


BOOK REVIEW

TEHRAN AT TWILIGHT



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ABSTRACT

Salar Abdoh wrote a third novel on a son wanting to free his mother from a theocratic regime. In this case, we are talking about Iran and its fundamentalist Islamic trend. Beyond its humanistic story, this novel is by essence and in its structure, pedagogical. It teaches us how the Iranian society works under their authoritarian leadership. The novel reveals the moral corruption of those on power, using religion for pecuniary gains and to dominate entirely the society. In this analysis, we have tried to extract the main features and the secondary ones that characterized the fiction of Abdoh.

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ARTICLE INFO

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received:
21 July, 2023
Accepted:
7 September, 2023
Published:
30 October 2023
Available online:
30 October 2023



Not without my Mother! Denouncing religious fundamentalism and the totalitarian Iranian regime through a novel

Author: Salar Abdoh

Publisher: Akashic Books

Number of pages: 240

Language: English

ISBN-10 : 1617752924

ISBN-13: 978-1617752926

Date of publication: October 7, 2014

The novel entitled, *"Tehran at Twilight"*, published in 2014, by the Iranian American author Salar Abdoh, is about identity; personal and collective identity! Malek Reza, the main character of this novel, is an Iranian who lives in the USA; he was an immigrant at some point, but became a citizen of this country. Through him, the reader is traveling around the world, or rather in the Middle East. With Reza or "Rez", we go to Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, USA, and Poland. Salar Abdoh is a cosmopolitan and a cosmopolitist. Abdoh takes us into the Middle East world, and especially in the political life of this region of the globe. Indeed, we do not learn much about the author's view of American politics, except a little bit about USA foreign politics in the Middle East, through the American military operations.

Although entrenched into humanism, Salar Abdoh takes us into the world of Iranian politics. From Malek Reza to the Jewish Polish woman named Anna, we are submerged into the abyss of Iranian political maelstrom. All the characters, meaning the main ones, are all related to political activities of some kind. Sina Vafa who grew up in the USA, a serious close friend of Malek Reza, became a political operator for an Iranian fundamentalist group known as QAF. There is also Clara Vikingstad who is a journalist looking for a "fortunate" scoop that will make her famous and wealthy. Then came the Iranian political "operator" named Fani. This one is basically trying to survive in the Iranian totalitarian political system. Fani wants to grab some money from the belongings of Sina Vafa, the son of a wealthy Iranian. On the American side, the important character is James McGreivy, a military man, a captain of the Marines Corps, whom became a scholar and a specialist of the geopolitics of the Middle East. Then appeared Soaad, the mother of Rez, who was also a victim of a Islamic religious

social system. To say it all, she was the victim of two elements: one, the totalitarianism put in place against individual freedom; but most and foremost, to us, the machismo of Iranian society. She could not be herself. When she tried she was punished severely. Soaad had to marry a man that she did not love. And, when she found someone to love wholeheartedly, she was punished harshly by having to abandon what was hers: her son Malek Reza! For a great part of his life, Rez thought that his mother had gone to Australia, as his father's explanations were the established truthfulness. The other great character was Anna the Jewish Polish woman who had escaped the Holocaust by coming into Iran through a journey full of obstacles, dangers and of wonderful experience. Anna, she was a "Tehran's Children"; these were Jewish Polish Youth that left Poland to avoid dying by the hands of the Nazis and their Polish collaborators. These Jewish Polish teenagers survived the Second World War by living in Iran, a Persian Muslim society. Through Abdoh, we keep on discovering a lot of social and historical facts. Undoubtedly, Salar Abdoh's novels are pedagogical. Yes, they instruct us on historical phenomenon that we ignore!

Abdoh, the novelist, cares about his country and, he wants us to become aware of and knowledgeable about the political affairs of contemporary Iran. Precisely, this novelist is very critical of the daily politics of the Iranian politicians on power. He denounces the fundamentalist Islamic system put into place. He firmly believes that the fundamentalist political religious system is an hypocritical regime! It is a system that has abused its citizens, especially people like the family of Sina Vafa. Sina is the son of a richman who was operating a grand scale business in Tehran. Without regard to the wealth and the work of the Vafa family, the fundamentalists behave like a mafia organization to dispossess Sina and his family of their wealth and properties, that they had accumulated over the decades. The father was an ambitious businessman, a man very capable, adroit, etc. Be that as it may, the fundamentalists had decided to grab the possessions of Sina by using politics, the judicial systems, bribery and violence. This behavior makes you think of the rise of Protestantism and the stealing of Catholic properties through the facade of religious justice movement in Europe. In others words, from inside, Abdoh explains to us that these men are not religious at all. Several of them are religiously dressed to hide their interests, which are to enrich themselves from other people's belongings by recouring to political and social corruptions of all kinds. A shadowy group of Iranians wanted to obtain the possessions of the Vafa family and they were using Fani, Sina and Malek. These fundamentalists were devout "Muslim" godfathers who wanted their "taxes". Fani was working for them and he had to make sure that they would have their share of

the Vafa's booty¹. The author wrote, talking about the fundamentalists: *"A food chain that no longer ended with a jack-of-all-trade like Fani; rather, it ended with other men, far more shadowy, devout godfathers who wanted their cut because that was their job. Between last week and this week Fani was no longer working alone; he had to answer to these other men and pay tax. It was simple, well-worn structure, Malek realized; they let you move the ball up the field on your own, but when it was time to score they stepped in and said, Salaam, "We are in." It was, in a way, the quintessence of gangsterism²."* Concisely, the fundamentalists were criminals, Iranian Maffia members disguised as "pious" individuals..! N'est-ce pas? Through the legal help of Malek Reza, who was pressured and under constant surveillance of Fani, the Vafa Sport Center was to be sold for hundred millions of dollars, which were to be shared among the fundamentalists. This part of the story is in reality a clear denunciation of the obscure activities of many Iranian fundamentalist politicians. They simply use religion to hide their vile criminal activities. In addition to common law crimes, these men are also implicated in numerous political crimes in the name of God and Islamic moral rectitude. To this end, Abdoh writes in his political novel that, *"before the revolution, when everything was fine and in its rightful place, the world was ticking away handsomely without the troublesome Islamic Republic, without the killings and executions, without the war and everything that followed it³."* Manifestly and penetratingly, our writer made an undeniable statement against the violence and the injustices that the Iranians, men and women, old and young, religious or irreligious, poor and rich, face in their daily life of their existence within the Islamic Republic of Iran. As in his novel entitled *"Out of Mesopotamia"*, Abdoh testify once again against the phenomenon of political violence. Evidently, for the novelist, wars, in the Middle East and anywhere else in Asia, are absurdities and useless⁴.

Captain James McGreivy is a Westerner and a typical WASP in that story. A White Anglo-Saxon Protestant. He is also a warrior. He is depicted like a true combatant. A man who is as well cultivated and educated. A son that many American fathers would have loved to have: truly, someone to be proud of. At first, he was perceived by Malek as a Nemesis; effectively, according to the story, he is a success. On top of being an officer in the combat arms who fought during the Battle of Fallujah in Iraq, he is an academician, a real scholar who published a book denouncing the military operations in Fallujah. The intellectual soldier is a fun and a very lovable character. He is the American cool guy. On the long run, Malik Reza developed a serious friendship with James McGreivy. It is not an accident since both live in the

¹ Salar Abdoh, op cit, p.89.

² *Ibidem*.

³ *Ibid*.102.

⁴ *Ibid*.104.

USA; both are Americans; both are scholars of the Middle East; both work at the same school and finally both have living experience in that part of the world! Yet, Malek, for his part, was born in Iran and grew up in the USA. In this novel, Malek denounces the American values and its foreign policy. For instance, Sina, although an American, is very critical of the America identity; in his third year in college, Sina became a serious anti-American student, who was also dreaming of going in the Orient to straight up things. According to the novel, he did take that course of action. Sina was also involved in Iraq. Shiah Muslim represents about 15% of the world Muslim population, which means 154 to 200 million individuals. Iran Shiah population is about 95% of their 87, 590 873 million citizens. Which represents also, about 40% of the world Shiah Muslim population. In Iraq, the Shiah population, in 2015, was about 15 million, out of a population of about 35 000 000 million. Iraq is a nation of 55 to 60% Shiah Muslims and 40% Sunni Muslims. Based on this demographic statement, we understand why Abdoh has Sina's character involved in the politics of Iraq. Even in his more recent novel, *"Out of Mesopotamia"*, Iraq is the main place of the story, although in a constant relationship with Iran. In *"Tehran at Twilight"*, the story evolves mainly in Iran; and in *"Out of Mesopotamia"*, it occurs mainly in Iraq.

Abdoh in *"Tehran at Twilight"* has excoriated racism in three ways: one, his novel includes people from several ethnic and national background. Salar Abdoh is a cosmopolitist and a cosmopolitan Iranian American author. Secondly, he has an African American character in his novel, a woman named Candace Vincent, who will become ultimately, the fiancée of the Euro-American scholarly boy, James McGreivy. Thirdly, Abdoh wrote a comment about the skin tone prejudice in Iran, a country that is warmer than cold; a country where the population should have understood the role of the sun on their pigmentation. No! It is not the case. Here, what he wrote about this: *"When he (Malek Reza), had gone on jobs with Clara, he would usually shave and put on good clothes. It made a difference. And it made a difference from city to city too. In Tehran, the lightness of his skin and a clean suit would actually get his foot inside the doors that were impossible otherwise. And next to Clara, people often took him for a Westerner with enviable native fluency. They gave him respect, called him sir."*⁵ Abdoh even wrote to this effect that Sina used to call Reza, His Whiteness⁶. From this outlook, this character, Malek Reza, is depicted as being very European in his book. There comes the theme of assimilation to a human category considered more culturally advanced or having more manners, etc.

⁵ Ibid.45.

⁶ Idem.

Another theme that is constantly present in the story is the phenomenon of the social classes. The main characters are rich folk, highly educated characters, political leaders or operatives serving closely political masters of some kind. Reza's mother who is an educated Iranian woman, is an example of this. There are themes that speak about the desires and the objectives of the neo-Americanism: skin color, American English fluency, acquiring diplomas from Ivy League universities, going to school even though you might be impaired socially like Candace Vincent who keeps going to school even though she has three children and a miscreant lover. It is not a story of amiss ambitions. All the actors of the drama are there in the position of becoming overachievers! Everyone wants to achieve glory, money, diplomas, love, peace and freedom in the United States of America.

The greatest aspect of the story is Soaad the mother of Rez. Malek is reunited with his mother Soaad, this poor woman victim of an organized marriage, in which she never loved Reza's father; consequently, she found a lover but he was killed by the agents of the new revolution. Soaad was punished for loving another man than the father of Reza. The punishment consisted in being separated from her son that she never abandoned in her heart and mind. But because "Allah is Great", she is reunited with her beloved son Malek Reza, who gets involved in all kind of obscure transactions to obtain the emancipation of his mother from the Iranian political apparatus and their political vile operatives full of evilness within their heart and mind, all coated with a smell of Islamist machismo! This markedly look like the story from Beth Mahmoody, who wrote the book *"Not Without my Daughter"*, and was published in 1987. Overall, that book is the story of an American woman who ran away from an abusive husband when she was living with him in the abusive and dictatorial Muslim Republic of Iran. The lady had to escape from Iran to reach later the US embassy in Ankara, Turkey. Salar Abdoh, this time, he worked the concept of running away from evilness through the involvement of a beloved son in the maze of Iranian politics and affairs. The main differences between the work of Betty Mahmoody and Abdoh, it is the fact that Mahmoody is telling us what happened to her and her daughter and, Abdoh is speaking about a fake story explaining socio-political realities of the contemporary society of the Islamic Iranian Republic. In both cases, we speak about the power relationship between male and female, and relationship between the stale political apparatus and its citizens. Hence the rich work of reflection of our Iranian American author.

This novel on contemporary political realities in Iran, teach us about the subcurrent of the conduct of politics in that totalitarian, fundamentalist republic. From outside, you would never think of Islamist politicians as thieves! They seem to promote the values of Islam; but the novel explain that certain individuals are using the Islamist totalitarian regime to steal the properties of others. In this context they are trying to rob the gains of business people. These business people had a savoir-faire that the nefarious politicians do not have. The politicians use the violence of a totalitarian regime to obtain forcefully the belongings of skillfull Iranian entrepreneurs. Abdoh showed us that because he knows about that awful social phenomenon. This is a godawful situation since we know that many people clung to the views of these religious fanatics. Secondly, through the story of the mother, Soaad, Abdoh has shown us how the regime is a “penitentiary facility” for its citizens. The system keeps people as prisoners while at the same time using them to spy on their own family like the Stasi used to do in the defunct German Democratic Republic, better known as Eastern German Republic. Abdoh reminds us that the Iranians are under the unacceptable power of a few political renegades who are claiming faithfulness to God and moral righteousness in the name of their Shiah Islamic faith. Equally to this we encounter as we read a multitude of actors and actresses that bring life to the novel. For instance, how can we forget Anna the Jewish Polish lady, who converted to Islam to marry her Iranian husband, but who also was caring for her Jewish identity. The evidence of this is she requested to be buried with the other Jews in the cemetery. Historically, that novel made us discover the story of Jewish children who came from Poland and arrived in Iran. Some stayed, and some others went to Palestine. This is a great story that many Westerners like us did not know about. We even read a book on the Middle East in World War II; the work was entitled, “*Le Moyen Orient Pendant la Seconde Guerre Mondiale*”, written by a French historian Christian Destremau; all along the pages of that book, we never read anything about this topic! Nonetheless, Abdoh reminded us about this act of heroism of the Iranian nation. Thirdly, this book took us to an unknown world, which is the quotidian of the Iranians and some of the political emissaries. The author made us travel into the social life and the dangers of contemporary Iranian society without being hurt physically, although we, as a reader, psychologically suffered for the unbearable social, political and economic pains that afflict the plethora of characters.

⁷ Christian Destremau, *Le Moyen-Orient Pendant la Seconde Guerre Mondiale*, Paris, Perrin, Coll. Tempus, 2015 640p.

Our fictionist is a humanist because all he promoted was humanism. Clearly, his book and his story are full of humanistic events which are testimonies of a man looking for a better world for Iranians and for all human kind. Think of McGreivy and his love for a woman who is not the same ethnic group as him and who has three children from another man! In sum, these characters are not innocents. Abdoh created them for us to develop a sensitivity to others, beyond our nationality, ethnicity, religion or social classes. Through that story, we noticed also that Abdoh makes us understand the beauty of filial love and altruism.

In short, this contemporary and political novel is also a hymn to maternal and fraternal love. It is on this, that this literary adventure of Solar Abdoh and its main character, Malek Reza, is based. By reading these pages, we remember our friends who came to North America and told us such stories where family life is intertwined with the political existence of a society; the latter, in fact, could be afflicted by a deadly human pathology: the desire for power over all, to the detriment of the well-being and happiness of others. Abdoh, once again, knew how to make us appreciate the political literary art based on the hope for a genuine democratic world, where the fundamental rights of human beings would be the socio-political foundation of the essence of this said society. At once, let's say it: the moral of this story is, it is love that must be the foundation of our collective political life. Without it, we would be stricken in a maelstrom of collective hatred and incessant violence. Definitively, the author of "*Tehran at Twilight*" knows it too well!

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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