PEN American Center

Lila Azam Zanganeh & Atiq Rahimi: Mother Tongue

"Mother Tongue" was adapted from a conversation that took place at the 2010 PEN World Voices Festival. Atiq Rahimi spoke in French and his words were interpreted by Lilia Pino-Blouin. A longer excerpt appears in PEN America 13: Lovers*.*

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: Atiq, you had written three novels in Persian, and then you switched from Persian to French for your most recent novel, *The Patience Stone*, and it went on to win the Prix Goncourt, France's most prestigious literary prize. The novel is called *The Patience Stone*, which is the name of a stone from—is this an Islamic tradition?

ATIQ RAHIMI: No, it exists only in Afghanistan, Iran, and Tajikistan.

ZANGANEH: And what is the Patience Stone, the Sang-e Saboor?

RAHIMI: It is a legendary and magical stone. You have to put it in front of you, and then you can talk to it and express all of your suffering and your secrets. The stone will listen and absorb all of this. One day it will explode, and on that day you will finally be freed of all of that suffering.

ZANGANEH: And is that day the day of the apocalypse? The female character in the book says it might be. Is that a common thought?

RAHIMI: No, that's just my idea. It's a literary device that I use.

ZANGANEH: At the very beginning of *The Patience Stone* you have an epigraph by the French writer Antonin Artaud: "From the body by the body with the body / Since the body and until the body." This idea of lending a body and a textured voice to an Afghan woman is really at the heart of your literary endeavor here. Let me read one page to give a sense of the work and exactly what that means—because there is nothing more taboo in Afghanistan than talking about a woman in terms of her sex and sexuality.

I lived with your name. I had never seen, or heard, or touched you before that day. I was afraid, afraid of everything, of you, of going to bed, of the blood. But at the same time, it was a fear I enjoyed. You know, the kind of fear that doesn't separate you from your desire, but instead arouses you, gives you wings, even though it may burn. That was the kind of fear I was feeling. And it was growing in me every day, invading my belly, my guts … On the night before you arrived, it came pouring out. It wasn't a blue fear. No. It was a red fear, blood red. When I mentioned it to my aunt, she advised me not to say anything … and so I kept quiet. That suited me fine. Although I was a virgin I was really scared. I kept wondering what would happen if by any chance I didn't bleed that night …" Her hand sweeps through the air as if batting away a fly. "It would have been a catastrophe. I'd heard so many stories about that. I could imagine the whole thing." Her voice becomes mocking. "Passing off impure blood as virginal blood, bit of a brainwave, don't you think?" She lies down right close to the man. "I have never understood why, for you men, pride is so much linked to blood." Her hand sweeps the air again. Her fingers are moving. As if gesturing to an invisible person to come closer. "And remember the night—it was when we were first living together—that you came home late. Dead drunk. You'd been smoking. I had fallen asleep. You pulled down my knickers without saying a word. I woke up. But I pretended to be deeply asleep. You … penetrated me … you had a great time … but when you stood up to go and wash yourself you noticed blood on your dick. You were furious. You came back and beat me, in the middle of the night, just because I hadn't warned you that I was bleeding. I had defiled you!" She laughs, scornful. "I had made you unclean." Her hand snatches memories from the air, closes around them, descends to stroke her belly as it swells and slackens at a pace faster than the man's breathing.

Suddenly, she thrusts her hands downward, beneath her dress, between her legs. Closes her eyes. Takes a deep, ragged breath. Rams her fingers into herself, roughly, as if driving in a blade. Holding her breath, she

pulls out her hand with a stifled cry. Opens her eyes and looks at the tips of her nails. They are wet. Wet with blood. Red with blood. She puts her hand in front of the man's vacant eyes. "Look! That's my blood, too. Clean. What's the difference between menstrual blood and blood that is clean? What's so disgusting about this blood?" Her hand moves down to the man's nostrils. "You were born of this blood! It is cleaner than the blood of your own body!" She pushes her fingers roughly into his beard. As she brushes his lips she feels his breath. A shiver of fear runs across her skin. Her arm shudders. She pulls her hand away, clenches her fist, and, with her mouth against the pillow, cries out again. Just once. The cry is long. Heartrending. She doesn't move for a long time. A very long time. Until the water bearer knocks on the neighbor's door, and the old woman's rasping cough is heard through the walls, and the water bearer empties his skin into the neighbor's tank, and one of her daughters starts crying in the passage. Then, she stands up and leaves the room without daring to look at her man.

So many things are contained in this passage that I'd love to talk about, but first I want to ask about the language. You have said in interviews that it would have been impossible to write this book in Persian. You wrote your first three books in Persian, and you said those books had a kind of self-censorship, because of what could not be said in Persian. What was the first little throb, the first impulse, to change the language of your own writing?

RAHIMI: I must admit that I actually never wanted to write in French. I still feel that way. I feel that I can write a screenplay or an article in French, but as far as literature is concerned, as far as a text that is full of your own emotions, your own feelings—something so personal, so intimate—I think it is important to write in your own language, your own "mother tongue." The language you use when you cry, when you laugh. The language you use to understand the world. But in this specific case, the very first sentence just came out in French. After that first sentence I wanted to change to Persian, but I soon found out I was incapable, so I stopped trying. I started writing in French, and then the words came easily to me—the story itself seemed to guide me. Now that the book is done and published, I have some distance and I can think about what happened—and I realize now that one's mother tongue is not suitable for writing something of this kind. Just think of the term itself: "mother tongue." There is something about it that makes it unsuitable for this subject matter. There is some kind of modesty, some reserve.

ZANGANEH: The book tells the story of a woman whose man—they don't have names—has taken a bullet in the neck and is lying in a coma. She doesn't know if he can hear anything or not, but he has an open mouth and a tube that feeds him water and salt. Because he can't talk *she* begins to talk for the first time, she begins to empty out her heart and tell him about her own pain and what she has endured. Then she becomes more and more bold, in a sense. She talks about everything from the most outrageous secrets of her life to the tiniest thing—that she hasn't been able to kiss him, for instance. "To kiss him in the way that I see in those Indian movies," she says, which is a wonderful line. She says: We've never touched, you've never listened to me. You give voice to this woman and her intimate life—and it is impossible for me to imagine this in Persian. Would it have been possible? The book was translated into Persian and was published in Iran. How would you go about writing this in Persian?

RAHIMI: After the book was published I was asked multiple times to translate it myself into Persian—and I did try, but it just did not work. Then, all of a sudden, I got a call and someone told me it had been published in Iran. And of course many passages had been censored. I must say, in terms of the language, the translation is not very well done. But what I find shocking is that, in spite of the fact that many passages were cut, others I would have expected to be—for example the one that you read—were not. In the passage you read, some words were cut; for "sex," they put in three dots. But they basically revealed what it is because we know what would have been there. I just don't understand the resistance in our countries to talking about these things. When you go back to classical literature—think of Rumi, he named "sex" straight out. There is a book, *Masnavi*, which has a passage that is almost pornographic. It's the story of a merchant that leaves his wife home alone, and he has a parrot that is supposed to tell him if the wife cheats. There are all these temptations; people try to have sex with her. In 1998, I was in Tehran and I found Kundera's book *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, and I wondered, "How could such a book be translated into Persian?" So I bought it and started reading. And it was surreal: all the passages between Tomas and Tereza, where Tereza is his lover, well she was changed into his sister. I thought, "Maybe the young soldier that falls in love with my character will be turned into her brother." That would make it incestuous and perverted.

ZANGANEH: We were talking a few days ago and you said that one of the defining characteristics of our cultural era and our region, is that somewhere along the line the body was canceled out. And literature, the

texture of literature, is an allegory for the body having been canceled out. We have lost that—and as a writer you're trying to bring back the body. How did that happen, do you think?

RAHIMI: I was always shocked by this distance in our culture between the body and the mind. In classical Persian poetry, even in mystical poetry, we find something extraordinary—that, as far as I know, only exists in Persian; I haven't found it in any other language. I'm talking about one specific word, "jaan." You, as an Iranian woman, would know about this. It's a word that is used in Iran and Afghanistan and Tajikistan. It is a word of daily life. It's something that we add to the name: for example, you would be Lilajaan. It would be translated as "my dear Lila." It is a word that describes at the same time the body and the soul. There is no separation in this word. This separation is something that we find in Christian culture, in Judaism, and in Islam, but before that we had this idea. The separation came about with Islam and with the Judeo-Christian tradition; in our language, we say the word "jessm" for body and "rooh" for soul. But these words are not Persian words, we borrowed them from Arabic. So if we go back to mystic poets—I always like going back to Rumi; he uses this word with its full ambiguity. I could mention hundreds of poems by Rumi where he uses this word. And if you interpret "jaan" as "rooh," or soul, then you have a very mystical poem. But if you interpret it as "body," then they become erotic poems.

ZANGANEH: This affair of the body I find quite enlightening, because we tried to establish, in Iran, with the revolution, and in Afghanistan, this abstract universal idea of a sexless society, which was highly regimented and where sex disappeared from the public space. And then, of course, every time sex sprang up its head had to be cut off. Then you arrive: a man who lived in Afghanistan for about a third of his life, and, at the age of forty-five, is now living in France. And you lend a body and a voice, through your work, not only to a woman, but to a literary tradition. At this point we begin to see the political import of your work. The political impetus begins to inhabit your language in a way that gives it a very particular texture. What gave you the first inkling, the first desire, to inhabit, in your writing, the body of a woman?

RAHIMI: You mentioned the poem by Artaud earlier. That really is the program for this book. This book is focused on the body—and I found three dimensions to this body. In the beginning the woman has no body, she is ashamed of her body, and the man, his body, is lying there as a stone. He is on the floor, he doesn't move, he has no desires. Both bodies, of the man and of the woman, are objects of suffering, elements of shame. And this is something in all the main monotheistic religions—the body is always associated with shame, something that should be rejected, something that has an expiration date and will go back to the earth. In the beginning of the novel, this is the form that the body takes. The second stage is when the woman is obliged to become a prostitute. At that point, the body becomes an object of commerce. Something that can be sold, and this is what happens, of course, in many countries. It's no longer brings shame, but rather a trade.

ZANGANEH: There is an interesting moment in the book when the woman needs to lie. She says to someone who invades the house, "I am a prostitute." She says this to save herself because she knows that if she doesn't tell him that she's a prostitute—which is a lie at the time—she will be raped. She says, "Prostitutes are worthless." Because, in fact, in prostitution, in the Islamic context, the woman is not dominated; it is a relationship of exchange. I thought that that was extremely interesting.

RAHIMI: Little by little throughout the book this young woman gets to know a soldier and they fall in love. She becomes his lover—and at that point the body is no longer something to be ashamed of or something to be sold. It is no longer an object. It becomes a subject. She becomes conscious of her body and her soul becomes part of her body. Her soul is nowhere else but in her body. It's like a sheet where one side is the body and one side is the soul, but it is one single thing. We arrive to this beautiful idea where the body and the mind are just one magnificent, symbiotic element; there isn't the cult of the body over the cult of the soul, there isn't a prominence of one over the other, they are just one beautiful thing. In terms of religion, the woman starts seeing herself as a prophet. She develops her own religion which is not a religion of the soul or of the body, but is in fact a religion of the jaan.

ZANGANEH: In the end she says, "I am revealed." It's a moment of ecstasy almost; it's a very mystical moment. It parallels a crescendo in the dramatic tension—she talks about the Sang-E Saboor, the Patience Stone. She imagines the moment the Patience Stone explodes as the apocalypse, and of course apocalypse, in Greek, means revelation. So all of this is leads to a moment of revelation where she says, "I am revealed." It's a very harrowing moment. Before we open this up to the audience, I wonder if you could talk about the end of the book and what it might lead to.

RAHIMI: There are two things. First of all I can't really say what will happen in terms of the reality of our world. I don't think we're close to having found the solution for these things. At a personal level my hope is that humankind can move towards this idea of jaan, just like this woman at the end of the book who is revealed. She finds grace through the body in a way that allows her to also include her soul and vice versa. She fully accomplishes this idea of jaan. I hope that that's where we can all move as societies. It's a matter of beginning this consciousness. I think in the next fifty or one hundred years we will get there, I hope so.