

FARNOOSH MOSHIRI'S *AT THE WALL OF THE ALMIGHTY*: A RETREAT TO A WORLD OF IMAGINATION

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ABSTRACT

The writings of Farnoosh Moshiri mainly deal with the relationship of some individuals with the political regime in Iran in the period before and after the 1979 revolution and what these characters encounter of suffering because of the regime. This issue has been dealt with by a lot of Iranian writers like Azar Nafisi, Shahriar Mandanipour, and Bozrog Alavi who have tackled the political aspect in their works. While characters in the writings of Moshiri, in addition to their political resistance, are clinging and retreating to a world of imagination because it is related to memories of the past that enable them to remember their identity and humanity. This aspect has not been dealt with by a lot of writers.

This paper deals with Moshiri's view of the retreat to a world of imagination since it constitutes significance to the main character's relation to his Iranian identity. Later, in the novel the reader becomes aware of the fact that the character's relation with the world of imagination symbolizes the suffering that the Iranian expatriates face and their attempts to cling to their reality by retreating to their past.

Moshiri believes that the world of imagination in which the character lives is the only refuge for escaping from the bitter reality. The main character is analyzed in more than one phase in which he retreats to the world of imagination differently; for example, at one phase he remembers his family, at another he just hallucinates and imagines attempting to survive the bitter reality of prison and sometimes he tries to remember his identity in order to lessen the pain of the experience he is undergoing.

Keywords: Regime, suffering, imagination, retreat, bitter reality, expatriates

Three phases in the Iranian history are worth to be documented in literary works since they present the Iranian ordeal and suffering under the monarch of Shah Pahlavi, during the revolution of 1979, and under the religious regime of Ayatollah Khomeini (El-Deen in the novel). Along this era, Iranians were restless, suffering from poverty, tortured and oppressed.

The political condition in Iran was unstable before, during and after the revolution of 1979. People's condition was miserable under the reign of the Shah. They were living in a state of deprivation and poverty while the Shah was enjoying a luxurious living preparing lavish banquets for important international political figures at the expense of poor Iranians. The Shah was not aware of the amount of money spent on his luxuries; as a result, Iran faced a financial trouble and consequently his regime becomes bankrupt:

While statistics show that each Iranian consumes only 2.7 pounds of meat per month, the regime commissioned Maxim's of Paris to prepare feasts. While the Iranian people need schools, doctors, food and housing, the Shah spent around \$1 billion to entertain the world's richest. ("Corruption and Struggle," 1972, p.6)

The reasons underlying the Shah's act of preparing banquets for international figures and showing luxurious kind of entertainment is as indicated in *Corruption and Struggle in Iran* related to the Shah's attempt to hide the fact of his bankrupt regime hoping to convince the Iranian people and government that the Shah's Monarch is stable and is the best form of government for Iranians. Moreover, he tends to show the U. S. government that Iran's economy is strong and stable in contrary to the fact of being bankrupt. Thus, he would divert the investors' attention from the economic crisis. Other reason is related to the fact that the Shah tries to address the feelings of the Iranians by highlighting the ancient traditions of Iran (1972, p.3).

People's fury, against the practices of the Shah, has grown by the passage of time because of their dissatisfaction with the Shah's regime. Consequently, under a great pressure, the Shah started a campaign of arrest and execution for those who have resisted his regime "since then hundreds of members of underground organizations have been arrested, tried, tortured and executed at an ever accelerating rate" ("Corruption and Struggle," 1972, p.5).

Iranians needed to get rid of this restrictive regime and they wanted to do away with its constant oppression. They protested, in Iran and the United States, against the political regime of the Shah asking for freedom and calling for stopping the chain of arrest, torture and execution. Mayer has pointed out that Islamist groups in exile opposed this regime for being away from religion:

Despite growing prosperity during the 1970s, owing to greatly increased oil revenues, opposition to the Shah was widely spread, fanned mainly by conservative religious leaders. The Shah's responses to such opposition were increasingly repressive, and he relied heavily on his secret police, the SAVAK, which was much dreaded for its harsh methods ... In 1978, riots in several Iranian cities were led by the conservative Shiite Muslims, who wanted the nation governed by Islamic law. They were directed from his refuge in France-by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a revered muslim clergyman and long-time foe of the Pahlavi regime, who had been exiled in 1963. (2001, par. 23)

Then after a state of civil war, Ayatollah Khomeini forced the Shah to leave Iran after a 37 year reign and then Khomeini turned back to Iran. He established the Islamic Republic in Iran in opposition to the extravagant Monarch of the Shah (Mayer, 2001, par. 23).

Under his leadership, people are governed by strict Islamic Shiite regime. Some Iranians have supported his leadership while others resisted since they were dissatisfied with the new regime. Although Khomeini's leadership replaced the Shah's, still it wasn't much better according to Iranians. Also, after the 1979 revolution, a lot of execution and arrest have been committed. So far, these phases; before, during and after the revolution in Iran's history have been depicted in the works of some Iranian writers such as Azar Nafisi, Bozrog Alavi, Shahriar Mandanipour and Farnoosh Moshiri.

In *Reading Lolita in Tahrán* Nafisi's resistance of the regime is different from the hero's resistance of the regime in Moshiri's *At the Wall of the Almighty*. On one hand, the heroine (Nafisi herself) is expelled from three universities for her rejection of wearing the veil and her resistance of the Islamic regime of Ayatollah Khomeini. On the other hand, Moshiri's hero has political reasons for defying the Islamic regime. He resists the political oppression of the Islamic Republic of Ayatollah Khomeini. However, both of Nafisi, as a heroine, and Moshiri's hero escape the reality of Iran to a true republic in which they find out another reality; Allen (2003) states that:

After teaching literature at three universities in Tahrán (and being expelled or resigning in despair from each) Azar Nafisi picked seven of her best students and invited them to

come to her home every week to discuss books. She and her students, all women, began to think of these classes as an escape from the reality of Iran's totalitarian theocracy; but the picture her book paints is of an escape to a true republic where they are all able to discover another reality themselves. (par.1)

In his review of *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Onsando implies that the reader finds a lecturer struggling to teach seven of her students in spite of being banned from teaching at the height of the Islamic revolution. According to the Islamic regime, books like *Gatsby* and poets like Rumi were being banned because they are not compatible with the revolutionary way of thinking. Nevertheless, Nafisi persisted on teaching these books forming a literature band with her seven students (2011, par.2).

Shahriar Mandanipour has also dealt with the political oppression after the 1979 revolution differently. In his novel, *Censoring Iranian Love Story*, Mandanipour pictures the problem of writing and publishing under the Islamic regime. Dehghan goes on saying that "under this regime it could take the ministry weeks, months or sometimes years to respond to a manuscript, and this response would range from a simple yes or no to a detailed list of contested chapters, dialogues, sentences or even individual words"(2009, par.4) Whereas Bozrog Alavi plays an outstanding role as indicated by Ghazal in revealing the bitter reality and facts about Reza Shah's reign. (1998, par.8)

So far, all of the previously mentioned writers have dealt with the political condition whether before the revolution as revealed by Bozrog Alavi or after it as exposed by Shahriar Mandanipour and Nafisi. However, the case is different with Moshiri's *At the Wall of the Almighty* since the reader feels that her novel has encompassed three periods in Iran's history; the period before, after and during the revolution of 1979. This has been illustrated through the story of an unnamed hero who has been sent to prison after the revolution and endured the torture all the time of his stay in prison. The hero expresses the fact that he can't remember anything of his memories by saying:

I know that I'm in the hallways of El-Deen, the central prison of the Holy Republic, and I know that this guard is taking me from my solitary confinement – the Black Box – to cell number four, cell of the Unbreakables. But this is all that I know; I don't remember anything else. (Moshiri, 2000, p.1)

The hero has opposed the political and Islamic regime of Ayatollah Khomeini. He knows that he is going to be tortured for that but he persists on his protest and wants to reach the Hall of the unbreakables where prisoners survive all kinds of torture reaching the moment of facing death by being shot or repenting and being set free by the Islamic regime. Herein lies the policy of the Islamic regime, it is extreme since if you protest against it, you will be treated harshly and if you repent, you will be part of it. There is no compromise; either you are with or against or if you are against, you are going to be tortured severely. "'This is the Holy Army of God' Sheikh Ahmad says, stepping forward.' Repent or you and your rotten friends will be stoned in the main square of the city'" (Moshiri, 2000, p. 188).

During his stay in prison, the hero retreats to a past era where he was about seven and a half. It is the era of the Monarch when the Shah governed Iran. The hero's retreat reminds him of his father who has been also a prisoner of the regime because of his political opposition. The reader's first encounter with the hero is through this retreat. He/she delves into the hero's world of imagination and is introduced to his state of mind. The people's first gathering of revolt against the Shah and their first encounter with the practices of the Holy Republicans are stated clearly by the hero when he said:

We talk about the chants, songs, and slogans that we need to sing and shout up there. As we fly toward our destination, other people will join us. We will stop in the courtyards of the factories and poor neighborhoods; we will stop for the university students and peasants; we will gather at least one million in front of the monarch's castle. This will make him panic. He may leave the country. Our first success will inspire other revolutionary groups; they will join us and our numbers will grow. (2000, p. 180)

In the above quote, the hero shares the reader his memories of the first revolution against the Shah. He describes in details how people have planned to gather from different areas and how they have determined to move the Shah out of the country. What helps them in achieving their aim is that they have inspired other revolutionary groups such as the Islamic group of Ayatollah Khomeini (represented by El-Deen in the novel) to protest against the Shah and make him panic. Consequently, the people have grown in number and their revolution has resulted in the Shah's escape from the country.

The hero's retreat to the Shah's era signifies the end of a 37 years of oppression. It also can refer to other meanings in the novel. The hero has referred more than one time to a flying carpet, the peacock, and the comfort he was living in as a child. All these are symbols of a previous stage in which people were comfortable. Although this stands in sharp contrast with the idea of revolting against the Shah, the reader senses that Moshiri herself expresses her nostalgic feeling towards a past era. The retreat to the Shah's era makes the reader conclude that Moshiri doesn't seem to have any problem with the Shah's regime and she is merely mirroring the reality as it is without making the reader feel of her existence. As regards, she doesn't attribute any of her criticism to the Shah neither she interferes in the text every now and then.

The fact that Moshiri has fled from Iran in 1983 (Moshiri, 2003, para. 2) directly indicates her dissatisfaction with the restrictive regime of Ayatollah Khomeini. Through keen reading of the text, the reader feels how much Moshiri has reinforced presenting the practices of the Islamic regime. She has highlighted facts about this regime through commenting on their practices and directly criticizing their way of treating others. This is revealed clearly by the hero, as a mouthpiece of Moshiri herself, when the hero goes on saying:

From the other side of the intersection, the Holy Republicans, members of the Party of God, appear. The men are all in black shirts, carrying black flags, walking ahead. They carry human-size pictures of their Great Leader. Men and women chant slogans and beat their chests with chains: "One party: Party of God! (2000, p.419)

He continues: "Now all three processions reach a wall and stop. This is a tall brick wall. The crowd of millions becomes a silent sea. 'This is the wall of El-Deen,' I whisper in Sahar's ear" (p.419). Sahar, the hero's sister, expresses her hatred of the regime's extreme practices when she said:

'I hate these mourning holidays!' 'My dance class is closed for a week! We can't walk in the streets, movie theaters are closed, and everybody is locked in their houses. Prayers and lamentations everywhere. Even the sun doesn't come out!' (2000, p. 289)

In the above quote, the reader is aware that Sahar is Moshiri's mouthpiece. Thus, Moshiri has conveyed her opinion and criticized the practices of El-Deen. These practices are restricting people from performing their everyday work and because of the prayers and lamentations; everybody is locked in the house for a week.

Therefore, Moshiri's dissatisfaction with the Islamic regime is shown in the text through her interference in the text by having a mouthpiece who conveys Moshiri's opinions. Whereas,

she doesn't make the reader feel of her existence in the text when the hero retreats to the Shah's era. This may be considered as a sign of satisfaction with the Shah's regime on Moshiri's part. The reader cannot generalize but he/she according to the reader response criticism, recognizes the importance of a text from its significance rather from its meaning, Hirsch (as cited in Cain, Finke & Johnson (2010) suggests the notion of significance by clarifying that it differs from the notion of meaning because meaning doesn't change for it is intended by the author whereas significance changes since it is attributed to the "reader's personal associations"(Cain, Finke, & Johnson, 2010, p. 19).

The reader builds on the meaning intended by Farnoosh Moshiri in *At the Wall of the Almighty* and adds his/her personal associations. He/She arrives at certain conclusions as a result of his/her personal conception of the text instead of just being passive recipient of the text. In other words, the reader becomes involved in analyzing the text from his/her point of view and freely associates his/her ideas which add to the meaning intended by the writer.

Consequently, the hero's retreat to the past is not only understood as a reference to the Shah's period or Moshiri's preferable era in Iran's history but also it signifies the hero's mere state of hallucination for he was subject to severe torture. In addition to this, this retreat symbolizes a more comprehensive picturing of the Iranian expatriate's longing for an identity even though through living in a world of imagination. The hero's state of hallucination obviously appears when he received his laundry in prison:

The thought that a woman might have touched my shirt stirs my emotions. Tears burn my eyes. Maman's image with her sunken eyes and enormous breasts comes to mind. She is sitting on the floor in the middle of her room, a white sheet spread in front of her, a pile of damp clothes beside her. With a big ugly iron, which has a steaming hole on its head, she is ironing Grandfather's shirt, Aunt Hoori's school uniforms, Grand-Lady's kerchiefs and scarves, and endless sheets and pillow cases and mantelpieces. She feeds the steaming monster with more water, wets her finger tip, touches the monster's burning body to see if it's hot enough and when she hears the whizzzz sound and her finger burns, starts to iron. Sweat bubbles on her short, creased forehead and the corners of her smiling lips droop. 'Can I try?' Sahar asks. (2000, p.71)

The hero goes on saying: "And then the image of Zeinab fills my head – the laundry woman of our neighborhood, Hassan the Gardener's wife" (2000, pp. 71-72). Thus, the reader culminates in understanding that the retreat to a world of imagination signifies three possible meanings. One is related to the fact that the retreat highlights longing for a past era which is now finished. It is the era of the Shah which is according to Moshiri more stable than the era of Ayatollah's regime. Another meaning is concerned with the retreat as a mere hallucination for the hero undergoes a prolonged torture and punishment. Finally, it is a retreat to a world of imagination because it is the only link of the expatriates to their Iranian Identity. The hero's experience in prison symbolizes the reality of the Iranian expatriates who fled from Iran because of the political oppression and find themselves stuck in their world of imagination. The retreat to a world of imagination is the only embodiment of their Iranian identity. Memories of the past are their only link to a country which has survived a long period of restlessness.

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