The Women's Review of Books

Vol. XII, No.6 March 1995 74035 $2.00

Inside:

Children playing in a Gaza street, one of many photographs in *A Voice of Reason: Hanan Ashrawi and Peace in the Middle East*, a new biography by Barbara Victor; Sara Roy reviews it, p.26.

PRINTED IN THE USA

Birds without nests

by Nan Levinson

Women in Exile, by Mahnaz Afkhami. Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1994, 208 pp., $35.00 hardcover, $12.95 paper.

"My earliest memories are of unrest and chaos," says Ho Ngoc Tran, a doctor, who flees Vietnam in 1978, trusting her life to smugglers with a boat and eventually making her way to Chicago. When her youngest child dies at sea of dehydration, she buries him on an unmarked island, sewing her diamond ring—all she has of value—into his sleeve. "So it is just a story that ends here," she says. She cannot return.

Awakened by the KGB at five a.m. on July 20, 1980, Tatyana Mamonova is allowed to pack two suitcases before she is escorted onto a plane for Austria. As the first feminist kicked out of the Soviet Union, she is quickly awarded star status with its attendant press conferences, speaking tours and publishing opportunities that would have earned her a lifetime of official harassment at home. She relishes the irony, but misses Leningrad and the smell of Russian grass and won't know either again for over a decade, because she cannot go home.

Maria Teresa Tula, born to bone-grinding poverty in El Salvador, works with the human rights group Comadres. After her husband is assassinated, she is arrested, raped, beaten to deafness in one ear and imprisoned. On her release in 1987, she bribes her way out of the country with her two youngest children, walks across the desert into the US and applies for political asylum, which, six years later, still hasn't come. "We live like birds without nests," she says, "because we can't be in our own country."

These are women in exile, pulled up by their hair and deposited, their roots dangling, in some foreign land to reinvent themselves and their lives. They and nine others have told their stories to Mahnaz Afkhami, who fashioned the hours of talk into a dozen chapters that make up *Women in Exile*, a sad, lovely, horrifying, heroic book.

continued on p.3

Women in exile

continued from p.1

Modern-day Scheherazades, these women tell tales that read like a map of political upheaval in our time: Malawi in the sixties; Afghanistan, Vietnam, Chile, Argentina and Cambodia in the seventies; El Salvador, Sudan, Palestine, the USSR and Iran the following decade, while in the early nineties China is the name of displacement. Some have no country left; others have seen power shifts that allow them to go home, but that decision is never easy. Exile, we are told, alters irrevocably.

Afkhami, once secretary general of the Women's Organization of Iran and herself in exile since 1978, conceived of the project as a tribute to hope and executed it as an act of communion. Selecting women who were forced to leave their countries because of their politics, ideas, or loyalties, she spent hours in taped interviews with each, asking questions but, she says, allowing them to choose their own focus and emphasis. All but one of the women now live in the US and nearly all of the interviews were conducted in English. Afkhami then condensed the material and sought the narrators' approval of the final versions.

This methodology has its limitations. Though geographically and culturally diverse, the women have a sameness of background. Most were born to privilege, all are or were married, the majority are educated and politically active, and two-thirds live in the Washington, DC area, as does Afkhami. Also, Afkhami's feminist perspective seems to blot out all others. Have none of these women encountered racism or xenophobia in the US, for instance? We are not told.

Still, the mix of voices in *Women in Exile* beguiles. Each chapter begins with an introduction by Afkhami in which she describes the woman she is meeting and the circumstances of the interview. Invariably, the woman is attractive, strong (despite or in line with appearances), deeply committed to the project and all-round extraordinary. Well, they are extraordinary women, but not always by choice, and their power is demonstrated so much more convincingly by their own words that these introductions sound sentimental and flat in comparison. That's surprising, because Afkhami is as eloquent as any when she tells her own story. More to the point, she is skilled at getting people to talk about what matters to them and has the good sense to get out of the way once they do.

BEGIN AT THE BEGINNING, I imagine her saying. And so the stories open with childhood memories, lyrical, poignant, charming in their details about school-books mislaid under the fabric of a dressmaker grandmother or women selling their gold to finance a feminist journal. These remembrances are followed by descriptions of the crises that led to exile, the narrators' (often harrowing) escapes, and the initial relief or numbness they felt at having cheated annihilation. Samnang Wu, for instance, on finally getting out of a Cambodia dedicated to dehumanization, is given a piece of cake, but can only stare at it until she is reassured that when it's eaten, she can have another. Later, in the new country, it is common for the women to throw themselves into an almost manic busyness, meant perhaps to deny that exile, though a form of survival, is really defeat.

In the later parts of each chapter, the women talk about the assimilation blues (though many say adjusting to a new place is easier for women than men), the excitement of trying out new opportunities, the development of their feminism and how it affects their work and relationships, the loneliness of living in a country where no one knows your parents' names and people never drop by unannounced. But, notes Afkhami, "Exile in its disruptiveness resembles a rebirth for the women." "I have, in a sense, chosen exile because it offers me a better chance to work for my people," insists Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim, a Sudanese feminist and politician. "Exile is the place I have come to in order to continue my struggle." And Hala Deeb Jabbour, a writer who first left her native Palestine when she was five, says that when she became an American citizen, "My feminism flowered—that's exactly how I feel—like a large, healthy plant which is given water and air and sun until it blooms. I began to feel unencumbered."

But mostly these women talk about their homes—with nostalgia, bitterness, curiosity, blame and longing for that connection to a place where what is happening has consequences for you. The sum total is a kind of collective mourning in which the loss of country is as piercing as the loss of a person—maybe worse, since it encompasses so many losses: home, family, friends, work, status, language, landscape, food, familiarity, laughter, all that most of us are lucky enough to take for granted. The greatest loss, though, may be the loss of ease in one's world that threatens to become the loss of oneself.

Yet Afkhami is right that her book is about hope. All of these women have not only kept their selves intact; though damaged, they have refused self-pity and have flourished and helped others do the same. I have learned, they say; or they ask, who am I now that my identity has been grabbed away? The answers vary. Many find redemption in telling about their lives, like Argentine poet Alicia Partnoy, who says, "I had changed from victim to witness." Some find a new home in their work or language or self-worth. Some, most notably Fatima Ahmed Ibrahim from the Sudan, take on acts of stunning bravery as naturally as they would put on a shawl. Others commit themselves to their families, communities, or other refugees. But over and over they say you can't understand this life in which the bags are always packed and ready in the hall. "I try to explain that the difference in living at home is that you never feel homesick there," observes Florence Simfukwe, a Malawian nurse; "but it is hard to make myself understood."

WOMEN IN EXILE, like any good tale, offers up serendipitous riches along with its main story: details of female circumcision in the Sudan, foot-binding in China, maternity wards under the Soviets; asides on choosing children's names in Cambodia or the punishment of a sniper in Lebanon; lessons in how to escape from Afghanistan, Malawi, Iran...

Looking at the US through grateful, but discerning eyes, these exiles ask us to note that Americans require an individual tragedy to respond to a collective one, that youth, not age, is the bearer of wisdom here, that it is indeed funny when Americans feed their lawns vitamins. We're told too what is good about America, and it's a hearteningly long list, ranging from respect for privacy and the Constitution to the feast of feminist writing and the wherewithal to challenge received wisdom.

And we learn about the ideas these women hold that led to their exile and so must be honored. The truths they reveal about the vagaries of power, the price of political activism, the toll of oppression on the human soul and the strategies they use to advance the causes of women are hard-won and often presented with the zing of a good one-liner. Speaking of her involvement in the Iranian Student Association in California, the pseudonymous Azar Salamat notes wryly: "It seems passion and tolerance, like water and oil, don't mix." Ibrahim reminds us that "replacing white faces with black in positions of power does not automatically benefit the masses of women." But what does benefit women is not a simple question, notes Sima Wali, who says of the refugee women she has worked with since she fled Afghanistan:

> Their strength, courage, and leadership capacity has convinced me that a civil society and democratic institutions cannot be imported.... I find that the formulas presented in international dialogue often miss the mark when it comes to bringing about change in developing societies. I feel the West can act only as a facilitator.... They cannot define the problems nor can they propose solutions. We must find our own way through the labyrinth.
> (p.137)

The more theory-fond among them say that to be a woman is to be in exile. I suspect that many of the others would find that more poetic than useful, since this book makes it abundantly clear that exile as metaphor is a far cry from exile as reality.

Finally, though, these meditations on banishment argue that, in Afkhami's words, "nothing is worth the suffering, death, and destruction brought about by ideologies...." Ge Yang, a Chinese journalist, now in her late seventies, lost her house, her job and her position in society when she was sent to a labor camp to feed pigs. Twenty-two years later, the Cultural Revolution was officially declared a mistake. Now she says: "All of that time I did not live, I did not experience anything of value, I accomplished nothing, and I suffered. How can you call that 'a mistake'?"

SUBSCRIBER ALERT!

Several of our readers have notified us that their February 1995 copies were misprinted and illegible on some of the inside pages. We're extremely concerned that this has happened: if you find you have a defective copy—of February or any issue—we'll be happy to replace it as soon as we hear from you. Call us at 617-283-2087, FAX to 617-283-3645, or write to *The Women's Review*, Wellesley College, Wellesley MA 02181.