

Recensione: Rooja Mohassessy, *When Your Sky Runs Into Mine*, Denver, Elixir Press, 2023, pp. 104.

When Your Sky Runs Into Mine, the debut lyrical collection by the Iranian-born poet and educator Rooja Mohassessy, follows the route of a narrative of identity dealing with exile as a condition of permanent transit. More in detail, the author analyses her own wounds to question the political body of the migrant, as well as the displacement of an imaginary drawn from the Iranian historical-religious background and steeped into an intellectual stream of escape and return to a fragmented and ghostly self.

The dedication in the collection's opening lines refers to Mohassessy's Uncle Bahman, the Iranian painter and sculptor with whom Rooja tackles her forced school-age migration from Iran to a Europe imbued with artworks and Italian urban views. It's a deliberately disjointed assemblage that begins with the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) and, through the representation of the sacrifice of countless victims, is marked by a refined syntax and symbolic framework, which is articulated and thick also in terms of linguistic and cultural contaminations.

These latter bring back Persian codes and lexical inserts grasping a poetics of self-negotiation that seems to recall Babak Elahi's positions on diasporic language as *jam sessions* (Elahi 2008), namely, with several implications for the writer torn between an Iranianness of family (re)connections and a troubled belonging to the "final" American destination. To those real and figurative worlds, Mohassessy turns as if in a dramatic composition made of unanswered interviews and continuous role-playing. Not by chance, she then insists on her mother's innate deafness suggesting this condition as the epitome of a life on the margins and, therefore, of endless isolation.

Moreover, transience and estrangement (re)shape the poet-migrant's stunted setting and open to issues of death, gender confinement and nativism between a remote, ruined past and a wandering, recreated present. Also, the collection is divided into four chapters telling of a self revitalised by Uncle Bahman's art, but bewildered and guilt after abandoning the rest of the family in Iran. There's a declared sense of "intoxication" coming from sacred verses and illusions – "War tricked us into believing it wouldn't stay" (9) next to the dullness of bans imposed on the autonomy and freedom of Iranian women's body and sexual desire: "They turned away / many goods and colors, our men, / barely managing, fumbling / to keep our confounding thigs, our unruly hair / out of view and rule the country with a fist" (5).

Not secondary is the backlit portrait of a disseminated Iranian diasporic community – in accordance with that "Third Space" conceived by Homi Bhabha (1994) as a field of ambivalences and never fixed enunciations – to rebuild a collective memory stifled in the blood of a war not yet amended, but reproduced in an almost impossible rise under a starless sky:

[...] we rise
 out of an immaculate ruin, against a backdrop
 of hellfire, flanked on both sides
 by fallen martyrs, their blood scabbed into fields
 of poetic poppies that die
 at the vanishing point (19). [...]

Mohassessy's poetics repeatedly fluctuates between a civil and interior landscape both annihilated by conflicts that are prefigured by sirens like hisses of vipers ready to strike and release poison. In the Iranian social body mutilated by bombs and the resounding of Khomeinist rhetoric – the same that blesses the war by enveloping children soldiers' foreheads with the exhortation to a redeeming end – the contrasting colours lead to a grim darkness ("It's time to come to terms / with the dark" (4)) of the aftermath: "the significance of black after the revolution" (23).

A darkness that spreads and dooms even the veiled childhood of Mohassessy to extend its own tentacles of authority along the dusty streets of Tehran, its neighbourhoods and crossroads of busy roads. It is the “heft of fabrics” (23) that overwhelm, as much as the duty to recite the Quran in a non-native language: another trace of fervours that, in the poet’s words, are hopelessly far from a long-sought secularism and sexual liberation.

Thus the trembling of a “Shy and broken” (31) childhood, the inadequacy of forced coexistence with a dogmatism instilled in the veins are accompanied by Shakespearian, musical and lyrical Western quotations and yearnings – the title of the entire collection is taken from the third act of *The Merchant of Venice* – that move from the tragedy of an internal exile to the homeland. And from there the verses disclose the shades of suffering as the poet-migrant lives in a struggled bond of home and guilt looking for a new life. This is summed up in the metaphor of a lamb that has abandoned the flock to join a broken West or *Ġarbzadegī* (Westoxication) (Al-e-Ahmad 1984), that is, in the eyes of the homeland, a loss of identity towards an emulation always targeted to domineering Western canons.

The lyrical “lament” and its multiple image are reflected in a mirror that prepares the final stages of the verses and follow the exile’s dislocations from shattered reference points to those reshaped ones:

Well, I had nowhere to turn. I’d clambered out
of rubble and ran
[...]
I picked till then
at my insistent face in the mirror, bridled
my mother tongue, swallow radifs and quatrains.
Once obsolete, I could lie
about where I’d come from and those
I’d left to die (41).

Mohassessy’s speech, which is at times sharp, at times twisted, does not avoid digressions on other contemporary geopolitical sceneries – she looks, for instance, at the Lebanese situation and the jihadist terrorist attacks in Sri Lanka – and, as in the poem *Straniera* (*Stranger*), does not escape admissions: “two years of exile and still waiting to fall” (54). Her repeated attempts to overcome a need of survival fall into the details of the first kiss (55), of the flesh and its taboo (61) in a cycle of death and rebirth so that she acknowledges: “Exile suits me, convenient / as an affair” (64).

Yet, the tangible and intangible loneliness of a divided self, dried up as a native American lilac plant suffering from too much heat (76), as well as the impossibility of repositioning and hinging the white roots (“my bone- / white roots call for a touch up” (69)) in the context of Trumpian sanctions, all reassert a burden of defeat and exclusion.

Burden and conflicts that are also of the poem *Defeated* by Laleh Khalili¹, as in Mohassessy’s *Eggplants*². It’s a kind of imaged dialogue also with *Ode to the Eggplant* by Karim Persis M. where a symbolic dramatization takes place to deal with the hybridity of the exile: “A much misunderstood creature, / the eggplant is like an exile” (Karim 2006). On the other hand, Mohassessy looks at the blurred boundaries of her self-recognition by means of the fragile lens of on-going linguistic

¹ See the lyrical parallel with Khalili’s verses: “[...] our history devoured us with the final fervor of / an insatiable ghoul who sees her lifeline fraying at the ends / [...] Obsessed by the unique superiority of our race / we have survived so long / we have survived so hard / that shape-shifting is coded into our marrow and our memory”. Laleh Khalili, “Defeated”, in Karim Persis M., Mohammad Mehdi Khorrani (eds.), *A World Between. Poems, Short Stories, and Essays by Iranian-Americans* (New York, 1999), pp. 58-59.

² In the poem “Eggplants”, Mohassessy suggests a difference in the body through the symbolic eggplants’ curve and their dark pigmentation echoing that of chadors: “Did the eggplants / back home / potbellied and turgid, / dangle different? [...] Remember how we stood / them in rows on the kitchen counter / like mothers in queues / of Tehran-Bazaar, wrapped / from head to toe in black chadors?”. Mohassessy, *When Your Sky Runs Into Mine*, p. 83.

adjustments: “When I visit your country / I’ll carry a trifle of your words / to use in fair trade” (73). Nevertheless, the poet tries to claim her own political and creative role beyond the footsteps of an Iranian giant still bridled in her throat, from there, she clings to life with little sips of air and even more refined pronunciations³ (81, 90-91).

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³ See Mohassessy’s poem “Shopping” where the poet reflects upon life in the aftermath of war: “The cling to life / after death-on-the-stand [...]”. See also “A Muslim” to catch Mohassessy’s positions on the linguistic turn of exile: “I carefully construct the truth in my mind / [...] feeling an odd pinch of pride in my precision of language / But I look into the expectant face, / grateful I cannot recall the Farsi word [...]”.

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