

## SETAYESH NOORANINEJAD

*Poetic Bridges: Spanning Literary Traditions,  
Politics and Cultures*

Interview with Iranian poet Zahra Taheri

Dr Zahra Taheri is an acclaimed contemporary Iranian poet and scholar. She is the 2016–17 Bahari Visiting Fellow in the Persian Arts of the Book at the University of Oxford's Bodleian Libraries. She convenes the Persian Studies program at the Australian National University and holds a PhD in Near Eastern Studies from the University of California, Berkeley. Her work has been published in Persian, English and Japanese, and includes *The Absence and Presence of Women in Persian Sufi Texts* and *The Silence of Old Mirrors: The life and poetry of 'Alamtaj Qaem-maqami*. She is currently working on her new book, *The Image of Women in Persian Ethical Texts*. Her published poetry books are *Milad (The Birth)* and *Pegah-e Nokhostin (The Primal Dawn)*. Her third poetry book, *Daman Be Pa Mikeshat Mah (The Moon Drags Its Skirt on Its Feet)*, is in the process of publishing in Iran. Captivated at an early age by the familiar classical Persian verse, Taheri was further inspired by the revolutionary style of Nima Yushij, who envisioned a new perspective in modern Persian poetry.

*When did you first start writing poetry? What made you feel the need to express yourself in this way?*

I started to write my poems from the early years of high school. I was born in Shiraz, Iran, during a period of revived interest in contemporary Persian literature. During the last decades of the twentieth century, Nima's revolutionary literary theories on modern poetry had created a turning point in the historical literary tradition of classical Persian poetry, and poetry had become one of the most important

literary and social issues during my teenage years; and it was not long before I discovered my insatiable passion for Persian literature. Nima's fresh interpretation of the poetic definitions had created a huge wave of poetry composed by his disciples, followers, and younger-generation poets, which had aimed to liberate Persian poetry from the confinement and barriers of prosodic restrictions and clichéd terms. Nima's followers were going to discover the value of a more extensive structure in the area of poetic forms as well as a better understanding of the contemporary social realities. The readership of poetry was phenomenal and my generation's enthusiasm for modern Persian poetry was astonishing.

My familiarity with classical Persian poetry had started at a very early age, in elementary school, when my uncle, who was one of the lovers of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, began to narrate the heroic stories of this precious Persian National Epic to me every night instead of children's bedtime stories. I also, coincidentally, had found an old manuscript of Hafez's poems in a big old wooden chest in my aunt's pantry, during a hot summer's afternoon in Shiraz, and started to read the verses, without knowing anything about Hafez at that age, when I was in the second grade, and also without even imagining that I was reading the most precious and exquisite collection of poetry ever written in the Persian language. Of course, I could not understand and discover the significant meanings deeply hidden in the hemstitches and verses of Hafez's *Divan*, however I could simply feel the beauty of the words, meters, rhythms, and rhymes, even though I had to go through the challenge of discovering the pronunciation of the words stunningly written in the *Nastaligh* style of Persian calligraphy.

Reading Hafez's poems at such an early age blessed me with my first connection to classical Persian literature, and helped me to put my first step across the threshold of the paradise of Persian poetry. That gradual familiarity with the *Shahnameh* and Hafez's lyrical expertise was the beginning of my love, enthusiasm and passion for Persian poetry in my elementary school years. I declared Persian literature as my major in high school and, years later, at Pahlavi (Shiraz) University, I studied classical and contemporary Persian literature, and continued

studying and working on Persian literature into the years my of PhD program at the University of California, Berkeley.

I never published my poems during my years in high school; however I still keep them in a hand-written collection and sometimes read them to remind myself of the long way I have come. During those years it was actually a tradition for students in my hometown, Shiraz, to be a member of a literary society or circle. Teenage poets used to attend the weekly literary gatherings and recite their poems to the other members and evaluate their compositions through critical comments and feedback, usually offered by the previous generation of poets or literary critics. This tradition has survived in my hometown and poets and writers still get together for weekly assemblies and present their work. I was a member of several well-known literary societies and circles in Shiraz, such as the House of Culture, in the decade which ended with the 1979 Iranian Revolution. I both learnt from these societies and contributed to them, and it was truly fascinating and prestigious for a teenager to be known as a celebrated young poet among these literary societies.

What makes me feel the need to express myself in poetry? To tell you the truth, I have never decided to write a poem nor intentionally started to compose. There are magical and miraculous moments in my life when poetry captures my whole being. At these times I have no choice but to listen to my heart and my mind. These are the poems that have always seized me and conquered my heart and mind in order to find a way out of their captivity within my subconscious—or, as we say in Persian, from the depths of my heart.”

*Why was Nima Yushij so important?*

Nima's innovation in the history of Persian literature is a very significant turning point, because he paved the way for a revolution in Persian poetry—a true revolution! Many poets had struggled to establish reform within Persian poetry after the Constitutional Revolution (1905–1906), but Nima had recognised that gradual reform was going to take a long time and that it might be aborted midway. He had to declare his manifesto and create a revolution.

Nima had inherited a vast treasure trove of Persian poetry, with all its both genuine and imitation gems. In this literary tradition for almost seven centuries after Hafez, classical Persian poetry had been imprisoned by fixed themes and rhythms. Almost all poets had continuously repeated the same similes, metaphors, images and allegories to compose the same themes in the same meters and forms. This means that Persian poets for many centuries after Hafez had continued to see the world through the eyes of the classical masters, and their talents were thus wasted in imitating, not creating. Of course, during the post-Constitutional Revolution era and the first three decades of the twentieth century, Persian poetry was witnessing the first signs of change, but the process was very slow. Paving the way for the major and essential change was not easy, since any slight and minor change was considered as challenging the legitimacy of classical Persian poetry, and faced very powerful opposition from prominent figures in classical literature.

The Constitutional Revolution had brought new ideas and demands onto the scene of Iranian society, and classical poetry was not capable of adjusting itself to its necessities. Through the Constitutional Revolution Iran was going to step into a new era in the first decade of the twentieth century and needed a new poetry with less restriction and more capacity, more flexible forms, and a breath of fresh air. Persian poetry had to enter a new phase, not through a slow change but through a revolution; and Nima's creativity and innovations generated and formed this revolution. When he started to compose his poetry, many prominent literary figures of the classical style considered his reevaluation as a disaster for classical Persian literature. It is actually a known fact that Persian poetry is very sacred for Iranian people; poetry has always been part of an Iranian's life, even their everyday life, and Nima's revolution in its first stages could be considered as infidelity. Not literally, but symbolically. However, a few classical literary figures, as well as the younger generation of Persian poets, came to realise that this literary revolution was inevitable, and this is how the new era of contemporary Persian literature entered into the history of Persian literature.



*Many Iranian women grow up with a sense of femininity rooted in cultural values and familial role models. Could you please talk a little about that aspect?*

I am a woman and look at existence as a woman. I have collectively inherited women's characteristics, virtues, senses, values, beliefs, and viewpoints from all women who have lived in the same land, language, and culture before me throughout the history of Persia. I have noticed that, in the second collection of my poetry, giving birth to a child—creating another human being, and the power of fertility and creation—is the main theme of my poetry. I have experienced the power, and also the suffering of creating and of being a creator. This is truly the most astonishing feeling a human being can experience, and nature has granted me, as a woman, the blessing of experiencing it. This is a beyond-belief sense of power that a woman shares with the goddess of Earth, who is fertile and the Creator.

Identifying women with the Creator has been a long cultural tradition in Persian history, from the Zoroastrian religious doctrine to the Sufi traditions in Persian literature. In the sacred text of Zoroastrians, *Sepandarmaz*, the goddess of Earth is a feminine figure who is the creator of life and the grower of seeds. Rumi, the celebrated Persian mystic poet, has also identified women with the Creator in his didactic composition on speculative mysticism, the great *Masnavi*, by using the adjective "*khaleq*" for them. Also, in the *Shahnameh*, the legendary mythological bird, *Simorgh*, is a feminine character who raises *Zal*, a hero who later becomes the head of the legendary Persian heroic dynasty. I have naturally and collectively inherited this culture, with its beliefs, traditions, and viewpoints. Looking at nature, I also share the sense and strength of being a creator with trees which blossom and bear fruit, and the plants which grow and spring up. Of course the power of creation in human beings is higher than the stage of plants and trees in Nature, because what a woman creates—another human being—has consciousness, wisdom, intellect, and above all, can experience and feel love and sorrow.

Another astonishing experience that I can point to as a woman is the moments of nursing my children. I truly feel that in the act of

nursing babies we women are not only simply feeding the human beings we have created, but also nurturing them with the essence of our being; we give them the bounty of our body and soul, and we make them a part of the history of our existence.

All these motherhood experiences are a big part of my poetry and manifest themselves in my moments of composing poetry, when inspiration seizes my heart and mind and captures my language.

*Given that you have emigrated from Iran to Australia, when you are writing poems do you have the sense of in-betweenness? If yes, has it had any reflection on your writing?*

The story of wandering around the world for me is not just about migrating from Iran or moving to Australia. With my husband, Reza, and my older son, Milad, I migrated from Iran to the US, California, in the early 1980s. We lived there for almost twenty years, during which I finished my PhD at University of California, Berkeley, and taught Persian language and literature there for a few years. In early 2000, I received an invitation from Tokyo University of Foreign Studies in Japan to teach in the Department of Iranian Studies, and I lived in Japan for eight years. It was an amazing experience to have the opportunity to learn about Japanese culture and get the chance to know that part of the world. Five years ago, I received a job offer from the Australian National University to teach Iranian Studies courses in their Persian program, so I moved to Australia. It has also been an amazing experience to live in Australia, which I think is one of the most multicultural countries I have ever lived in. During the first months of my stay in Australia, I became familiar with Aboriginal paintings and music. Fascinating! Listening to Aboriginal music and seeing their paintings give me a special sense of *living in history*! I have listened to their tales through their narrations in documentaries, and looking to their sand-based painting is the entrance to a colourful, mysterious world for me.

Yes, I have lived in many different parts of the world, but, to tell you the truth, I have never felt the sense of in-betweenness; never. I love to explore the world and its different cultures, customs, languages,

religions, traditions, beliefs, music, arts and literature. I strongly feel that I am a Persian woman who has lived in different parts of the world and has learnt from the people whom she has met and lived among, the lands she has seen, and the cultures she has experienced. I am not confused about my identity at all: I have never experienced any crisis regarding my identity and my personality. I don't feel as though I am stuck in between cultures at all. I am a Persian woman who speaks to her children in her mother tongue, Persian, cooks Persian food, decorates her house with Persian calligraphy, *termeh*, *mina*, *khatam*, and red or orange-based Persian carpets. I am a Persian woman who celebrates the Persian New Year, *Nowruz* and *Yalda* and *Mehregan* with her students in Tokyo, at Berkeley, and in Australia; a woman who opens Hafez's *Divan* and recites his poems when life is not kind, and tells the story of *Zal va Roudabeh*, and *Rostam va Sohrab* to her children at bedtime. At the same time I am a woman who loves to see, learn, and understand other cultures, other people's traditions, cooking, poetry, music, dance, and art, as well as their religious and sacred beliefs. I have always celebrated differences, explored them, tried to understand them, respected them, and enjoyed them.

*Does the framework of "world literatures" provide the best prism through which we can explore the work of writers such as you?*

Definitely. I think only in such a framework can we provide a prism for the worldwide exploration of the art of writing and composition created in different languages. It would be truly sad (and fortunately it is impossible) if one day all poets wrote their works in a universal language, let's say English. In the framework of world literature, the magic of poetry is created and manifested in its *local* beauty and its diversity of thoughts, beliefs, customs and traditions. There is no need to say that the main tool in this framework should be translation, however this translation must be multi-folded and be able to look at the root of every thought and term. I believe that each nation's poetry can only be understood in the context of that same nation's culture and the complicated system of its literary tradition. Of course the essence of feelings expressed in poetry can be more or less universal. A



concept such as love, grief, regret, frustration, affection, passion, hostility, attachment, suppression or suffering, more or less has the same meaning for all human beings. But how we talk about them or deal with them is different in different cultures; the manifestations of these concepts are different in different cultures. We need to understand the way people look at existence in order to understand their poetry, and shallow translation that does not go deeper than the surface of the words is not the tool we need to use in this framework.

In translating Persian poetry in particular, if we do not understand the depth of its literary tradition, the translation would be something either very confusing or very simple and naïve. In the case of classical Persian poetry, translation can usually portray only a part of the whole picture because the beauty of the language usually gets lost in the translation. If we don't understand the culture, different layers of meanings, allegories, satire, folklore, anecdotes, people's beliefs, values, myths, and the history of this ancient nation, it would be impossible to understand the depth of the poetry they compose. Hafez, a fourteenth century Persian poet, has created masterful lyrics which are considered the most brilliant works ever composed in Persian literature, but the world does not know him and has not heard enough about him. Why? Because to understand him one should learn about and understand the culture and history of his nation—the background in which his works were produced, as well as Persian mysticism, philosophy, religions, mythical heroes, history, and Persian literary tradition with its unique images, similes, and allegories. Translating his poetry on the surface of the words would be like looking at an ocean and describing it as a layer of water, without knowing about the magical world of life and colours and shapes and beauty beneath the surface.

The framework of world literatures can make a bridge between nations through the understanding of their thoughts and the depth of their cultures, and use this knowledge in translation. That is the best way to avoid the snare of judging other nations and to prevent the focus from being on agreeing or disagreeing with them, rather on knowing them; understanding them.



You know that during the last few centuries the world has been divided into man-made categories such as civilised and uncivilised, modernised and non-modernised, first world and third world, developed and undeveloped nations; but no one has ever dared to categorise world literature into these kinds of fabricated standards. Why? Because literature is all about immeasurable and unbounded human feelings and thoughts; their understanding, suffering, happiness, love, grief, longing, beauty, and all the other limitless concepts related to the human heart and soul. Maybe that is the point at which to start. Literature is about those magical moments when a human being shares with others, regardless of where she lives, regardless of the developed/ undeveloped categorisation.

Understanding other cultures is the key to a useful translation, through which we are able to understand other people's poetry.

## ZAHRA TAHERI

*Rainless May**for Sahand who has learned wisdom from migration*

Translated by Bijan Mottahedeh

don't lose heart  
you'll get used to it  
to the rainless months of May  
to the absence of the umbrella bin at the entrance  
to the missing sense of security  
and to the little bottle  
which we fill with our share of freedom  
from this immense ocean

★

you'll get used to it  
when parting from the multitude of sour orange trees  
confined and restless  
within the walls of houses in Shiraz  
I also thought  
I'd never get used to it

★

when you left Rancho school behind  
nestled in Novato's dense walnut trees  
for this place  
to discover the land of the rising sun  
in the bitter clamor of school bells  
to listen to the unfamiliar words  
calling you

Gaijin  
you never thought  
you'd get used to it

★

you persisted through the pain  
that those playful inhospitable eyes  
inflicted on you  
you settled and grew roots

★

how hard it is today  
to be uprooted from this moist soil  
which always smells fresh  
and to be cut loose from the affection  
that dwells deep in the pools of their eyes  
but don't lose heart  
you'll get used to it

★

oh how small the world is!  
and how brief the opportunity  
brief as your poem  
whose Kanji mysteries I cannot fathom

★

oh how small the world is!  
you're just moving  
from one shore of the Pacific to the other  
stones are the same stones  
the moon is the same moon  
as is the orange melancholy of sycamore leaves

★

from the land of a nine-year-old

whose smile, spirit and bright black eyes  
would fit on a little metal scooter  
to today's frontiers of longing  
where only the monsoons can uproot your bicycle  
you have come so far!  
don't lose heart  
you'll get used to it  
but this bicycle can no longer bear  
the weight of unlimited distances  
we must leave it here

★

oh how vast the world is!  
and how brief the opportunity  
when the moon can't look at  
both shores of this expansive ocean  
at the same time  
but don't lose heart  
your poems  
will carry the land from these shores  
on their shoulders  
to the other side

★

slight sorrows  
take you to the borders of wisdom  
so you can see the world from within  
how wondrous!  
how wondrous

★

don't lose heart dearest  
when the storm of your tears subsides  
the sun will shine  
you'll get used to it



## خرداد ماه بی بارش

برای سپند که خردمندی از کوچ آموخته

دل بد مکن<sup>۱</sup>

عادت می کنی

به خرداد ماههای بی بارش

به نبودن جاجتری در پاگرد خانه

به خلأ حس امنیّت

و به شیشه کوچکی

که سهم از انیمان از این اقیانوس عظیم را

در آن می ریزیم

\*\*\*

عادت می کنی

روز دل کندن از نارنجهای انبوهی

که تاب نمی آورند مستوری را

در حصار خانه های شیراز

من هم گمان می کردم

عادت نمی کنم

\*\*\*

روزی که مدرسه "رنجر" را

در گردوزارهای "نوانو"<sup>۲</sup> جا گذاشتی

تا اینجا

در همه تلخ زنگهای مدرسه

سرزمین افتاب را یاد بگیری

و به واژه های نامفهومی گوش کنی

که ترا "گای جین"<sup>۳</sup> می خواندند

گمان می کردی

عادت نمی‌کنی

\*\*\*

در مسیر دردی که

بازیگوشی چشمهای خوش کشیده این غریبه گدازان

به دلت می ریخت،

ماندی و ریشه دواندی

\*\*\*

امروز

چه سخت است

ریشه کندن از این خاک نمناک

که همیشه بوی تازگی می دهد

و بریدن

از ژرفای مهرتاب چشمهایی

که روزن تابش این خورشید را

همیشه به برون بسته اند

اما دل بد مکن

عادت می‌کنی.

\*\*\*

جهان چه کوچک است

اه!

و فرصت چه کوتاه

به کوتاهی همین شعری که نوشته ای

و من از راز طلسمات عجایب<sup>iv</sup> کاتجی هایش

سر در نمی آورم

\*\*\*

جهان چه کوچک است

اه!

تو تنها از یک ساحل اقیانوس کبیر

به ساحل دیگر می روی

سنگ همان سنگ

ماه همان ماه

اندوه نارنجی پنجه های چنار

همان اندوه

\*\*\*

تو از قلمرو نه سالگی

با لبخندی، جاتی،

و چشمهای سیاه درخشانی

که یکسر بر یک/سکوتر فلزی کوچک

جا می گرفت،

تا مرز دلتنگی امروز

که دوچرخه ات را

تنها طوفانهای موسمی

می توانند از جا برگنند

اینهمه راه آمده ای!

دل بد مکن

عادت می کنی.

این دوچرخه را

اما

دیگر توان فاصله های بیحد نیست

باید همینجا رهائش کنیم

\*\*\*

جهان چه فراخ است

اه!

و فرصت چه کوتاه

وقتی ماه نمی تواند بکزمان

بر دو ساحل این اقیانوس گسترده بنگرد

اما دل بد مکن.

شعر هایت

سرزمین این سوی ساحل را

بر دوش

به آن سو خواهند برد

\*\*\*

اندوه های کوچک

تو را به مرز دانایی می سپارند

تا جهان را از درون ببینی

چه شگفت

چه شگفت!

\*\*\*

دل بد مکن جانان

توفان اشک هایت که بگذرد،

آفتاب می زند.

عادت می کنی

لحافظ

شهر کوچکی در شمال کالیفرنیا

آیه زبان ژاپنی به معنی غریبه، غیر خودی، کسی که از ما نیست

لحافظ<sup>۱۷</sup>



