

READING AZIZ'S NOTEBOOK IN 2013

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Chowra Makaremi: *Aziz's Notebook: At the Heart of the Iranian Revolution*.

Paris: Yoda Press, 2013 (English translation)

(Originally published in French, 2011)

'You cannot know or feel what it is like, because you were not there'

– Letter from Fataneh Zarei (Gachsaran) to Farzaneh Zarei (Paris) in 1979 (Makaremi 2013: 125)

Aziz's Notebook speaks to us through the voices of the dead, with memories refracted through other memories. What ensues is a single narrative, one of absence, violence, imprisonment, execution and exile pieced together from different perspectives. We are led into the lives of two sisters, whose political affiliations cause their eventual executions in a post-revolutionary Iran. This is an Iran rife with chaotic power struggles between the (then) newly founded Islamic Republic and opposition activists.

There is a difference between this and other memoirs of the same era, though. It is Makaremi's grandfather Aziz, an elderly man with no political affiliation, who narrates the first, central part of this short work. With concise footnotes, designed to be unobtrusive and orienting, we hear the grandfather talk directly to us about his daughters' demise at the hands of the Islamic Republic. The second part of the book is a window into Makaremi's own journey, her fragmented memories as a child, the absence of her parents, the questions she had growing up in Paris and an anxious reunion with her grandfather Aziz when he comes to visit them abroad. We get a sense that only after his death and with the discovery of the notebook does Chowra see the inner workings of a man who had for so long been troubled by the violent deaths of two of his daughters. His piety becomes tangled up in these experiences: he literally scrawled the details of his children's torture on the back of a Quran.

'They lashed her until her toenails fell off, they slapped her until her ear drums burst, they broke her teeth. All the while they did not allow her poor children to visit her. All this suffering was inflicted in the name of Islam and the defence of Islam. And what happened? Was it the justice of Islam when, after seven years and six months of frantic rushing around prison doors in Bandar-Abbas, Gachsaran, Teheran, Shiraz, they gave me the number of a grave, but no one knows if my daughter is really buried there?' (Makaremi 2013: ix)

By leaving the account raw, in its emotive state, Makaremi's own anthropological sensibilities shine through. Like a painful fieldwork vignette, the piece lies open and awaits an analysis which does not follow; it is not necessary. Nordstrom, an anthropologist who addressed her own approach on the war in Mozambique, discusses the process of lifting analytical frameworks away from such events (Robben & Nordstrom 1995: 18). She declares explanatory categories, drawn up in peaceful working environments and used to explain the absolute chaos of war and violence, to be largely obsolete. Instead, she dedicates time to 'meaning, creativity and imagination as

strategies of survival' (Robben & Nordstrom 1995: 18).

This seems relevant when approaching Makaremi's own passages describing childhood memories, dreams, and the epiphanies and discoveries which led to the book's publication. Aziz's Notebook could itself be described as a work of creative survival in this context. As Robben and Nordstrom go on to state in their anthology, violence does not just concern destruction but also reconstruction. There is a regeneration process which accompanies acts of incredible cruelty and it often exists in the margins of the mundane, in everyday existence *despite* the presence of great threat.

During the 1980s in Iran, the threat of violence was a tangible reality for everyone, even those who were not explicitly involved in political endeavours. Being accused of aiding or simply not reporting political runaways and activists could lead to arrest, torture and execution. Meanwhile, a long war raged on with neighbouring Iraq and bombs fell into Iranian cities as prisoners were hanged at the gallows or shot at close range. The climate was one of absolute fear. Beyond essentialised functional explanations for the enforcement of fear and power consolidation, it is plausible to conclude that a direct consequence of such a climate was the silence of many who lived through the era.

TORTURE AND IMPRISONMENT IN IRAN DURING THE 1980S

Although relatively under-reported in academic and popular media, there has nonetheless been ground-breaking work on the systematic torture and imprisonment of those deemed a 'political threat' by the Islamic Republic in the 'bloody decade' of the 1980s. Ervand Abrahamian (1991) and Dariush Rejali (1993) in particular have analysed the role of institutionalised torture in the making of modern day Iran. Far from simple punishment or trying to obtain information from prisoners, Abrahamian (1991) specifically recounts the importance of torture as reform in the Islamic Republic's prisons and the much sought-after recantation, intending to destroy the person and not just the site of ideological conflict itself. As Foucault's vision of modernity showed a shift from torture to imprisonment (Foucault 1977), Iranian modernity subverted the use of torture to create desired citizens, presumably disposing of those who it could not change. *Aziz's Notebook* addresses this through the few prison meetings that take place between Aziz and his daughters. The dialogue between parent and child frequently grapples with the subject of recantation. Aziz recounts his daughters' disgust at the prospect of producing recantations; Fatemeh is even quoted as saying 'a dignified death is worth more than a life of shame' (Makaremi 2013: 73).

Aziz's daughters were not alone. Many prisoners found the process of cooperation with their captors unbearable. But some did concede; and perhaps although it is difficult to accept, this is understandable. From other memoirs,

however, we know that in many cases, even after the recantation was produced, prisoners were kept in the same squalid conditions, hazed by fellow inmates and transformed into a 'tavvab' or 'repentant'. Worse still, and as Fataneh describes, the process of 'reformation' or 'repentance' did not stop with simply renouncing one's political ties. *Tavvabs* were regularly forced to assault, intimidate and sometimes kill fellow inmates as proof of their new loyalties. Fataneh Zarei recounts this to her father after he pleads with her to cooperate with the guards and to 'confess' (Makaremi 2013: 26).

During my time spent researching on and around the topic of political persecution in the 1980s in Iran, I met a woman who after over 20 years bumped into a *tavvab* who had regularly assaulted her during her long stretch in prison. The woman, who was well respected for her enduring political activism, told me with great regret how she had responded to the *tavvab's* greetings. She had addressed her with bitterness, disgust and anger. 'Her daughter had been with her,' she told me, visibly embarrassed by her own behaviour. What remains amongst former inmates of that period is an enduring hierarchy of respect and shame. The *tavvabs* of the 1980s, it seems, were punished then and are still punished today. The respect, which accompanies the status of former prisoner of conscience, is completely negated for those who in any way collaborated with their captors. These former 'repentants' therefore are confined to a life of silence, shunned by both sides of the political spectrum.

The violence of the 1980s in Iran transcends the prisons and the interrogation rooms, something *Aziz's Notebook* illuminates well. The violence of this era was striking in the way that it repressed public grief and mourning through the intimidation of families, the withholding of bodies and destruction of burial sites. Khavaran cemetery, located on the outskirts of Tehran and the site of the shallow graves of many unidentified political prisoners as well as some known ones, is still an arena of conflict and controversy today. Elderly mothers holding photographs of their loved ones clash with state officials who regularly interfere with remembrance rituals. By criminalising even small incidents of remembrance, the government sought (and continues to seek) popular support as legitimate victors of a fight that it won long ago against the Pahlavi throne. It wrestled (and continues to wrestle) the narrative away from anyone who dared object. Re-considering Robben and Nordstrom's perspective on violence and resistance leads to poignant polemics with regards to mourning families and remembrance both as part of a grieving process and as defiance to state powers.

RECORDING THE REVOLUTION

If producing histories 'legitimizes a present order of political and social power', as Paul Connerton discusses in 'The Spirit of Mourning' (Connerton 2011: 1), we may understand the angst of challenging a calcifying state

narrative and of the increasing time pressure associated with this. The longer the state narrative prevails, the older the living witnesses to that particular temporal moment become. As personal experiences fade into historical obscurity, away from the geographic borders within which they took place, states simply continue to control what is and is not kept as an 'official chronology' of events. Amongst affected Iranians in the diaspora, some, like those involved with the Iran Tribunal, continue to struggle (increasingly frantically) to establish recorded and documented histories before the narrators themselves disappear. Others, in a manner much like Lisa Malkki's (1995) Hutu informants in Tanzanian towns, draw away from the 'history making' process altogether, considering history, as in Connerton's discussions, to be the domain of the state. In the face of these legitimizing narratives, memoirs and testimonies from those who suffered at the hands of the Iranian state stand perhaps as Lyotard's *petit recits* (Lyotard 1984). Many such challenging *petit recits* or *petites histoires* exist amongst former prisoners of the 1980s. Fewer are written by the family members of the executed and disappeared.

The numbers of such *petits recits* continue to grow, especially those which are becoming translated into European languages. The prison memoir genre has certainly proliferated amongst Iranians following the 1979 revolution (Abrahamian 1991: 15). Some memoirs, like that of Mehdi Aslani, a well-known survivor and activist, continue to sell well (Aslani 2009). This is partly due to his detailed descriptions of a place and time cordoned off from many inmates' loved ones, inmates who did not leave alive and who left no answers as to what had happened to them.

For their families, memoirs of what they deem 'credible' sources are few and far between. There is still an excavation of knowledge taking place amongst the families of the executed, and the prison memoir is one avenue of inquiry. But this is not 'excavation' in some abstract Foucauldian sense; it is a literal attempt to make meaning through a captured temporal experience that is otherwise unattainable. *Aziz* did not appear to have plans to publish his notebook. He was not dispersing information but rather recording it for himself, in a conversation which regularly spoke directly to God and asked for answers. We as the reader often feel as if we have stumbled across a man engaged in private prayer and lamentation.

Aziz's Notebook paints a sombre picture, of impotent frustrations and the dull grief of parents who did not understand what was happening to their children. With the poetic elegance that seeps into the English translation Makaremi shines a light on the incongruity of each party's experience in relation to the imprisonment and violent death of her mother and aunt, from two very different perspectives – one of a father frantically recording the events that led to his daughters' capture and eventual execution, to a child's memories of a time accented by the absence of her parents; then later, as an adult, working through her grandfather's memory to reconstruct the lost

narrative of her mother and aunt's deaths. We, as the reader, are witness to Makaremi's excavation of knowledge.

Both temporal and spatial journeys follow: the third and final part of the book is a collection of letters written between 1978-1992, between various family members in Iran and Makaremi's aunt who had been in Paris throughout the revolution. Documenting the events preceding and then following the revolution, we walk through a historical moment with an inevitable sense of dread. Like stills taken in the midst of absolute commotion, we notice the mundane and the spectacular fused together as seamlessly as in real time. From Fataneh's longing sentiments as the wheels of unrest had started turning in Iran, in 1978:

'...This year Papa and I squeezed the lemons for the juice and we missed you... It was the same for the tomato preserves. Do you remember, last year you helped us prepare the lemon juice?' (Makaremi 2013: 122)

To her chilling final letter in 1982, as she prepared for what turned out to be (on that particular occasion) a mock execution:

'They say that before his death, a human being feels that the time to leave has come; with all my being I feel I will only be alive for a few more hours...' (Makaremi 2013: 140).

Fataneh Zarei did not make it to the summer of 1988, the notorious peak of the executions of political opposition members, coinciding with the end of the Iran-Iraq war. But we continue to creep through the bizarre decade in Aziz's memory of his other daughter Fatameh's imprisonment until the October of 1988. Then the story changes course after news of Fateme's execution reaches him. The death toll during this period included minors and the elderly, some of whom were there simply due to their familial affiliations or for having accepted a pamphlet in the street containing prohibited information. Illiterate men were murdered as American spies, and young girls were raped to eliminate virginity and be denied entry into heaven. Some guards even forcibly 'married' female inmates. The 1980s was a decade of such stories. Chowra Makaremi's lens magnifies the people behind the political event, shining a light on its survivors – their stories of heartbreak and torment, the torment of not knowing. We do not think of Fataneh and Fateme as political activists so much as they are the daughters of a religious man desperate to make sense of a nonsensical situation. We think of Fataneh Zarei, recently married, widowed and pregnant. We envision Fateme Zarei, rarely allowed visits from her two young children, and even deprived of light.

Aziz's Notebook is difficult to read because each of the narrators is palpably recognisable. An old man, weathered by angst, a young girl led through a migration and returning to Iran as an adult. These are the stories which

root the Iranian diaspora in a conflict which is largely unknown to outsiders. Like a public secret, these stories become buried under the years that have contained them. As Linda Green points out, being 'socialized to terror' does not imply either a constant state of alertness nor an acceptance of the status quo. It is instead in a state of 'low intensity panic' (Green 2004: 186) which sees chaos 'diffused' in the body and manifested in chronic illness and recurring dreams. These events live on in the bodies of those who transcend them.

COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND ENDURING LEGACIES

The truth is that what happened in 1979 and the decade that followed shook the generation that experienced it, whether they stand by it still or renounce it completely. They were a part of something that grew out and beyond them. Monstrous and out of their control, it turned back and swallowed them whole. Fateme Zarei's home visit in 1988, the visit she herself had described as her first and last meeting with her family, is peppered with advice she gave to her sisters. Among this, she tells them: 'However much we believed we were Iranian, Iran didn't belong to us, we knew nothing about this society. Now we are paying the price' (Makaremi 2013: 68).

William O. Beeman said that 'few societies are as invested in the search for their own identity as Iran' (Beeman 1996: 876). Perhaps considering the nation's tumultuous history, this is unsurprising. A kind of enduring 'Axial age' (Jaspers 1948) has plagued the nation since the revolution of 1979. Diaspora Iranians tend to look back the most. A discussion of why is neither relevant nor surprising here. At least partly this is because we have the luxury to do so. But there are other factors at play. We are displaced, we are longing, and we are strangers to the homelands we visit, read about, see on television or, as Makaremi has done for this book, conduct research on. Perhaps the most literal analogy is found within *Aziz's Notebook* itself, as Makaremi describes in painful detail having her grandfather's notebook read aloud by her surviving aunt to allow her to record its contents.

Academically, the work does instigate wider discussions about Truth and Reconciliation Commissions – the supposed antidote to social forgetting, usually occurring in the context of a power change. Iran has seen no such change, but a Truth Commission was established in 2012 by the victims' families and survivors of the 1980s in Iran. The so-called 'Iran Tribunal' was and is centered on the 'bloody decade' of the 1980s. Structurally, this historically significant movement (where Makaremi herself provided a testimony) could be viewed as an attempt to air silenced grievances, perhaps a collective effort at previously suppressed grief. The partakers, of course, demanded far more than such simple emotive results. A formal legal framework and expert witnesses aimed to show what was described in the final judgement as human rights violations committed on a 'widespread and

systematic basis' (Iran Tribunal 2012). It is this distinction, and the use of the word 'systematic', which encourages further legal and international enquiry. Within this framework, the deaths of Aziz's daughters were not random acts of violence. They were not accidents or a case of mismanaged incarceration during the chaos of war in Iran. Their deaths are located in a purposeful and strategic killing of political opponents who presumably posed an existential threat to the revolutionary government of the 1980s, which endures up to the present day.

Currently, the Iranian state continues to deny any wrongdoing during their time in power. It is widely discussed in diaspora activist groups that the younger generation currently residing within Iran does not know or perhaps care about the events that preceded them. While it is true that the current conditions in Iran mount multiple pressures (political, economic and social) on Iranian society at all levels, the continuity in regime oppression is often overlooked. Perhaps even those who recognise the wrongdoings of the revolutionary government consider the 1980s massacres to be confined to history, preferring to focus on more 'contemporary' problems like current gender inequality and international sanctions.

The fact remains, however, that former judges, torturers and executioners of the 1980s have held prominent positions in governmental structures up to the present day. Even popular 'liberal' president Rouhani recently appointed Mostafa Pourmohamadi, the notorious former member of the 1988 'Death Commissions' who sentenced hundreds to execution in 1988, as the Minister of Justice (Iran Human Rights Documentation Center 2013). This is an irony of bitter proportions and does much to distance affected diaspora Iranians from reformist debates in Iranian politics. It is these continuities that partly radicalise calls for regime change amongst the Iranian diaspora, even those who may visit Iran regularly.


Amongst the heterogenous and fragmented Iranian diaspora, a common idea about the discourse of the Islamic Republic's violence permeates discussions, demanding that it be uprooted completely before democracy can ever be successfully cultivated. A government who began its reign exterminating political opposition and proceeded to reward the most gruesome offences with medals of power and authority is considered to require complete overhaul and not trivial title changes, no matter how quaint president Rouhani's tweets may be or how congenial the government appear in the course of sanction lifting.

To some extent the generation that has reached adulthood with Makaremi, touched by the same traumas, undergoes the same processes of knowledge excavation as she did. We look for narrators of a place and time we are far removed from. We look to survivors of the revolution to build whole, sensory images of the place and time that pulled us out of the ground and replanted us elsewhere. We want to recreate the faces that have long since faded during this decisive period. But unlike academic sourc-

es – rife with paranoid chronology and fact collation or the memoirs of those who fought for the revolution that punished them – Aziz provides a touchingly personal account, free of romance and political ideology.

Addressing perhaps the most written-about era of contemporary Iranian history, fraught with the victory narrative of the revolution and the eight year 'sacred defence' against Saddam's army and allies, this account is located very much at the opposite end of macro analyses. Aziz is not looking to explain himself nor make political forecasts. Makaremi herself says of his act of recording as an example of 'history penetrat[ing] individual lives' (Makaremi 2013: 115). Revolutions in general and the events that ensue do just that to countless people who are inscribed with their memories.

Collectivity in this suffering has, however, never truly been achieved amongst Iranians in the diaspora. Fear, political conflicts, shifting priorities and indifference all play important roles in the silence of those who lived beyond that temporal moment. For this reason, *Aziz's Notebook* is a special reminder about how far and wide the trauma truly scattered, and how many voices were silenced in the process of rebuilding their own lives. There are many unpublished stories within the Iranian diaspora which echo that of Aziz. Makaremi recalls his negation 'may it not remain unspoken' (Makaremi 2013: xiv), and indeed this is the position he adopts throughout the whole work.

We are now in the year of the 25th anniversary of the bloodiest year of the bloody decade, and I too close with this sentiment. Like the testimonies of famous survivors of totalitarian regimes – although notably lacking their public purpose – *Aziz's Notebook* writes 'in defiance of the threat of forgetting' (Connerton 2011: 33). 

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