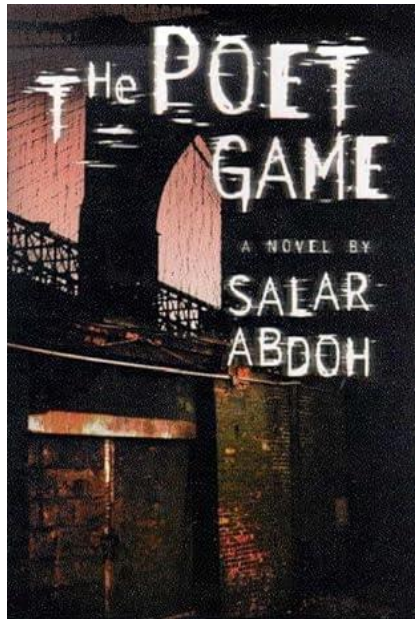


BOOK REVIEW

THE POET GAME: A NOVEL ON A MIDDLE EASTERN POLITICAL IMBROGLIO IN THE WESTERN WORLD



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ABSTRACT

This is Salar Abdoh's first novel. It was published in 2000. So, this text is not about the novelty of this text. The reason for this text is the analysis that we can make from the reading of his work. This text is in continuity of our work of analysis on previous novels by Abdoh. Our objective consists in developing a better and profounder understanding of the mind and the soul of Abdoh's stories. This work by Salar Abdoh is a great debut, but we observe that it was not an end in itself.

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This novel deals with the secret services of Iran and the politics of the Middle East in the United States of America. Yes, it is a political novel about terrorism, especially Islamist terrorism, and this was written and published previously to the attacks of Tuesday, September 11, 2001. For those who read this book before it came out, it gave them a glimpse of possible terrorist activities in the vicinity of New York City. We read the book 25 years after 9-11. Assuredly, Salar Abdoh was not cracking political jokes in writing this novel; indeed, there was a terrorist cell in the US homeland!

Salar Abdoh is an Iranian writer who has written several novels on contemporary Iran and its domestic and foreign affairs. With Abdoh, we travel in the safety of our North American home; chances are that we will not be killed by one of those terrorists. On the other side, and it is sad, we must acknowledge that the life of the Iranians is stressful because they do not know when the state apparatus will strike them.

Salar Abdoh, a Persian to use the terminology that certain Iranians use to introduce themselves in the USA. Persian is the language spoken by Iranians, but it is not necessarily their “ethnic” identity! That concept is related to the ancestors of the Iranians, the Persians. Our writer has no problem speaking about the different Arab nations, even with a “Persian” outlook on the Arabs..... In his novel, he speaks about the Syrians, Libyans, Lebanese, Palestinians and the Egyptians. Abdoh depicts each of these people with a stereotype. For instance, the Lebanese are hotheaded; the Syrians are cautious, Palestinians are inclined to degenerate swiftly, and to finish with these prejudicial bubbles, he depicts the Egyptians as possibly serious and smart, but also as being clownish and egotistical. Woops! We had forgotten one, the Libyans, who were considered as being untrustworthy. After addressing the Iranians' prejudice against Arab nations, Abdoh wrote about the two perceptions of Iranian operatives. One was like having the prophet's own right hand at the helm, and the other individual clearly had an attitude of defiance.

In effect, for certain Arab Muslims, the old tensions between Shia and Sunni Muslims are still effective in this contemporary time. In addition to them, there was also a light-skinned African American. Overall and essentially, those terrorists tended to be a motley crew with the primary goal of hunting Uncle Sam or a Muslim nation.

Sami Amir, the main character, is an Iranian American who has never known his American mother and never knew much his father who paid Christian private school for him. These were the reasons for Sami to be fluent in American English. His Europeanness was inciting doubt; in response, he explained himself to them. Through all this, Sami had contacts with the Christian missionaries. Even when his father stopped paying for his education, Father O'Malley kept him within the mission. Later on in life, Sami became an agent for the Iranian counterespionage; this unit was called “Section Nineteen of Intelligence and Security”. Through several characters, Abdoh put us in contact with an unknown world for the average American. On top of the other people in the story, we have Nour a Pakistani and Ellena, the American woman. Abdoh immerses us into a cosmopolitan environment socially. The same could be said about the political environment. In this cosmopolitan culture, you may expect any kind of comments or situations. For example, he has a Muslim operative drinking whisky; the Muslims are doubtful of the Halal food prepared by a Chinese joint, or a Caribbean prostitute woman speaking in Spanish. By being in New York City, these Muslim men influenced the city's culture but were also influenced by the multiculturalism of the city. Abdoh makes a point to let us know that an Oriental man

coming in New York City will be changed or transformed over the years in that city. Sami Amir, by operating in New York City, ends up drunk and in the bed of a woman whom he considers not too aesthetically appealing.

What did we learn from spying? Espionage in the novel is simply dirty business, which is probably the truth. Who is honest in that world? No one! For the fundamentalist Iranians, the US Embassy is not an institution of trade and cultural exchanges, but rather a den of spies. Abdoh adds when he wrote that "he [Sami] was more aware than most other men that words like spy and spying carried a set of different connotations from one country to another" (p.38). Furthermore, a spy was not someone working or evolving on the international scene trying to obtain secret information for your own country. No! It consists of surveilling your family and friends and making a report to the authorities about what they are doing and thinking. A spy is someone who works for a dictator, who only cares about maintaining himself in that violent political regime (p.38-39).

In this fiction, which is often confusing and where the intrigue is not coherent, Sami's mission in the USA was full of twists or changes of events. Consequently, for the reader, it is not a serious thriller. Maybe because it was the first published story from Salar Abdoh? Nevertheless, it remains that usually Abdoh writes excellent existentialist political thrillers.

What did we learn through this political novel? There is a seriously interesting aspect in that narrative: it is the revelation that the Iranian secret services work in tandem with other Muslim terrorists. This is done either against Westerners or Arabic Muslim nation-states. Iranians who are not Arab might not be in a great relationship with the leaders of these Arab nations. Cultural and economic interests that transform themselves into political interests might be the source of international tensions between Islamic nations. So, in the story, the Iranian secret services have sent Sami to counter the terrorist operations of Arab nation-states because they knew that the Westerners, in this case the USA, would have made their presence omnipresent, which would have been a political hindrance for the Iranians. In other words, the enemy of the USA, the Islamic Republic of Iran, was protecting the Americans to avoid the mingling and the scrutiny of the security agencies of Uncle Sam in the Persian Gulf. Concretely, Iran was protecting the US and itself at the same time. We might think it is an irony, but it is not. Politically, Iran was protecting one's interests, and often to the utmost. In this fictitious narrative, that was exactly the political topic: Ellena and

Sami, the two main characters, were securing, through their actions, the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Another aspect of this novel was the positive criticism of North American society. The Oriental characters are always challenged by the Western open-minded culture. The best example of this is the sexual values that were debunked in the novel. From sexuality with no tomorrow to sadomasochism, Abdoh has divulged the Western sexual follies to the Oriental character, which, in the novel, thrives on Muslim characters. The story was also an exploration of New York City society, where those Oriental characters might discover that relationships between humans, even beyond the obscure activities of espionage, are often shallow. Sami Amir has also discovered that NYC can be the home of profound people willing to help and protect you wholeheartedly. Ellena, the American woman, has been in the narrative the best ally of Sami. She never defected from her moral code and her political responsibilities. This needs to be mentioned because it is a contradiction to the often-prejudicial thought of Easterners, Africans or else on the North Americans or the Western Europeans. Abdoh, at this point, is letting us know that these are also people with moral and political convictions.

To say it all, we have developed a cultural and psychological bonding with the work of art of Salar Abdoh. We admire the dynamic and the essence of his stories. Our criticism of this literary novel shall not be an obstacle for someone else to spend time to read this "Iranian" political thriller. Maybe it needs another reader with a better perspective than ours to finalize a judgment on the essence of this novel. Our author is a superb writer, a great storyteller and a great artist. He has opened many doors on the understanding of the dynamic of politic in that region of the world. 9-11 happened after he published that "novel". Since there was a previous attempt to hurt New Yorkers through an act of terrorism, we cannot say that his story was a science fiction text. In asserting the realism of political dynamics, Abdoh has also defended humanistic values. We remember too well how he depicted the thought process of the terrorists toward American civilian citizens. These people were worthless, and any evil action against them was somehow welcomed! Like the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), Abdoh depicted a scene where some people spoke unfavorably of other human beings, but these dreadful individuals had become vermin. Now, who wants to keep the vermin alive...? And this is the ignominy of terrorism or a politically murderous act; the perpetrator always thinks of himself as the heavenly "detergent" that will clean up humanity of its nefarious pest. "The Poet Game" is a narrative with

the manifest objective of arousing a moral debate on government, people, and reactionary militant groups.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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