

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Roshanak Amrein, *Songs from a Far Island* (Gardoon Publishing House, 2012)

Songs from a Far Island (*Zemzeme haye az Jazire Dur*), the second collection of lyrics written by Roshanak Amrein, is the serene, placid but melancholic resonance of a suffering soul. When the reed-flute is separated from its reedy bed,¹ when home, ‘the place where, when you have to go there, /they have to take you in’,² is lost, such a moan flows from the heart of the sufferers. Amrein is no exception. In a supple and gliding tune her songs flow like the silent deep brook and captivate the heart of the readers straight away.

In a world of the play of power and dominance, Roshanak Amrein is a downtrodden one. She was born in Iran before the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979 and lived through the eight-year-long Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. Though during this period of unrest many migrated to Australia, the safe and popular haven for the refugees, the case was not so for Amrein. In Iran she faced perilous political intolerance and discrimination due to her Baha’i faith. She experienced a shocking and traumatic time when her mother and brother had been expelled from University and her uncle had been executed. Thus her homeland becomes ‘the desert’ (Stream 18), ‘the burnt gardens’ (Endure Broken Voice 16) and ‘the poisonous space’ (The Story of Captive Stars 19) from which she had to flee. But as they were not permitted to travel, they had to wait long ten years to come out of it. Nevertheless, Amrein migrated to Australia and with all the golden opportunities open to her she became a cosmetic dentist in Adelaide.³ Consequently her poems become pregnant with conflicted feelings between her home and her new home. A type of in-betweenness – on one hand longing for home, a place of memories where she will never be able to return, and on the other hand, lack of cherished attachment to new home – burdens her lyrics with woe.

When, in an interview,⁴ Amrein was asked whether ‘it’s book of longing, it’s a book of love, it’s a book of exile,’ she says, ‘it’s a book about bravery, about courage and about standing up for justice and for truth.’⁴ I assume it combines all these themes. She talks about suppression and tyranny in Iran:

They have captured
The stars of the velvety night-
Those who were our guides to the daylight

At the darkest point of time (The Story of Captive Stars 19)

Or

¹Translations and Versions of ‘The Song of the Reed’ (Masnavi, Book 1: Lines 1-34) www.dar-al-masnavi.org/reedsong.html, 7 January 2014.

1. Now listen to this reed-flute’s deep lament
About the heartache being apart has meant.

2. Since from the reed-bed they uprooted me
My song’s expressed each human’s agony, (Mojaddedi, 2004)

²Robert Frost, ‘The Death of the Hired Man’, *American Literature 1890-1965: An Anthology* (New Delhi: Eurasia Publishing House, 1967) 388-392.

³<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/spiritofthings/on-the-wings-of-a-prayer/4791770>

⁴ABC South Australia, Sunday 10 November 2012. http://blogs.abc.net.au/sa/2012/11/roshanak-amreins-poetry-life-story-escaping-iranian-persecution.html?site=adelaide&program=adelaide_evenings

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In the planet that I call home,
people of power
give execution orders
and forests and rivers and lakes
and whales and gazelles and eagles
and thousand year old trees
fall like autumn leaves. (My Planet, My Home 30)

Or

Be silent!
put your pens down!
and we do. (The End of Story 32)

– about her tear-jerking separation from it:

This was our story.
It began with the day our nest burned down,
and we flew away
unwillingly. (Melodies of Exile 36)

Or

Did you see how I flew away
so quietly
that no sleeping eye opened
to shed my farewell a tear? (Streets 27)

Or

The day our hands
didn't even get a chance for a goodbye
I thought of you
and how hard this separation will be,
and how heart breaking. (Separation 42)

– about her coming on a faraway land:

but for me there is a sense of calm
in knowing
there are trees home to high soaring birds
and seas that have abundant food
for the mightiest creatures. (My Planet, My Home 31)

Or

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I have arrived,
on your soil-
shameful,
unwanted,
uninvited. (Shells 45)

Or

In these far away islands,
In this paradise of tinsel leaves
only our songs are missing.
we came
and sang the story of a distant home
on treetops.
[...]
But the island
never understood the meaning of our songs
when its branches
were being filled with sorrowful birds. (Melodies of Exile 36-37)

– and about the spirit of protestation and the revelation of light, truth and justice as the obvious outcome of darkness:

Strike the daf!
As a hand would slap
the face of the oppressors.
the ones who want happiness
silenced
and love disgraced. (The Warrior Who Plays Joy 49)

Or

My eyes are open,
sorrowful but waiting,
with a thousand sorrows weighing on my shoulder,
I remain waiting.
may be a bright morn will arrive.
may be the sun of truth
will rise from the peak of Alborz. (Brothers 13-14)

Or

I speak of a heart
that beats for freedom
of eyes

which like wild flowers of the mountain
look to the high skies of truth
and of the one
who has risen like a mountain
to face the storm. (Tale of Rostam 54)

Or

Father was right.
the homeland will be free
when her children
recount so bravely
the stories of the past
in their songs. (Streams 17)

Or

My last words
will wash your hatred like flowing water.
Love is the only way
out of this darkness
to the limitless realm of freedom,
to the boundless joy of spring. (Last Words 7)

Roshanak's poems are enchanting to read because of her apt use of allegorical imagery. Instead of direct names or indications imageries after imageries come and all imageries are woven around nature. Tree, leaves, seedlings, garden, birds like doves and canaries, rain, streams, shells on the beach playing with the waves, seasons like spring and autumn, blossoms and so on recur in the poems. The upright personality is sketched as a solitary tree on a highest mountain-top whose thoughts are 'his emerald leaves' and who 'Alone/ facing the storm' 'sings a melody in silence' (The Lone Tree 5). In 'Endure broken voice, she compares herself with an 'injured dove /who has taken refuge/in a strange tree' after 'the lush garden of home' was burnt (15-16). Again, in 'Sounds of Captivity', she evokes the image of 'a singing canary' for whom 'there is no spring, /no forest, /no flight, /no you' (38). Also she draws analogy between their broken hearts with the broken pieces of shells which are 'played by the waves of destiny' (Shells 45). The image of the seedling is painted in different ways. In 'The End of Story', she writes that because of the suppression they are silent but in their minds 'a seedling grows' that they water as if it can be one day a 'shady shelter/for the children of justice / and the birds of peace'(32), or in 'Mother' she contends that in her arms 'there is a seedling' that one day will be 'a mighty tree' to be a 'shade' 'for the people of the garden' (29). That's why I feel, after Emily Dickinson, her poems are the finest ones I have ever read. Here readers will have no hard nut to crack but an encompassing beauty and mystery to unveil.

The bilingual text *Songs from a Far Island (Zemzeme haye az Jazire Dur)* is divided into two – thirty-six poems in the Persian language and the English translation of thirty-five, excepting 'beman'. Because of the adaption of the sprightly movement of modern verse form, the poems in Persia are as sweet and elegant as in English. The passion and emotion that she wants to convey are conveyed

perfectly in both languages. The poet's mastery of English language (within a very short period of time after her migration to Australia in 1994) is really praiseworthy. Sometimes I become confused in which language she wrote the poems at first!

I hope Roshanak Amrein's songs will fascinate many, especially those whose home is lost.

Umme Salma

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