

Review

Beyond the Salt Seas... a desire for liberty

The work of Fateh Emam retraces decades of experience and critical observation. After a life of various kinds of exile, the author, a gentleman-rebel, finally settles in Switzerland. He succeeds in extracting himself from the crushing hierarchy of the Orient, and manages, through his own gentle tenacity, to find his place in the West. He has seen many a hotel room, and tasted many a moment of solitude...

With an often corrosive, but non-sectarian humor, Fateh Emam makes us eager to follow his journey. His strolling and largely autobiographical narrative is written in an alert and rich language, full of life, scents and colors. It is a long story, told as a rhythmic ballad, full of interesting details from many countries. It notably informs the reader about Afghanistan of the 1930s, a place where some 64 different sorts of grapes grow!

A country cut off from the world

Karim, the protagonist of the book, grows up in an isolated corner of the world—a country lacking even a railway. The first steps of a long-overdue modernization occur in a laborious manner. In the Kabul of Karim's childhood, the streets have no names and the houses have no numbers. Even the civil registers are absent: a man is simply "the son of the King's bursar, the chief gendarme's brother, or the cousin of the local celebrity". In the religious schools of that epoch, all kinds of abuses occur, which no one had the idea to criticize at the time. As for medical facilities, they were practically non-existent.

Coming from a family of wealthy merchants, Karim was initiated at a young age to the French language, from which he absorbed, among other things, its lucid character. It was through his studies that he gained insight into this cultivated milieu and became aware of realities that were unimaginable to the rest of the populace in that country, protected behind its high mountains. Thus he learns, for example, that a comfortably seated American pilot in a modern warplane let loose "from the sky of the Empire of the Rising Sun" the two atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

India, a first opening

While still quite young, Karim is sent to the bedside of a sick relative in Lahore, who is there to benefit from the modern clinics run by the British. Karim is curious about everything, and it is rather as a conqueror and not yet as an ex-patriot, that he experiences his very first voyage. Karim dreams of great cities, of movie houses and elevators, but must still wait a long time before eventually getting authorization just to leave his country, and the resulting passport. When he discovers Hindustan, he is blown away by the colonialist segregation in place, which, by principle, puts the most ignorant and arrogant Englishman above the most civilized and learned Hindu. With humor and elegance, the narrator realizes the cultural differences present notably in the relations between man and woman. "One simply does not love in the suburbs of Calcutta as one loves in the green fields of Ireland, covered in ferns and

lavender”. In the Orient, the obsessive prudishness that burdens the relations between man and woman renders those relations rude, summary, and utilitarian. One does not *court* a woman. As Fateh Emam states it: “One does not prepare her for the adulterous bed while gazing into her eyes, flirting before the flame of a candle lit purely for the pleasure of it— and armed with a bottle of sweet wine to chase all inhibitions.”

During a brief return to his native land, resulting in his being sent off to study at the Sorbonne, Karim discovers that his entourage no longer recognizes him. His metamorphosis has begun. But the young conqueror is already yearning for liberty: and looking towards France. *Beyond the salt seas... a desire for liberty*: In the popular Afghan imagination, the sea represents the inaccessible, and to cross it is akin to a kind of heroic mysticism, in this case inspired by the thirst for liberty that is to become both the drive and the talisman for the young Karim.

France

His departure is experienced as a tearing-away, a physical pain accentuated by his mother’s grief. This is to be the greatest shake-up in the life of Karim, who has just received a grant to go and study law in France. The trip takes an eternity. In Iran, Karim takes note of an explosion of technical modernization, in contrast with certain ancestral mentalities, which have not evolved in the least. The self-flagellation performed by the Shia Muslims on the occasion of the festival of *Muharram*, leaves a difficult impression on him. He finally straddles the continents by airplane, as in a dream, and arrives one July morning in a Paris that distinctly does not smell of “Soir de Paris” perfume— but rather like bleach. In France’s capital, Karim was expecting to find ravishing and slightly mischievous women— but not to find homeless people, and the sullen and hurried crowds. A maid speaks to him of the Revolution... there are the dance halls, and more or less boring classes, but Karim’s initiation is ultimately a difficult one. Aghast, he collects people’s tales of the last war. Just as he begins to get his bearings on French soil, he receives a message from his father, requesting that he come to join him in the United States, a country of which he knows practically nothing.

American interlude, and other trips

In the 1950s, Karim discovers America, and at the same time discovers his father. But the alchemy of the hoped-for connection does not occur. The *American Way of Life*, modernity, the endless rectilinear streets of New York City— and even back then, the astonishing parade of obese people— all perplex him.

On a whim, Karim decides to leave the U.S. for what is to become, after many trials and tribulations his “chosen land”, the Eden of Helvetia: Switzerland, represented in a Nepalese legend as an indulgence of the Creator.

After a new interlude in Paris, where he falls ill, Karim returns to Switzerland and discovers a snowy Lausanne; a clean and orderly city where everything seems bathed in a utopian harmony. But there’s a sour note: contact with an openly xenophobic police, who shamelessly

brandish the worst clichés of the Cold War. At that time, Italian and Spanish workers in Switzerland were disinfected with DDT at the border...

Then a return to his native city of Kabul becomes a trap. Stuck in a place where his attachments have been severed, Karim is given a diplomatic job that does not correspond to his ambitions, he gets by as well as he can and bides his time, awaiting the first opportunity to flee. In the department of Protocol, after a punitive spell in the Archives, Karim suspects he has been transformed into a stooge of the Monarchy.

In the 1960s, he is sent to the land of the “child-eating” Bolsheviks.

The look and behavior of this lost Oriental man are totally out of place in icy Moscow beating to the drum of Soviet communist dogma, and this incongruence leads to a host of awkward incidents. Suddenly Karim’s health declines after a series of mysterious injections are administered upon him. This is how our eternal emigrant receives the authorization to go to Switzerland and consult a doctor.

It was with real jubilation that Karim once again found himself in Lausanne, where he felt the irresistible pull of freedom. “In the material paradise of secular Switzerland, even the streets seemed to have a soul. And because the western democracies placed man at the center of the village (revolutions were made for that!) the citizen, armed only with his own free will, could have a sex-change, color his hair green, or call into doubt the existence of God.”

After having humbly and patiently worked at the United Nations with the prospective of getting a position that suited him, Karim sees his dreams of his self-realization shattered when the Kingdom of Afghanistan opposes his activity at the U.N., which was planning to send him on a mission. The son of an Afghan consular officer elbows him out his job, and Karim’s world collapses.

Finally, after a burlesque investigation led by the police of the canton of Vaud, Karim’s Swiss residence permit is revoked, on the grounds of his “questionable character” and “proven instability”. At the height of the Cold War his recent stay in the U.S.S.R. just gives ammunition to the visceral and triumphant anti-communism of the civil servants, who brandish as an argument the “overpopulation by foreigners”, for lack of a more serious reason, and refuse to renew Karim’s permit.

Epilogue...

Today almost eighty years old, the man who local journalists describe as “the most Lausannois of Afghans” shares with us his memoirs and the sumptuous philosophy of openness that inspired them. This poet-diplomat with the big dark almond eyes finally won his battle to remain in Switzerland after an appeal, and now holds court in the café of the Hôtel de la Paix, a chic establishment in the capital of the canton of Vaud. In all liberty, he affirms his diverse adherences, which never come off as a negation of other people.

And in closing, I would like to cite Amin Maalouf, in the conclusion of his *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong* (Arcade Publishing NY, 2000) : “Each of us should

be encouraged to assume his own diversity, to conceive of his identity as the sum total of his diverse adherences, and not confuse it with one single identity raised to some supreme membership; an instrument of exclusion, and at times an instrument of war. (...) In the same manner, societies themselves should also accept the multiple adherences that have forged their identity throughout history and up to this day.”

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Geneva, the 28th of December 2008.

Au-delà des mers salées... un désir de liberté. Récit.

Fateh Emam. L'Harmattan, Graveurs de mémoire, Paris 2007, 396 p.

www.fateh-emam.com