, my soul
You bow down but never fall

My Suitcase

In my suitcase I carry the remaining shadows
The madness of unfinished acts
And violation of childhood dreams
By the guards of lifeless tunnels

My suitcase travels among Gulliver's travels
Walking, running breathless towards life's mysteries
Following the traces of light, hiding away its phantoms
Pursuing the destinies of Tom Sawyers adventures

In my suitcase folded are the faces
That lighten up the flame of my molecules
Folded are in composition the chromosomes
That comprise the hereditary dna
Of the pain, euphoria, enlightenment and triumph

In a corner of my suitcase snuggled up
Stubbornly remains the innocence of one love affair
a dream, a fairy-tale illusion of paradise
sweet as life itself
sour as life itself

I carry my suitcase inside the colours of my rainbow
Remaining hieroglyphics across the pyramids of my
deserts
I have the Nile, I have the Danube
Wandering in my veins

A suitcase unlocked only by the mysterious
Code of the fifth element,
A suitcase stuck inside my bear skin
My skin is my shadow, my shadow is my suitcase
In it I carry the first kiss, the last tear
Seven wonders of the world and seven sins

Home is where the Sun rises

Home is where the sun rises in the right-hand of the
sky
Somewhere where we walk barefoot on the warm
ground
Home is the ocean of crystal waters
The sky we fly in without wings

Home is where heart
Always remains tied up by its cord
The cherished childhood dreams
Blossom its full bloom

Home is where I want to be
When I laugh, cry and blossom
Home is where I want to share
My last bread and salt

THE KISS OF THE RIVER BANKS

Mirza Mustovic

Translated by Prof. Ivan Danicic and Prof. Tom Harrison

Stone by stone
Stone upon stone
Stone against stone
And through the stones
The banks hold out their hands to each other
Boldly seizing
Binding one to the other
As men
And time
Build bridges
(And destroy them)
With their hands...

...Two banks became one
Each gives itself to the other
Kissing in the sky
Watching below
That stone embrace
Becoming in turn a part of heaven
A part of ourselves

Mostar, 1967

THE CLOWN

Sonja Besford

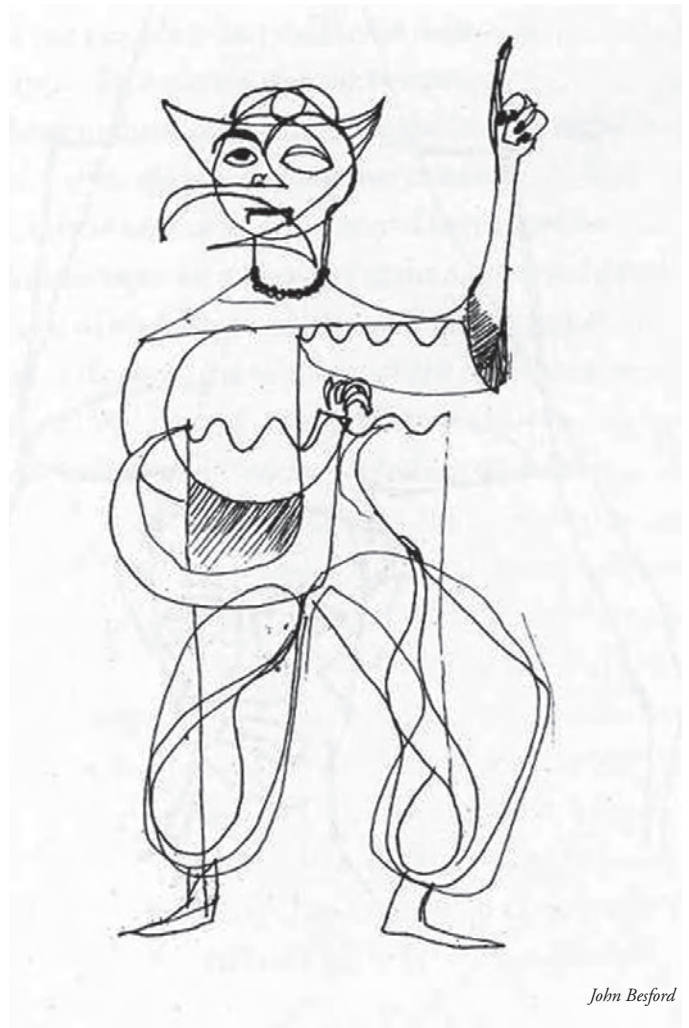
Every night intoxicated or not, I dream the same dream, as if my radiant dreaming dimension, tired of rotating in laughter and beauty, opened its doors to a sinister terrestrial being. My head, my dream, becomes his sanctuary. Why me?

In front of me stands a town with white walls. It is mid-day. The sun clings to my skin with the devotion of a healer. The tower on the left of the city gates is covered with fragile white lilies. The gates are open and I enter. The feeling of joy is at first inexplicable, taunting. As I wander along the deserted streets, I suddenly recognise it as my home town. I weep with happiness, since the tale of its burning to the ground, which had reached me some years ago while I was still an apprentice clown, clearly isn't true. This discovery stirs me so powerfully that I instantly shed the awesome burden of my forgiveness: I forgive my father. At last, I forgive my father.

Light in heart, I walk and skip through the streets and alleys, which always lead to another square with a fountain and several statues of cats. I admire the gardens full of cascading lilies. Their delicate fragrance makes a frame for childhood memories.

Father spent his life drinking. At other times he chased mother around the garden or the circus for the ostensible purpose of procreation. Mother, although arrogant and beautiful - she came from the hills - responded to his lust with feline grace. Even in their trapeze act their passion was intense, undisguised, sometimes shameless. If she ever feared that he would not catch her in time, because he was too drunk, she never displayed it.

There were no nets. Father said, no one would come if there were nets. He died one night shouting that it was my mother's turn to catch him. The dull sound of his body hitting the sawdust of the ring below, blended with my mother's scream. For a moment she stood on the platform above paralysed, her exquisite face illuminated by the glare of several spotlights, a mask devoid of emotion. Then, like a cat after its prey she leaped into the air, somersaulted twice and with a perfect alignment of legs and arms, landed on her head, next to my father's. Fragments of their brains and



blood mixed; their inter-locked limbs, the utter stillness and silence of the audience, somehow confirmed that this act of dying had purified their life-long satanic embrace.

Being here in my home town made me see why their passion had offended me. Not because it excluded me or my brother, but because I was hungry to feel the same, and never, never could! Not even when I loved Josefina with all my heart and our passion exorcised the ghosts of all previous lovers. Not even when we cried together, invented vows and commandments, made a common but unique promise that our love would last for eternity. All the time I knew that she would leave me and that I would let her go. Somewhere in all my split wisdom and wishful indulgence, there was a hidden axiom, murmuring at first, then speaking aloud, clear: I

did not love Josefina, not really, not as outrageously, venomously as my parents had loved each other, and that was the only kind of love I wanted!

I sit on a stone bench somewhat breathless from walking, or is it perhaps from a painful nostalgia which the memory of Josefina's caresses has caused? Do I feel them so intensely now that they are meant for my brother? Is it because they would be now illicit? Do they seem so much more precious because they would be illicit, were they given to me? Or is it that, after all, I really loved Josefina? Before I can put my questions onto the weighing machine, I perceive the changing shadows. The sun glides to the west and the noise of window-shutters opening, doors creaking, fills the town. I start to walk again, smiling.

I expect to see familiar faces, but I recognise no one. No one pays any attention to me, no one looks at me. It is almost as if they cannot see me. The streets are full of people. I listen to their conversations. With each conversation my fears grow. The strange anxiety makes me turn this and that way looking for a single person I have known, a single welcoming face, but even those who are familiar in some undefined way just look through me.

Then all at once the streets are lighted by thousands of candles. They are all in the shape of giant lilies. They flicker and wave, creating shadows which have nothing to do with the surroundings. They project peculiar geometrical shapes, cages with monsters behind them who silently rave and scream, a flock of ravens although the skies are empty of birds, a dance of letters although there isn't a single shop-sign in sight, a skipping laceless shoe, a rostrum full of weeping women... Next to me there is a statue of a man size cat, and I hug it pressing my face against its marble ear. Presently I shudder at the realisation that this is only a look-a-like of my home town, the horrific journey's end for a collection of misfits and failures! The cat, having shared her secret with me, pushes me into the crowd.

I now recognise everyone. I encounter awful poets, petty criminals, untalented actors, humourless scientists, unbelieving priests, inadequate mothers, vengeful fathers, unscrupulous lawyers; my shoulders brush against knife-happy doctors, power-crazy politicians, sadistic teachers, child-molesters, perverse virgins, graceless ballerinas, corrupt bureaucrats... By touching them, observing them, I can see that they have all arrived in the city where they cannot lose anything, because they had nothing to lose in the first place. They are happy. They loudly contemplate their own greatness. They are sycophants to each others egoistic fantasies. Those who listen, nod and believe, expecting to be believed in turn. I stop several to ask how to get out. They cannot see me, and even when I grab hold of someone's sleeve, shake it in a frenzied attempt to get an answer, he doesn't feel it. I turn to face another cat statue and in its glaring, cunning eyes I read the horrible truth:

since I have crossed that invisible line between the desert and the city-gate with the tower of lilies, I can never get out! I can never retrace the steps into my world, because the circus has moved on. Everything has moved on. I am stuck here amongst people who are indifferent to my existence.

But what happens if I go forward? That being the only plausible alternative, anything outside must be better, I start walking and then break into a run. I no longer pay any at-

tention to these wretched ghosts disguised as human beings. I cut across the frightening shadows, guided by the most sublime sound: children's laughter. I hear it louder and louder. I run in the complete certainty that it will lead me to the city-gates, and promptly I am there. The gates are wide open and I can see the desert beyond. Relieved, I try to take the last step to freedom, but my body does not obey. Something seems to be holding me, this night, the shadows, the flickering candle-light... I don't know, I don't know. I struggle and curse in vain.

Always at this point I wake-up, out of breath and sweating. Slightly unsteady on my feet, I open the door of my trailer and sit on the steps. I listen to the animals groaning in their restless captivity. The night echoes with the sounds of predators and victims, with the creaking noises of decay, with the smell of rust expanding under the bright paint of the circus vehicles... Across the semi-circular courtyard, I can see my brother's trailer. Josefina is probably asleep in his strong arms. What dreams does my brother have, he, the brutal and adored prince to his lions and the master of Josefina's being? What dreams does Josefina have, she, the embodiment of Innocence, riding on her white stallions, who follow the flickers of her whip with love-sick eyes? Does she, under the permanent cloak of absentminded loveliness, have secret nightmares?

Although, wrestling with such thoughts I should ordinarily have felt disturbed, in this short pause from my dream, they give me nothing but comfort. I go back to bed with no remorse, no fear. As soon as I drift back to sleep, my dream continues.

I am still struggling to cross that line. Then I am surrounded by many people, some of whom I've seen earlier. They are all smiling, shaking my hand, kissing me, congratulating me. Some mutter, well done!, others make a dancing ring around me, round and round they dance, singing:

Arriving in style,
Our Clown mustn't die,
He'll give us a happy lie,
And we'll hit the sky.
All laughing the while
We find we can fly
My, oh, my!

They are turning me, clockwise, anticlockwise, pushing me, touching me, stroking me, kissing me. I am outraged but they laugh. Apart from this appalling song, I hear:

Well done! You cannot escape! Unless you had tried, you would still be invisible! Now you are one of us! Goodness, how funny you look! Dance with us! Tell us how to be funny! Tell us! Dance! Tell! Dance!

I wake-up shivering. Again, I jump up, this time quite steady, and fling the doors open. It is dawn and I am alive. If on the previous day we have stopped in some kind place, perhaps a meadow, I now touch the dew on the grass. I wash my face in it. I smell the sun and the good earth and the whole cycle of life. Then, with my face clean, I ask the fading constellations above: what does it all mean? What kind of evil anarchy rules my dream, who sponsors this sordid pilgrimage to a place whose dynamics and symbolism I refuse, I refuse to accept! Everyone tells me, everyone knows, everyone laughs, everyone applauds - I am, I am, I am a funny clown!

The Making of a Dissident Writer

Shereen Pandit

The article is adapted from a speech delivered at a PEN conference on Dissident Writing in Valladolid, Spain, in 2001.

What is a dissident writer?

"The dissident...means the fighter who cooperates with others to struggle against oppression and exploitation, whether personal or political" (Nawal el Saadawi Reader p157).

I'd like to think that, in terms of that definition, I've been a dissident for all my life. In South Africa, when I was an activist in the oppressed and exploited community from which I come. In London, picketing the South African embassy, going on marches and demonstrations for South African and other oppressed people. Now, living and working with asylum seekers.

What makes a someone a dissident?

Like most people, my own experience and observation of oppression and exploitation drove me first to silent dissent, then to open and active opposition to it. I was a dissident long before I was a writer.

As a child, I cried with hurt the first time I was thrown off a white bus. The first time I was pushed off a white park bench, I questioned the rightfulness. The first time I was forbidden to use a toilet because it was for whites only, I raged. Only when my mother, my sister and I were nearly killed by a white man, purely for fun did I understand that all these things happened because of the colour of my skin.

Growing up, I saw people treated even worse than I was, because their skin was darker than mine. I'd see police chase men and women, beat them and throw them in police vans. Where are they taking them? I'd ask my father. To jail, he'd say, because the government has made it a crime for them to be here. They have to have a pass to come to the towns. So I learnt that people could be imprisoned simply for being in a place, for looking for work, or working. For living. In their own country.

All around me, I saw white people - well fed, wealthy, powerful. I saw black people - hungry, poor, powerless. These things made me angry with those who caused such suffering and injustice. Thus, from earliest childhood, I was ready, first in small ways, then more and more strongly, to show my opposition to injustice.

Many millions before and after me became dissidents in similar ways.

What does a dissident write about?

When I began to write, I chose to write about oppression and exploitation, about the suffering which the mass of South Africans endured for so long, as a reminder of man's inhumanity to man. I also chose to write about opposition to it.

My characters were not just victims of tyranny, but also fighters against it. They were mainly the brave and determined women of South Africa, in unions and community organisations, who faced bullying bosses, violent husbands, armed police, in their struggle for the right to organise and protest, to strive for better working and living conditions.

Their stories were a necessary celebration of the courage that won a country.

Later, there were the stories of exile. When I got to London, homesick and demoralised, I found so many people fighting our cause. I could not give up, when so many mainly young, many poor, people, were picketing the South African embassy for 24 hours a day, year after year. These people took numerous beatings from fascists, harassment from the police, even arrest. Many lost their benefits and their homes and had to sleep rough. Their courage kept me going in the dark days of exile and so they too, feature in the stories which I write.

What makes a dissident into a writer?

In those days of youthful dissidence, I was too busy to take stock, sit down and write. I didn't think of being a writer, joining those whose novels, short stories or poetry of dissent were banned by the old South African government.

The only writing I did, was in collectives, producing anti-government materials - leaflets and pamphlets, shop-stewards' manuals and township newspapers. Getting caught with such materials led to my husband's and my own exile.

Whether this can be called dissident writing is another question.

Only once the struggle seemed to be over, did the stories of the men, women and children I'd met in the years of political activism and exile, cry out to be written. So I wrote to record the suffering and salute the courage of South Africa's masses because already in the early post-apartheid days, it seemed forgotten except by those who wished to exploit it for personal gain.

I started meeting a new breed of South African - young people enjoying the fruits of freedom, without any thought for the long hard struggle that had won it. Either they'd never learnt about Sharpeville and Soweto or they couldn't be bothered. The people who made our history were not real flesh and blood to them, just names from the past.

The many young South Africans who travel the world, the hundreds who live and work in London, taking advantage of South Africa's return to the Commonwealth, have no idea, for example, of why South Africa was kicked out of the Commonwealth. They know little or nothing of national and international boycotts and of the fight for sanctions, the sacrifice of the young people who picketed the embassy. Many don't care.

These young people need to know about their country's history, because all around them is the evidence that the struggle we fought is far from over. Millions of South Africans still live under the same conditions as they did before 1994 and now without even the dreams of liberation that we had. One way of teaching young people our history, is by bringing the struggle to life for them in stories. Making them see real men women and children suffer and die, fight and win.

Maybe then, they too will want to change the continued suffering in South Africa and elsewhere.

I want my own child, born and raised 6000 miles from the townships of South Africa, to not grow up in ignorance of the past of her parents and people like them. She will be an adult when people have forgotten what apartheid really was like. The struggle for the freedom of South Africa will be so much dry history, just as the agony of the Palestinian people, the starvation of Africa and destruction of Eastern Europe and similar things all over the world, are just news seen or read from a distance.

Hoping to open the eyes of young people to the changes that still need to take place in our country and elsewhere, changes only they will be able to make, I started to write stories set in the present. I wrote about a young man who wasn't afraid of the tanks and guns of the apartheid government, but killed himself because he feared the corruption and greed of a government he'd helped to bring to power. I wrote stories of the rape and violence against women and children which go on at a horrific rate in South Africa, even though the government has enshrined the equality of women in the constitution and sworn to protect our children.

Am I a dissident writer now?

Often, dissidents become exiles. Exiles come into contact with the problems of their host country. The dissident cannot stand aside from these.

When I came to Europe, my own country was on every front page and television bulletin - marches and tyre burnings, the stoning of the troops in the townships. Everywhere I went, people only wanted to discuss the SA struggle.

Yet in Britain, the country of my exile, exploited workers were on strike in mines and elsewhere. The oppressed of Northern Ireland were struggling for their freedom. Many people were homeless and jobless. Yet these were the people who stood shoulder to shoulder with us. We could not stand aside from their struggles. Just as we opposed the horrors which Britain had bequeathed my country, its continued exploitation of my country, my continent, we had to express opposition to what it was doing to the oppressed and exploited in Britain.

But there was another struggle going on in Britain. The struggle of immigrants and asylum seekers, the struggle of Britons whose ancestry isn't white, Anglo Saxon Protestant but who continue to be treated like outsiders several generations on.

For many reasons, we in the SA struggle had been isolated from the oppressed and exploited in the rest of the world, including our own continent.

In Britain, I became part of a worldwide exile community – a microcosm of which lived in London. This community identified with the SA struggle. Perhaps if that great fighter Mandela had seen this, he would not have equivocated on the Irish struggle and hesitated on the death of Ken Sarawivo.

By the time the ANC came to power, I'd lived for a decade amongst people who fled mistreatment, violence, genocide, in their own countries. Their lives were ravaged by climatic changes caused by global warming for which the West is largely responsible. Their countries face famine caused by Colonisation, Aid and Development. Their people devastated by diseases bequeathed them by countries which now refuse

them medication. These days their number – the number of those driven to seek refuge far from their homelands - has been swollen by further senseless wars which have laid their countries waste.

In Britain they face another struggle - sickness in substandard housing, refusal of the right to work, inadequate benefits to live on, racist attacks, and threats of being returned to the war-torn or famine ravaged countries from which they come.

Britain welcomes white South Africans, Canadians and Antipodeans with open arms. It steals the most highly skilled from developing countries. But those starving as a result of war and famine, Britain sends home to die. So do the other countries of Fortress Europe which are responsible for war-mongering and supplying murderous dictators with arms and money.

By the time I began to write, ill-health was compelling me to seek less militant means of dissidence than that of my youth. These lay in putting the skills and experience I had, to use in my new community - the exiles from Africa, Asia, South America, Eastern Europe.

One small form of protest was to teach women who'd been deprived of education, to read and write. This helped them to adapt to life in a strange place, but it was also a rebellion against countries which keep women illiterate and innumerate and therefore in subjugation. Literacy and numeracy empower.

Teaching immigrants the language of the country of their exile is also a form of protest against a hostile host country, which exploits their lack of English to ill-treat them and allows its citizens to ill-treat them. Literacy and numeracy, learning the language of their new country, enables immigrants to resist becoming the new underclass of their hostile host country.

Another small form of protest is to help refugees to handle the bureaucracy which tries to cheat them of asylum, housing and benefits. Thus the British state is forced to give protection and succour, however little, to refugees.

Giving exiles moral and physical support against racists whipped up by media and state, is also a form of dissent about what is happening in Britain today. This work helps sustain the dissident within me, reminding me that the struggle of the oppressed and exploited worldwide still goes on.

Just as my writing was fuelled by the experiences of the oppressed and exploited in my home country, it is now fuelled by the sufferings and triumphs of the immigrant/exile/refugee community of which I am a member. Our stories enable us to relate to one another. They also let people in the countries of our exile share those experiences.

Hopefully, through my writing and the writing of others in this community of ours, the people of Britain will begin to see us, not as threats, but as people who need their support and who will one day return that support. And as people who aren't that different from them.

So, am I a dissident writer? I've been a *dissident* all my life. I *write* about my experiences as such. I use my writing and other skills to oppose oppression and exploitation, even in the country of my exile. All of that probably does make me a dissident writer.

London, 2007

LOOK, WE HAVE COMING TO DOVER by Daljit Nagra

published Faber and Faber, 2007

Janna Eliot



photo: © Sarah Lee

In February, 2007, Exiled Writers Ink hosted award winning poet, Daljit Nagra, at its monthly event at The Poetry Cafe in London.

Born in London into a Punjabi family, Daljit offers the reader insights into the British Asian experience, while his wide-ranging themes - culture clash, racism, language, identity, the myth of return, survival techniques, arranged marriages - will resonate with many in our multicultural society.

The sense of alienation is beautifully evoked in 'Rapinder slips into Tongues', a poem about a confused Sikh child caught between two cultures, familiar with both, yet not totally at ease in either. At home, he repeats the rituals learnt at his Catholic school, but is scolded by his father and exhorted to pray properly. So next time he's called on to say a 'Hail Mary' at the end of school registration, he superimposes the mental image of the Golden Temple on the crucifix, roaring "Wahay Guru!" in his mind. 'Prelude to Suka's Adventures from the Board Room' encapsulates the sad story of many an immigrant, lured to Britain with false tales of riches. Instead of the promised banquet, these gullible migrants find a diet of "cardboard chapattis" and "a stream of shift-working men, sleeping days or nights" in partitioned bathrooms.

There is an affectionate dig at the refugee industry in 'Booking Khan Singh Kumar'. The poet reflects on the stereotypes demanded by arts foundations eager to dole out money to exotic, exilic writers. In a reference to his day job as a teacher, Daljit questions this bleaching of his "bile-name, the chalk of my white inside on the board of my minstrel-blacked outside." Ever been embarrassed by your parents' outlandish clothes? Then you will relate to 'In a White Town'. The child in this poem is under siege, desperate to hide his otherness from his peers. Armed with air spray to mask the smell of incense, turning up Capital Radio to hide the "noise

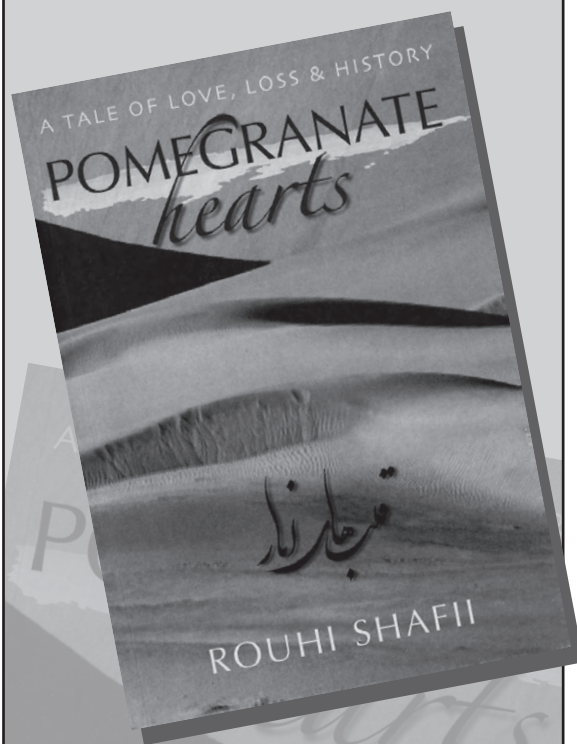
of holy songs", tamping down the curtains so no peeking Tom will discover the rites and rituals of a Sikh household, the uneasy youngster lives his days in fear. 'The Man who would be English' shows a British Asian in a pub, surrounded by old schoolmates and roaring slogans at the TV screen during an England match. Back home, his wife accuses him of consorting with the enemy, the enemy who graffitied the garden wall the night before. One of the funniest poems is 'Arranged Marriage', in which the groom, a "costumed prat", is force-fed ladoos by relatives who misinterpret his unwilling passivity for joyous acceptance of the old customs. The uneasy relationship between Asian merchants and white English unemployed is explored in 'Parade's End', a witty poem set in Yorkshire where Daljit was brought up. The northern Brits moan about how those "darkies from down south Come up ta Yorksha." To take revenge on this double invasion, the Northerners regularly chuck acid over the London Asian car. Several poems are written from the female perspective. 'Consummation' describes a bride "collected from Passport control," who dutifully endures her wedding night while her husband blanks his unwanted gift and downs his Holsten. A schoolgirl, servating food to suitors, envies the liberty of her feisty black teachers and friends in 'Jaswinder wishes it was easy being Black', and a widow casts a savage eye over her sluttish daughter-in-law in 'Bibi and the Street Car Wife', mourning, "O son, I widow each day by netted windows..."

Nagra has a great ear for dialogue and speech patterns, a gift which brings his poems to life. Punjabi, Anglo-Punjabi, Yorkshire, it's all there. Great images too, skilfully mixing East and West in 'Darling and Me', in which the bhangra arms of a new bride mingle with the skating Torvill and Dean hands of her husband. The poet writes in a variety of styles. He does savage in 'Digging', a ghastly poem about identity. He does poignant, in 'On the birth of a Daughter', a poem of religious intensity portraying the mysteries of childbirth overshadowed by the future. And he does heartbreak in the title poem of this collection, 'Look, we have coming to Dover', portraying stowaways arriving in England, "grafting in the black within shot of the moon's spotlights," a description that subverts the moon from an icon of poetic beauty into an object of danger and exposure.

The author's wild images, subtle puns and mad verbs exploded in my head long after I'd finished reading the book. Unpretentious, witty and real, it's one of the best new volumes of poetry around.

Pomegranate Hearts

by Rouhi Shafii



Published: 2006

Publishers: Shiraz Press

3 Oliver Business Park,
McNicole Drive
Park Royal
London NW10 7JB

Website: www.shirazpress.com

Email: info@shirazpress.com

ISBN: 095444814-6

Price: £9.99

Bells of Speech by Nazand Begikhani

Reviewed by Lynette Craig

Bells of Speech, Nazand Begikhani's first collection of poems in English is published by Ambit in their series entitled *Here From Elsewhere*. This neatly ties up the various themes in Nazand Begikhani's poetry. These are the poems of Exile and this volume reveals what an important contribution poets of exile are now making to the English canon. Nazand's 'bells' resound across cultures.

Nazand Begikhani was born in Kurdistan in 1964. She has since lived in Denmark, France and the UK. This is the poet's first collection in English. Her other work is published in France and Kurdistan. But this is not her first exploration of a new language. Nazand is an accomplished linguist and scholar.

Her acknowledged and obvious influence from within the hierarchy of English poetry is T.S. Eliot. In the poem *Silence in my Ears* which she says is 'after *Ash Wednesday*', she responds to Eliot's idea of denial of feeling which he seems to accept, his 'I do not hope to turn again, with

'No longer,

The beauty of moments captures me no longer'

but then goes on to describe 'a dazzling child/ on the palm of the snow' and 'a fretful girl' kneeling to pray, perhaps herself in the past or the past itself. Her sense of denial is tempered not only by a longing for this past but her wish to reconcile it with her present. In other poems we hear Eliot's influence: the way she repeats 'This is a dry time' in the poem, *Evening by the Loire* is very much his technique of letting a phrase gather layers of meaning. In *My Mother's Prayers* we find the line 'and the memory of the garden has perished'. Yes, indeed this is her mother's real garden but also surely Eliot's richly symbolic garden in *Burnt Norton*.

There are, too, echoes of Blake, the apparent and often deceptive simplicity with which he describes the ills of the world, in such lines as 'I woke up one day from a deep sleep' from the poem, *The Wall*, in which a 'naked wall' is both actual and metaphorical in separating her from her dead brothers and her own freedom from persecution. And her use of parallelism in the prose poem, *A Song for my People*, in the lines, 'I am light', 'I am the light rays of your sun', 'I am your light' takes on the lilt of the Psalms in the English Bible.

There are many other threads of influence from other languages, other writers, but this is not to say that Nazand does not have her own individual voice. She certainly has. This voice is lyrical and spiritual.

In *Here Me There* she says, 'My past/was a goddess in the East,' her present, more prosaically, is 'in Paris/sitting in the Grand Cluny café' and her future 'is sleeping between East and West/dreaming of both'. When she introduces a tangible image such as the daisy petals she pulls off saying, 'Will I return home? Will I return? Will I?' she uses an image that is not only very 'English' but also, I think, allows her reader into her experience more readily. Similarly the description of her mother's life 'picked and burnt away/like a cigarette/between a man's fingers' grounds the poem in an accessible reality.

One of the most remarkable poems in this collection is *A Song of a Murdered Girl* which is dedicated to the victims of honour crimes. Nazand campaigns against the horror of such crimes and for women's human rights. This poem is not only brave in its subject matter, but challenging in tone as she takes the subject directly to the reader-

'Hey hey hey hey

My life story may one day become yours.'

Another poem in which she challenges us is *God is Not Dead for My Mother*, the final lines of which are remarkable in combining English idiom with lyrical expression -

'When you can trace the white wings of your dead children flying over the path of light in the azure of the sky you don't need God to die.'

These poems, about exile, her family, her own struggle to come to terms with loss and persecution, reward careful reading. There is a creative tension here between the universal, all loss, all suffering, and her particular situation, the murder of her brothers and watching the suffering of her mother. There is tension, too, between the richness of her cultural heritage and the expression of it in English. These poems go beyond the anger and lament of the exiled to include us all.

The Myrtle Tree by Jad El Hage

Banipal Books, 2007

Reviewed by David Clark

The reader is quickly transported to scenes of village life where characterisation is larger than life. At the outset, there is a sense of foreboding, as the raging civil war outside slowly draws nearer. But it is the inner conflicts within the village itself that take centre stage for much of the novel. It is a chronicle of the disintegration of traditional life, hitherto strongly bound to the rhythm of the soil and the seasons, in which proverbs encapsulated all you need to know, but now giving way to a new, chaotic and unpredictable order. Young men, eager for battle and bloodshed, challenge the authority of their elders. Hakim, the village dentist, healer and mediator, is also the repository of village lore and custodian of the keys to the old disused castle. He seeks to keep the village united in the face of demands by the outside militia wishing to use the castle as a training ground for raw recruits; for a while he appears to succeed.

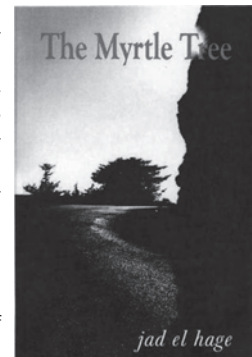
As the story unfolds, we glimpse, through the eyes of the narrator, some of the full horrors of civil war. Hakim falls victim to the escalating hostilities between neighbouring villages, and Adam, his nephew, spends time amidst the ruins and basement shelters of

Beirut, sorting out the bureaucratic formalities following a death. Later on, Adam takes his daughter to a nearby market town and witnesses the parading of mutilated and executed bodies. The senseless

and brutal civil war firmly takes hold of every part of Lebanese society and as Jad El Hage writes: 'ideas and ideologies went to the back burner, leaving gangs of robbers and looters to rule'. And yet, it is the passing away of the traditional village that the author is mourning above all else. The

author conveys a vision of a more harmonious past in which rural life was associated not only with the land and honest toil, but also with a place and time in which members of different religions shared a common tradition and common values.

Those who were able to, fled the raging civil war and sought refuge elsewhere, in nearby Cyprus and further afield in Australia or South America. Jad El Hage left for Australia in 1985, but still manages to spend part of his time in his village in northern Lebanon. Clearly he cannot shake free from his roots and remains firmly attached to the age-old ideals. It is a difficult balancing act to maintain and his novel clearly conveys his nostalgia, longing and affection for a past way of life that has been forever shattered by civil war.



Umbilical

Cord:

A Narrative
of

Exiled Iraqis



Samira
Al-Mana

The
Umbilical
Cord

Available from:

almananiazi@supanet.com

ISBN 1 904808 45 4

£8.99

The Reluctant Fundamentalist by Mohsin Hamid

Hamish Hamilton Ltd (1 March 2007)

Reviewed by Nia Davies

We are walking through a market place in Lahore in Pakistan with our narrator Changez, who has offered to take an American stranger, clearly new to the area, for tea. Changez's voice is reassuring and human, and he tells this tense, suspicious man of his life as a young Princeton graduate working in New York as a promising high-powered business analyst. The American remains the quiet listener. Changez tells how his love affair with America and with the beautiful regal Erica came to a crashing crisis in the wake of September the 11th. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, is Mohsin Hamid's second novel after the award winning *Moth Smoke*. The success of this novel lies in how the reader is compelled through an intimacy and empathy with the narrator, to recognise that this empathy and understanding of cultural difference is absent in the minds of the mutually paranoid and violent who sit on both sides of East and West. This relationship of conflict, misunderstanding and distrust is filtered through the two men in the market place, as one – Changez, tries to reassure the other of their common humanity.

It is through this intimate story-sharing that Changez reveals to the stranger his very personal journey. The way Hamid meshes the personal and the political is extremely effective and subtle. The political events are not simply mirrored by the personal events. Neither is the love affair in this novel one that is simply torn apart by cultural difference: it is a

story in itself of loss and intense disappointment. Changez's attachment to Erica is barred through her nostalgia for a dead lover. In turn, but not in direct reflection, America retreats into a nostalgia of nationalism in the wake of the Twin Towers attack. Changez feels unable to participate in both Erica and America's idealistic reminiscence which has been born out of an intense mourning. Whereas before he feels he belongs in New York, his outsider status in an increasingly patriotic America grows. In a re-evaluation of his identity Changez struggles to reconcile a Pakistani self to an American environment, one which is beginning to feel extremely imperial. The hostilities between India and Pakistan have been growing and there is suspicion that the American government has been covertly stoking the more powerful India against Changez's home-country. Changez's identity crisis is a poignant and passionate display of someone who has become deeply divided; all the while it is delivered to a stranger whose reactions are remain unclear and mysterious.

As the story continues the tension builds. Stealthily and quietly a shade of distrust deepens as the night draws in around the market square. For us the *other* is the quiet unfamiliar American. But Changez, who seems honest about his unexpected reaction to 9.11 and about his decisions thereafter, remains an object of suspicion for the American. Suddenly we see how it is the fear of unfamiliarity and difference that creates distrust, and eventually, conflict. 'You should not imagine that we Pakistanis are all potential terrorists, just as we should not imagine that you Americans are all under-cover assassins.' Here Changez sums up the mutual distrust that has thrown the

world into such violent chaos since 2001, and yet he is trying to bridge an intimacy with this stranger, showing clearly how much humans share in common. Although Changez builds up a fervent anger at the arrogance of American empire-building, he never slips into the ignorance of anti-American hatred.

'*Fundamentalist*' here is an ambiguous term: what is a fundamentalist? Here it seems to suggest both his growing reluctance to 'focus on the fundamentals' in his job on Wall Street; where he must ignore the emotional damage his company is doing. But fundamentalist might also refer to his return to Pakistan, which is mournful but decisive. Before he leaves he grows a beard. Is this for political or religious reasons? It is 'perhaps, a form of protest on my part, a symbol of my identity, or perhaps I sought to remind myself of the reality I had just left behind [Pakistan]; I do not recall my precise motives.' This struggle for an identity that must be either Western or Eastern brings to mind the problem of making a cause for common humanity when it is our differences that make up our identities; and subsequently these diverse identities that make the world so breathtakingly diverse. Hamid seems to suggest we need empathy in a divided world.

Fiction is a brilliant medium for familiarising and creating empathy and Hamid has harnessed it with expert irony, tension and beauty. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is not only a devastatingly important and personal story of loss and identity; it is also a striking provocation of how human beings figure in political events and how in turn politics affect our personal lives.

Film

Mahnaz Mohammadi: Women Without Shadows

Cristina Viti

This is a documentary which is available online: <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=2146045358746321890>

It follows a group of Iranian women interned in a mental asylum as their week unfolds.

By structuring the narrative to begin and end with the same images and sounds, the author has us sharing the women's desolation at the endless cycle of days revolving without any hope of release. In this world devoid of any saving grace, visits from the outside are the only ray of light, and are inevitably invested with symbolic significance: the telephone calls received are a sign of status, and the ordinary-looking visitor handing apples out of his plastic bag like a reverse Eve in an infernal Eden catalyses with his presence the resurfacing of long-lost dreams and buried sorrows.

The author casts a lucid but compassionate eye on the women as they act out their inner torment falling prey to the see-saw of conflicting emotions, and perfectly captures the state of heightened dramatisation they live in: a woman makes up her eyes in front of a blue mirror by the untouched apple; another tenderly paints the lips of a 'sister' after a quarrel; another places a rose on her breast and sings of love and freedom.

The stark contrast between the tender, ravaged inner world and the harsh everyday routines of garbage food doled out on metal trays, enforced work and rough splashes of water is incisively underscored by the use of music and light; scenes from the outside world are black and white or bathed in blue light, as if to heighten their cool remoteness, and the passage of

time is marked by the sound of a train rushing by indifferently.

By restraint, timing and command of imagery Mohammadi fulfils the artist's calling to find the core of lyrical beauty present in all experience. Predictably, she is made to pay for her daring as her work is banned in Iran, and she was one of the thirty-three women arrested in Tehran on March 4th 2007 during a peaceful protest against the imprisonment of some fellow women rights activists. Released on bail, she is reportedly still suffering from ill-health after being denied the medication she needed during the time she served in Evin prison. Her work remains, and will hopefully continue, as a powerful and inspiring statement of courage and artistic integrity.

Film and Censorship

Nathalie Teitler

Article 19 and Human Rights Watch London Film Festival recently hosted a panel discussion on Film and Censorship. The speakers included a panel of both film and documentary makers whose work focused on exploring controversial areas and allowing freedom of expression. They included filmmaker Rex Bloomstein (Director of the film *KZ*), Michael Chanan (Professor of Cultural Studies at the University of West England), Ziba Mir-Hosseini (Co-director of the film "Divorce Iranian Style") and Beroz Ghandi (filmmaker from India). The event was originally intended to have centred around the most recent work of the Indian Director, Deepa Mehta, whose previous films on partition ("*Earth*") and lesbianism ("*Fire*") had been severely censored in her own country. The anger aroused by her controversial films had led to the actors of the most recent film, "*Water*" (featured in this year's Human Rights Watch Film Festival) receiving death threats and the set being burned down. This necessitated changes in both cast and location to ensure the safety of those involved in the film. The re-cast film went on to win much acclaim, including an Oscar nomination, much to the chagrin of the Indian government. Unfortunately Mehta was unable to make the panel due to the death of her father but the panel was led through an interesting discussion by the Executive Director of Article 19, Dr Agnes Callimard. The panel touched on the difficulties of clashes between conscience and faith, the cultural context for censorship, commercial censorship, the issue of whether censorship could ever be justified as well as looking at the complex issues of self-censorship.

Introducing the talks, Dr Callimard, discussed the paradoxical nature of the right to free expression. She pointed out that at present the only real tracking of films currently being censored was undertaken by a hard core porn site. This posed the question whether all censorship was inherently bad, or if in some cases, it should be allowed; a question to which the panel returned later. The panel were then invited to offer initial observations. Ziba Mir-Hosseini spoke of the conflict between conscience and faith, identity and religion and the difficult negotiations these implied for the film-maker. For example, her own work, "*Divorce Iranian Style*" which followed five women seeking divorce through the Courts had been criticised for presenting a negative image of Iran to the West; something for which she as the film-maker had been attacked. Thus although her intention was to expose a specific cultural practice which was not acceptable in her country, and celebrate the women who fought it, the level of censorship meant that the film could only be shown outside its native Iran, fuelling the misunderstandings already existing. Explaining the multi-layered mechanisms of censorship in Iran, Mir-Hosseini outlined how both script and cast had to be approved by the Ministry of Culture before the actual filming had even begun. Clearly a film such as her own could not then be shown in her own country, leaving her no choice but to show it in the West aware that it could be used as a form of negative propaganda. The different forms of censorship in diverse cultures were also explored by Veroz Ghandi. She explained that in India the high level of censorship in place was a legacy from colonial times and had been initially intended to protect the image of the 'pure' white woman. The cinematic act had been retained by later independent governments and was now used to limit freedom of expression by Indian filmmakers.

Another of the film-makers, Rex Bloomstein, suggested that in Britain there is little censorship of the film industry but that there may be tensions brought about by this very lack. He pointed to the example of free speech exhibited by Holocaust deniers, stating that

he was against any laws that impinged on free expression even by this group. Michael Chanan disagreed with this point, arguing that in the UK many documentaries about Ireland had been blocked, supposedly to prevent terrorism. Freedom of expression was also a myth in his opinion as many controversial pieces did not reach a larger audience due to lack of distribution, a form of commercial censorship that was unfortunately not fully explored. The panel also discussed the question of whether art has the right to offend, either deliberately or by implication. There was disagreement on this, with some feeling that it was the right, even the duty of the artist to shock and offend while others felt that it was about opening up spaces for expression without causing offence where possible.

Following on from Bloomstein's point about the absolute right to freedom of expression, the panel was then asked what their personal limits in film-making were, i.e. did they have any topics they would not be comfortable filming? For Michael Chanan the only acceptable censorship was that needed to protect those involved in the filming. For example, in shooting a piece about guerrillas in El Salvador he had allowed participants to disguise their identities. He had also not filmed an American machine in a factory in Cuba, knowing that this would cause many problems with the respective governments. Rex Bloomstein concurred that in cases of personal safety his main duty was to the subject; faced with an incest case he had pulled the footage based on the family's objections. Veroz Ghandi had been involved in a film about an actor charged with terrorism in which right-wing forces had been responsible for both putting him in prison, and later paradoxically, for releasing him. She had cut this last part as it made the politics of censorship too complex, but bravely admitted to feeling guilty about this editing which could be seen as misrepresentation.

This led to the issue of whether film should be seen as representing 'truth' or simply a point of view. It was stated by one panellist that there is a need to recognise that the ethical is also political and cannot be separated, it was also felt that artists have no special rights with regard to freedom of expression and will always represent a political view. Another panellist however, felt that in some cases the filmmaker did have a special ethical sensibility such as when documenting torture in Israel and that film-makers have unique dilemmas to face. Thus some members of the panel felt that artists should be given special protection, particularly visual artists whose work can be so easily destroyed. It was suggested that documentary is not the same as filmmaking. This pointed to the idea that there may be ethical differences between something purporting to be fiction and something presenting itself as truth and brought up the important question, should art and non-fiction be censored in the same way?

In closing Dr Callimard stated that without some form of state protection the artist was endangered and that freedom of expression was an essential if 'dirty' right, in that it conflicted with other rights such as the freedom from discrimination. Government intervention in this area was clearly seen to be about limiting space, rather than protecting expression and the need for all members of society to be vigilant about existing forms of censorship, however complex and uncomfortable some of the arguments might be, came across strongly.

Excerpts of this panel discussion are on the Article 19 web-site: www.article19.org

Biographies

Shanta Acharya was born in India, educated at Oxford and Harvard; and currently lives in London. Her latest poetry collections are *Shringara* (Shoestring Press, UK; 2006) and *Looking In, Looking Out* (Headland Publications, UK; 2005). www.shantaacharya.com

Reza Baraheni was born in Tabriz, Iran. He is professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Toronto and President of Canadian PEN. He is the author of numerous books of poetry, fiction and literary criticism in Persian and English and has been translated into all the major European languages.

Sonja Besford was born in Belgrade. Her seventh book (poetry) was published by Ambit in 2006.

Keena-Diid Caynaane was born in Mogadishu and came to Britain in 1993 as a refugee fleeing from Somalia. She works for an NGO and writes literature on the life of Somali immigrants.

Robert Chandler has translated the poetry of Sappho and Guillaume Apollinaire for the series 'Everyman's Poetry'. His translations from Russian include Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate* and *Aleksandr Pushkin's Dubrovsky* and *The Captain's Daughter*. He has co-translated numerous works by Andrey Platonov, two of which, *Soul* and *Happy Moscow*, were shortlisted for the Weidenfeld European Translation Prize. His translation of Hamid Ismailov's *The Railway*, set in central Asia, is on the shortlist for the 2007 Rossica Translation Prize.

David Clark is the child of refugees fleeing Nazi Germany. He grew up in Australia, Italy and Austria. He studied in Canada and East Africa and now teaches tourism studies and contributes to various cultural magazines in London.

Lynette Craig holds an MPhil in Writing and leads poetry workshops with refugee groups, mentors and edits their work. Her own collection, *Burning Palaces*, (Flarestack), explores dispossession and persecution in her own family heritage.

Nia Davies recently graduated in English Literature at the University of Sussex. She is a writer and traveller and is currently working at Swansea University.

Janna Eliot Novelist and translator, she lives in London and comes from an immigrant family.

Miriam Frank has taken up translating and writing since her retirement from her medical academic and clinical work. Her articles, translations and original works have been published by the Guardian Review, Index on Censorship, Buenos Aires Herald, Quartet Books, Serpent's Tail and Rodopi.

Anna Gunin is a freelance translator and interpreter who graduated from Bristol University. She lives in rural Somerset with her Russian husband and son. She is translating the novel *I Am a Chechen!*

Mark Hill is an exiled Iranian who came to the UK in 1989. He has written a series of poems and short stories in English and two novels in Farsi.

Jennifer Langer is editor of *The Bend in the Road, Crossing the Border: Voices of Exiled Women Writers* and *The Silver Throat of the Moon: Writing in Exile (Five Leaves)*. She has an MA in Cultural Memory. She writes poetry and essays.

Born in 1968, **Nkwachukwu Ogbuagu**, poet, novelist and short story writer, published his first novel, *Bosheth Williams*, in 2003. He is a Nigerian.

Shereen Pandit was a South African lawyer and political activist before coming into exile in the UK in 1987. Her articles, reviews and short stories have appeared in anthologies, newspapers and magazines and have won several prizes, including the Booktrust London Award.

Isabelle Romaine, a French Cameroonian, graduated in Geography at Lyon II University. She has an M.Phil in English Literature and an MA in Cultural Memory.

Shahrokh Reisi is an Iranian born photographer and artist living in Frankfurt, Germany. He left Iran in 2001.

Fathieh Saudi born in Jordan completed her medical studies in France. Her books include *L'Oubli Rebel*, *Days of Amber* and *The Prophets*. She has translated books from English and French into Arabic. She is a recipient of several human rights awards.

Rouhi Shafii is a social scientist and writer, her focus being women in Iran. She has published *Scent of Saffron* and *Pomegranate Hearts* and written numerous articles.

Punjab-born, Kathmandu-based poet, **Yuyutsu RD Sharma** has published seven poetry collections and shall bring out a special British Issue of his magazine, *Pratik*, www.yuyutsu.de

Born in Sri Lanka, **Pireeni Sundaralingam** was recently named as "One of America's Emerging Writers" by the literary journal *Ploughshares*. She is a PEN USA Rosenthal Fellow and her work is featured in the International Museum of Women.

Nathalie Teitler born in Argentina, has a PhD in Latin American poetry and is a professional editor and writer. She has worked for many years in the field of cultural diversity and arts, specialising in work with refugees.

Cristina Viti is a poet and translator. Published work includes translations of Dino Campana and Elsa Morante.

MA IN REFUGEE STUDIES



The MA in Refugee Studies is part of a dedicated programme of teaching and research organised in association with the Refugee Research Centre at the University of East London.

The multidisciplinary course links the study of forced migration to the lived experience of refugee communities. It offers specialist options in refugee and human rights law, migration and citizenship, refugees and racism, refugees and the media, gender and psycho-social issues, and cultures of exile.

The one year full-time or two years part-time programme will interest those concerned with refugee advocacy and welfare, migration, ethnicity and diasporic studies, and social, cultural and legal theory.

For further information contact:

Diane Ball, Refugee Studies, University of East London, Docklands Campus, London E16 2RD.

Tel: +44 (0)20 8223 2770; Email: d.m.ball@uel.ac.uk

For prospectus and application form contact:

admiss@uel.ac.uk or call +44 (0)20 8223 3333

www.uel.ac.uk/ssmcs/programmes/postgraduate/refugeestudies/

uel
University of
East London
www.uel.ac.uk