



Female Scholars in Exile Form Legion of Longing

By Bijoyeta Das
 WeNews correspondent
 Monday, January 11, 2010

Exiled female writers find they have little in common with immigrants who come to the U.S. seeking material gains. Instead, they are often looking for the chance to find continuity and tell stories about their ruptured lives.

(WOMENSENEWS)--She left Baghdad in a hurry.

Dunya Mikhail, a poet in exile, still carries with her a pocketful of memories. The delicate smell of Razqi, small starry white flowers. The bustle of Mutanabi Street, with new, used and banned books spread on blankets. The taste of masgouf fish, grilled with olive oil, pepper and tamarind.

She tries hard to forget the gory images of the Iraq-Iran War of the 1980s and the Gulf War of the early 1990s.

She cannot forget, so she writes.



Mehrangiz Kar faces prison if she returns to Iran.

Credit: Bijoyeta Das

"The transition from disconnection to calling it your place happened when I returned to writing poetry," said Mikhail, who worked as a literary editor of the Baghdad Observer.

Her writings put her on Saddam Hussein's enemy list. In 1995 she fled to Amman, the capital of Jordan. She came to the United States a year later and reconstructed her life as a poet and Arabic teacher.

Around the world more than 42 million people have been forcibly uprooted by conflict and persecution, according to United Nations High Commission for Refugees. Sixteen million live in exile; 26 million are internally displaced.

Over the last few decades many international and grassroots organizations, including some that cater to writers and intellectuals, have sprung up to help refugees survive and resettle.

"It was not easy at all starting from zero, trying to find your space," said Mikhail, the author of two poetry collections in English and four in Arabic, most of which were translated into English during her years in exile. She won the 2001 U.N. Human Rights Award for Freedom of Writing and the 2006 PEN's Translation Award.

Sitting at the Barnes and Noble cafe in her adopted hometown of Dearborn, Mich., sipping mugs of mocha, she often contrasts her life to the one she led in Baghdad, where a male relative had to

chaperon her. "Here I am with people and also left alone," she said.

She works as an Arabic resource coordinator for Dearborn Public Schools and Michigan State University, living with her husband Mazin Hana, an exiled Iraqi whom she met here.

War, peace and loss of homeland are her recurrent themes. "The killed loses his life. The killer loses his humanity," she said.

'People in Exile Are Different'

"People in exile are different from immigrants who come here by choice seeking better opportunities," said Mahnaz Afkhami, founder and president of Women's Learning Partnership, based in Bethesda, Md.

Before being forced into exile, Afkhami was the minister for women's affairs in Iran.

One chilly November day in 1978, when she was in New York City negotiating the terms of the establishment of the United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women in Tehran, the revolutionary government ransacked her house and invalidated her passport.

She found herself alone with \$1,000 and a temporary visa.

Back home, the Ayatollahs put her name on the death list for her opposition to repressive laws against women's rights and freedoms.

In exile you are stripped of all possessions, titles and safety, Afkhami said. As another example, she shared the story of her sister: "She was smuggled out of Iran through the Turkish border while eight months pregnant, accompanied by her 3-year-old daughter."

Her sister continues to live under an assumed name because the Islamic regime arrested and executed her husband for being a member of the political opposition and was most likely also seeking her.

Exile, Afkhami said, imposes an inevitable wrestling with the identity question: "Who am I?"

She reached out to 12 other exiled women from various countries and chronicled their experiences and means of coping in her 1994 book, "Women in Exile."

She drew energy and hope from their stories. "There is a type of sisterhood. Other women have gone through it and have become strong and positive members of the global community of women," she said.

Afkhami said men and women experience exile differently. Loss of homeland is more traumatic for men. Women are preoccupied in making a nest with less time to wallow in pessimism and depression.

"Women seem to have a continuity in immediate needs of the family and pragmatic ways of settling down," she said.

And some women dive into their creativity, research or activism.

Sanctuary Found Via Programs

Many exiles find sanctuary through programs such as Scholars at Risk Network, an international network of individuals and universities, headquartered at New York University. In the past decade the program has received more than 2,000 requests for assistance from over 100 countries. The region that generates the most requests is sub-Saharan Africa, followed by Northern Africa, the Middle East and South Asia.

Ma Thida, a Burmese fiction writer and physician, is currently a Scholars at Risk fellow at Harvard, a program that has hosted 32 fellows, including seven women, in the last eight years.

Though not in exile, Thida faces a perennial threat from the military junta because of her writing and pro-democracy activism. The author of "The Sunflower," "In the Shade of an Indian Almond Tree" and many short stories, she was sentenced to prison in 1993.

Because of her failing health and pressure from Amnesty International and PEN International, she was released before her 20-year sentence. She spent five years in prison in appalling conditions and contracted pulmonary tuberculosis.

Now Thida is determined to go back.

Despite the comforts of life in the United States, she is restless, troubled by thoughts of her fellow citizens. "Most of them are so naive and their eyes shine with hope that the international community will do something for them," she said.

Released to U.S. for Treatment

Mehrangiz Kar, a former Scholars at Risk fellow at Harvard, is an Iranian journalist, attorney and human rights activist who has lived in exile for the last nine years.

In 2001, she was sentenced to four years imprisonment on charges of acting against national security and disseminating propaganda against the Islamic regime. She spent two months in Tehran's Evin prison, when she was diagnosed with breast cancer. She was allowed to come to the United States for treatment and has been living here with her two daughters. She faces prison if she returns.

"I was 57 when I came here, seriously ill and I did not know English," Kar said.

A prolific writer and outspoken activist, she often fumbles for words and loses confidence when talking to an English-speaking audience.

"It was painful and it is still painful," she said, her voice trembling with emotion.

Since 2001, she has not seen her husband, Siamak Pourzand, also a journalist. He cannot leave Iran and is living between hospital and home with an outstanding prison sentence.

"I am always looking for Starbucks coffee shops, my real office here. I like to see people because I am so lonely at home" she said, wiping tears from her eyes. "I miss everything."

After a long pause, she said, "There are so many feelings an exiled woman faces inside her heart. Nobody can ever see that."

Bijoyeta Das is a multimedia journalist based in Istanbul, Turkey.

For more information:

Scholars at Risk

<http://scholarsatrisk.nyu.edu/>

Note: Women's eNews is not responsible for the content of external Internet sites and the contents of site the link points to may change.

Source URL (retrieved on 2010-01-22 13:57): <http://www.womensenews.org/story/arts/100108/female-scholars-in-exile-form-legion-longing>