

## **The Triptych of Azar Mahloujian's *The Torn Pictures***

**A Review by Reza Baraheni (University of Toronto)**

1—Whatever reasons there may have been for Azar Mahloujian's escape from Iran and her final settling down in Sweden, there is no doubt that the whole expedition falls conveniently within the universal framework of the exilic project: 1) there is a preliminary starting point; 2) there is a journey; and 3) there is a target country. The first of these is Iran; the second is the laborious journey through the freezing mountainous areas of northwestern Iran into Turkey and later into Eastern Europe, with the final flight and landing in Sweden; and the third is the settlement process in Sweden and observations on the adopted country. However, when we come to the actual decision making process, another triptych offers itself for speculation: What was the situation in Iran that forced her to escape? Why did she decide finally to go to Sweden, considering the fact that she had no such intention when she was leaving Iran? And what does settling down in Sweden mean to the émigré Azar Mahloujian, a former political activist in Iran, now turned into a writer in Swedish. The book was originally published in Swedish in 1995, but not knowing Swedish, I have read it in its English translation, printed in limited copies for the benefit of the writer's friends who do not know Swedish.

2—When I try to visualize Mahaloujian's journey from Iran to Sweden, I am reminded of a series of paintings by Marc Chagall did during the second decade of the last century under the general title, *Over Vitebsk*. The triptych is to be seen here too. There are two parts of a city, with a complete void in between the two parts, and a man flying horizontally above the void, in an overcoat, capped with a hat, and armed either with a

club or an unopened umbrella. It is very difficult to say which part is the most dangerous—the place from which the flight is taking place, the destination, or the void. In spite of the solemn artistic balance of this early surrealistic specimen of painting, the spectator goes through a disturbing feeling of both consternation and despair: What if he falls into the void? What if he cannot land on the other side, and what if there is nowhere for him to land, other than the place from which he took his awesome flight? And by an extension of this abstract conjecture to the plight of the exilic Mahloujian, what if she is caught in Tehran and placed before the firing squad? What if she is sent back by the Turks or the governments of East European countries? And what if a deal is made between Iran and Sweden, so that all Iranian refugees, including Mahloujian, were delivered to the Iranian authorities?

3—In the face of the exilic plight, the difference between life and death is the difference between the Derridean concept of difference and *différance*. They are pronounced the same way, but in order to tell the difference you have to write both words down. The second is Derrida's own coinage, made up of *différer*, with the meaning of postponing. All kinds of different things are taking place, so that death will be postponed.

Mahloujian, as well as all those people who are caught or are about to be caught in the teeth of the 1981-82 holocaust of the Islamic Republic of Iran, want to make a difference in their society, but the enormous force of the events of the day is postponing the bringing about of that difference. The government has to kill them or get rid of them in order to establish itself as the sole authority in the country. The government wants to create a difference of its own, to make things become different as it sees difference with

respect to its own interests; and those against the government want to postpone their deaths by hiding, by running away, by becoming refugees and most of them with the intention of going back later and making a difference. The concept becomes a matter of life and death, and Mahloujian brings about that difference by postponing her death, so that she will put down the events of her life, as a result of the political positions she has taken after the revolution, in the form of a writing, something which is different from those actions she was to take when in her country. One postpones her death, in order to write down the flight from death, in order to buy time. And what is writing? It is the means of postponing of the death of events, of what happened to you in all the serious stages of the journey of your life, by delivering your material into the process of a completely different phenomenon; the phenomenon of letting others, and those who are to come after you, see what it was like when you lived and you tried to be different. Writing about the difference between what was going to happen and what happened, as result of which you had to leave your country, turns the person from a political activist into a writer. She started living dangerously in Iran when she became politically involved, and once the Khomeini regime was stabilized and the turn came for the ultimate crushing of the opposition that had helped him gain power, Mahloujian knew that to make a choice: either stay in Iran, get arrested and finally put before the firing squad; or begin to live dangerously again: leave the country illegally, go through all the travail of moving from one country, legally or illegally, and finally land in Sweden. She chose the second dangerous alternative: groping in the labyrinth of borders of several countries to reach a home.

4—At first the process is so difficult that one cannot see that something is there to be written. Writing is not only postponed, but completely forgotten. However, forgetting is a kind of postponing. In order to demonstrate that forgetting is a kind of postponing, we have to read the book, not only from the beginning to the end, but also from the middle to the end, and from the end backwards to the beginning. Memory is on the alert, although on the surface the events of the escape from Iran are narrated historically, or rather, chronologically. Something ironic is taking place: she almost reads the history of the events of Iran as a text: the journey in the killing cold through the mountains, accompanied by smugglers, the hopeless days of the journey through countries between Iran and Sweden, the arrival and settlement in Sweden. This is travel as a text. And she has a wonderful memory for detail. Memory becomes a text. The hopelessness, the dangers, the kindness of utterly unknown people, and the sudden flights of hope, are revealed to her gradually, resembling almost a biblical testimony, a testament. When the little girl tells her that she was kissed by the guard, and in an instant, Azar knows that she must run for her life and for a final departure from Iran—because her identity and whereabouts have been revealed to the government—we are dealing with a kind of *déjà-vu*, as if the writing of this event were a carbon-copy of a revelation from a sacred text. She keeps this revelation to the last pages of the book, as a kind of “remembrance of things past,” à la Marcel Proust. One can summarize here by asking a question and answering it. Question: “How were you saved Azar?” “A girl at the door told me she was kissed by a guard, and I turned back and ran. That’s how I am alive.” Everything is so real that one can never prove that the writer is making up any of the stories.(Mahloujian, 112) This kind of writing leaves no room for adventurous flights of imagination, or the

narration of tearful, puerile events, or the depiction of a chain of causes and effects based on ideological compatibility. If there is any room for compatibility, it is the one that is based on human decency shining through all the pages of the narrative. Because the writer, deprived of the home she had, or the one she intended to build for herself and others of her kind—which slipped away from under her feet—has nothing else at her disposal, but her own intelligence and skill to build a home for herself from nothing. And for this, one is required to recollect, not in “tranquility,” as Wordsworth had said, but with all the tense and troubled veins of a person living and suffering the past, with a persistent digging into the past, by revamping the past for the sake of the present. Mahloujian’s writing is generally simple, almost without a style, but she is trying to build a home and to have a homecoming for herself. The question is simple: How can you build a home out of scratch? And is it really possible to build one?

5—Edward said once said: “The Achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever.” But he quickly added:

Modern Western culture is in large part the work of exiles, émigrés, refugees. In the United States, academic, intellectual and aesthetic thought is what it is today because of refugees from fascism, communism, and other regimes given to the oppression and expulsion of dissidents. The critic George Steiner has even proposed the perceptive analysis that a whole genre of twentieth century Western literature is “extraterritorial,” a literature by and about exiles, symbolizing the age of the refugee. (Said, 173-4)

In fact, all modern historians of literature will have to cope with this “extraterritoriality.”

The exilic has been at the heart of all great writing in the world. We were only giving it other names. The crossing of borders was taking place all the time. It was not only Conrad, Joyce, Nabokov and many others in modern times that left their home countries

and made other places their homes. Adam and Eve, and before them Adam's first wife, Lilith, were the first to be pushed out of the home of their birth into the unknown. Cain was an extraterritorial, and there was not a single prophet of significance that did not go through the troubles of exile. It was on the basis of getting out, going beyond the borders of one's own homeland, in fact, it was on the basis of taking journeys that human consciousness became cognizant of the other side, what later modern theories of literature and culture entitled, "liminality," "interstitiality" and "alterity." The consciousness of time and place, the combination of which later turned into what Mikhail Bakhtin, the Russian theorist, called the *Chronotope*, combined with another theory of his, "Dialogical Imagination," led to the fundamental precept on which all theories of narratology were to be formulated.

If we think of the exilic in our modern times, perhaps, no dislocations of population in the past could be compared with the ones that have taken place since the beginnings of the twentieth century. In one instance, it has been estimated that more than four million Iranians alone have left Iran since 1979, the inception of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Although a good number of these people went through the Eastern and southern borders of Iran, the greatest number of people went to the west, taking more or less the route Azar Mahloujian took in her work. Earlier it was the monarchists, military men, high officials of the previous regime, generally with their entire families. After the war with Iraq started, it was the young men, fearing for their lives, who left. After the spring of 1981, when the crackdown on the left and the Mujahedin started, it was the radical youth, fearing arrest and death, that left the country. The crackdown on the followers of the Bahai faith had begun to leave earlier. When Azar Mahloujian, a leftist, but not a Bahai,

was leaving, she was in the company of a couple, who were Bahais. The number of Iranians living in Los Angeles was so high that some people dubbed the city into Tehrangeles.

6—With her sharp eyes and ears grasping the minute details of events, people's, voices and places—characteristic of all people on the run from persecution—Mahloujian gives descriptions of everything in a very laconic style. She needs compassion, she receives it from many people, and returns it with equal kindness. But she always fears that on the border of these foreign countries, government officials will question the authenticity of her papers. And in many cases the officials are very exacting. Like any refugee, she is afraid that her money will finish; like any single political woman on the run in strange countries and through strictly guarded borders, helped only by those who take money in order to smuggle her from one place to another, she is in fear of men who might abuse her. She is protected by her instincts as well as her intelligence, and when she is finally given permission to land in Sweden, she knows that she has to go through the humiliating stages of suspicion, racism, alienation, and the indifference of those who consider themselves superior to those who arrive in Sweden from foreign lands. Her resistance to the general narrow-mindedness of the Swedish in racial questions is combined with both negation and explanation. But she admires the kindness and discipline of the Swedish people, particularly their disciplined habits of life, their work and business culture and the magnanimity of the educators. She learns the language like a native Swedish, and writes in it. The pangs of home come back to her. She complains that the people of Sweden do not realize that sometimes, even in dealing with women, Iranians could be far more advanced than their Western counterparts. The final chapters of the book have been

written through the eyes of a very skilled cultural comparatist, and here Iranians could learn a great deal from the Swedish people, just as the people of Mahloujian's homeland could teach her new compatriots a few wise lessons on human nature.

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