Another Sea, Another Shore: Persian Stories of Migration

Shouleh Vatanabadi and Mohammad Mehdi Khorrami, trans. and eds.
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Most critics of modern Persian literature would agree that the emergent Iranian diaspora literature is both rearticulating and challenging traditional Persian narratives of identity, nationality, nation-state, and homeland. *Another Sea, Another Shore* is an admirable attempt to bring together in a single volume representative samples of this diaspora literature, rooted in at least 25 years of exilic experiences.

The editors, Shouleh Vatanabadi and Mohammad Mehdi Khorrami, have done a superb job in selecting the stories as well as in translating them in a fluid, straightforward language. The book contains 21 stories grouped under three headings that roughly divide narratives into initial experiences of migrating/travelling, exilic experience, and more settled diasporic articulations. Represented in the volume are narratives of such well-established writers as Reza Baraheni, Hushang Golshiri, Nasim Khaksar, and Dariush Kargar, as well as those of such new writers as Kader Abdolah, Tahereh Alavi, and Marjan Riahi, among others.

The constant themes of shattered dreams, unfulfilled hopes, disconnected borders, ruptured identities, unfamiliar and defamiliarized spaces running through each story testify to the fact that this migration of a generation of exiled Iranians was no ordinary migration. It was not just about leaving one's home behind; it was, more importantly, about not being able to return. And this inability was powerful enough to drive some exiles and their loved ones back home to the shores of insanity – and even death. In "Anxieties from Across the Water," Pari Mansouri masterfully depicts this painful saga when a mother concludes that "the pain of separation will kill me in the end" (p. 7). And it does.

Among the collected stories, Mehri Yalfani's "Without Roots" perhaps best captures the essence of what one may call an Iranian diasporic experience. In this powerful piece, Yalfani demonstrates a complex web of relationships, conflicts, and interactions that migration creates, such as the ones between home and host cultures, old and young generations, males and females, as well as those emerging from class issues, racism, and processes of resocialization and identity formation. The old generation of Iranian

exiles, for instance, is represented in the figure of "the father," an ex-colonel in the shah's army who now drives a cab in Toronto and "talks about women as if they are sheep" (p. 93).

The ex-colonel's generation is a product of a culture that never came to terms with its own racist character. Many of its members come from privileged ethnic, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds and, for the first time, find themselves at the receiving end of their host societies' own racism and exclusion. Unable to fully grasp this condition, they hold on to their home-grown racist mentality and resort to superiority complexes as therapeutic mechanisms to cope with their disadvantaged status in new societies. Thus, it is no surprise that when the ex-colonel's teenage daughter brings her friend Salima home, he and his wife make fun of Salima, asking their daughter: "Why do you make friends with colored children?" (p. 96).

Similar signs of racial prejudice are evidenced in other stories. In "The Road to Arizona," for instance, Nasim Khaksar, a seasoned writer, finds it necessary to comment on "the black fellow's" deep voice, "with that heavy black accent that never fades away even if they stay somewhere else for thirty years" (p. 85). Likewise, in "The Wolf Lady," Goli Taraghi talks about the Iranian pride "rooted in 2,500 years of history … and a belief that we, descendants of Cyrus and Darius, even in our defeat, misery, and wretchedness, are superior to others" (p. 130). This superiority complex is an inseparable component of modern Persian literature and is ingrained in the worldviews of the majority of Persian intellectuals, writers, and poets.

A flip side of this superiority complex has been to inferiorize the non-Persian "others" in the country by denying them the space necessary for developing their languages, literatures, cultures, and histories. This fact is well-illustrated in Ali Erfan's "Anonymous," in which a member of the dominant Farsi-speaking group describes his encounters with Iran's Baluchi community:

> You know that over there everyone has tanned, dark skin, and my white, fair skin stood out. Then and there I felt I was outside; outside Iran. They were speaking in a local language, Baluchi. A foreign language, like here. I did not understand anything … I could not accept that this place was part of Iran. (p. 224)

Thus, a dominant body *foreignizes* fellow citizens of his country just because they have "dark skins" and don't speak his language, that is, the dominant Farsi language. In fact, modern Persian literature has always

played a very central role in perpetuating this kind of linguistic racism by seeking to (mis)represent itself as Iran's only and exclusively authentic literature, just as it has sought to establish Farsi as the only legitimate language in the country.

The late Edward Said emphasized the positive impacts that exile usually has on individuals' creative and intellectual development. As an indication of the increasing literary activities in the Iranian diaspora, *Another Sea, Another Shore* contains vestiges of positive exilic creativity. For the first time in the history of Persian literature, themes of identity, nationality, race, and language are explored as markers of differentiation, distinction, and othering. Such themes are rarely – if at all – taken up in the dominant literature back home.

Certainly, more positive results will come out of this new development when exiles mature to articulate their own position as "other" in host societies. By articulating this subordinate position and juxtaposing it vis-à-vis their superordinate status back home, we may hope that a fully fledged interrogation of acts of othering, excluding, and marginalizing in both home and host societies will emerge.

Hopefully, too, we may then witness such works as *Another Sea, Another Shore* covering not just Persian stories of migration, but samples of stories written in Iran's non-Persian languages as well. To this end, *Another Sea, Another Shore* is a wonderful starting point and a solid steppingstone. I recommend this work to all those interested in Iran and its literatures. It is a fine indicator of the beginning of Iranian diaspora's journey from monoculturalism to multiculturality, plurality, and heterogeneity.

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