

Spôjmaï Zariâb : The Man from Kabul



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History turned every Afghan into Tagore's *The Man from Kabul*.

Spôjmaï Zariâb was ten years old when the compulsory veil was abolished in Afghanistan in 1959. The future novelist led a happy life in Kabul, surrounded by books. Then, the Taliban seized power. In 1990, she took refuge in France with her two daughters.

You ask me what exile is...

Years ago, in a quiet corner of Kabul, I read the Persian translation of *The Man from Kabu*, a short story by Rabîndranâth Tagore.

With his magical words, this talented Indian writer made me discover the pain of exile... but it was an economic exile: an Afghan flees misery, leaving his wife and eight-year old daughter behind, and gets lost in the vastness of India in search of work.

His path crosses that of a little girl. She reminds him of his own daughter and he feels great affection

for her. Nostalgia and memories often compel him to visit her, his pockets full of candy and small change.

But exile's meanders and to life's surprises ends up leading him to jail, where he spends 15 years.

Once he regains his freedom, his heart beating and his pockets full of candy and small change, he heads off in the hope of finding the little Hindu girl he once knew. Arriving at her doorstep, he is surprised by the crowd's uproar and the hubbub of the music. Dazzled by spangles and lights, he looks for the girl and is brought before the bride.

Gaping, he ponders over the tyranny of time, and thinks of his own daughter who, in his absence, has



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▶ also become a woman. He thinks of her childhood, stolen from him, and of his fatherhood forever lost.

This short story shattered me, but I was young at the time and did not know what poverty was. I had no concerns other than to accompany Don Quixote in his adventures, share Renée's melancholy, and laugh with Molière, discover the enamoured Madame de Raynal, sit by the lake with Lamartine and by the peaceful Don river with Cholokhov, share the pains of the old Goriot, follow the Count of Monte-Cristo's ploys for revenge, cry with Fantine and Cosette, scrutinize the noble words of Tolstoï, shed tears upon Werther's death... Haunted by Dostoïevski, I would visit his house of the dead, change into an insect with Kafka, and wander behind the walls of his castle, listen to the works of Sartre and hear Hemingway's bell toll, search for things passed with Proust, admire Kazantzakis' Christ re-crucified, and experience hundred years of solitude of Garcia Marquez, all the while forgetting the man from Kabul and his suffering in exile.

I, who was sheltered from misery and who had only known war in books, saw myself also sheltered from exile... until the end of my days.

At the time, I ignored that one day, alas, history's unfair hand would turn every Afghan into the man from Kabul by Tagore. That history's folly would divide an entire nation and disperse the Afghans to all four corners of the world, far from their fathers, mothers, children, sisters and brothers.

Around me, I do not know of a single family that was spared the torment of exile, and that, although without having read Tagore, did not live the story of the man from Kabul and did not feel his pain within.

You ask me what I am thinking of...

What could I be thinking of when I see developing countries, still struggling to free themselves from the claws of misery, fall victim to the devastation of war? What could I be thinking of when I hear poor



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Spôjmaï Zariâb : "Where is the remedy for the insanity we call 'war'?"

people being condemned for knocking on distant doors to save themselves? What could I be thinking of when I see that, throughout the centuries, neither religion, philosophy, literature, art, science or technology have been able to appease the hunger in the World's belly and to find a remedy for the insanity we call 'war'?

Why have they not appeased it...? Why have they not found it...?

This time, I am asking you.

Do you have an answer...?

Spôjmaï Zariâb, Afghan novelist living in Paris