

SIBĀ-ZEYNAB-ZIBĀ: THE METAMORPHOSES OF AN IRANIAN WOMAN

SUMMARY

Zibā Nāvāk's three-volume autobiography provides not only an alternative account of the Islamic Revolution but also offers a fascinating counter-narrative of post-revolutionary prison experience. Once a communist revolutionary, a repentant prisoner (*tavvāb*) and a fanatical supporter of Xomeyni, who eventually became a liberated blogger, Nāvāk makes an attempt to construct a coherent narrative identity of her multiple selves. To achieve it, she resorts to the rhetoric of sincerity, metaphorical figures and the literary patterns of a mystical quest which are dominant in Persian literature and in which an apparent fall might prove an indispensable stage of spiritual progress.

It hardly needs to be said that Iran underwent dramatic political and social changes during the second half of the 20th century. The rapid modernization and westernization of the country resulted in the anti-monarchial and anti-Western revolution that turned the country upside down and led to the creation of the Islamic Republic.¹ The intense ideological ferment which accompanied these political changes constantly undermined the dominant values, which undeniably influenced the question of personal identity and inevitably re-shaped many 'selves'.

Most vulnerable to the changes was undoubtedly the generation who reached adulthood at the outbreak of the revolution and became its main victim. Those 'children of the revolution' who survived it, the war which followed and the oppressions of the 1980s, have been slowly recovering from

¹ Cf. E. Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, New York 2008; N. Keddie, *Roots of Revolution. An Interpretive History of Modern Iran*, Yale University Press, New Haven–London 1981; A. Hussain, *Islamic Iran. Revolution and Counter-Revolution*, Frances Pinter (Publishers), London 1985.

their traumas and trying to retell them.² Post-traumatic testimonies constitute an essential part of the recovery process, an attempt to ‘read oneself in the text’ and make oneself ‘a subject of one’s own understanding’ (de Man, Anderson),³ as well as an effort to renegotiate one’s identity with the world. These take various forms, ranging from what are generally perceived as more fictional novels and short stories⁴ to more intimate memoirs⁵ and autobiographies, a genre which has been rather under-represented in Persian

² Šahrnuš-e Pārsipur writes about the vast number of arrests in 1981 and 1982: ‘We can say that we witnessed a revolt of high school kids (*yek šureš-e dāneš-āmuzi*).’ See: Š. Pārsipur, *Xāterāt-e zendān*, Stockholm: Našr-e Bārān 1996, p. 84.

³ Paul de Man considers all autobiographical acts as futile, however, because ‘all knowledge, including self-knowledge, depends on figurative language or tropes. Autobiographies thus produce fictions or figures in place of the self-knowledge they seek.’ See: L. Anderson, *Autobiography*, 2nd ed., New York, Abingdon: Routledge 2011, p. 12. P. de Man, *Autobiography as De-Facement*, ‘Modern Language Notes’, vol. 94 (December 1979), pp. 921–922. See also: Idem, *Autobiography as De-Facement*, [in:] *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, New York: Columbia University Press 1984, pp. 70–72. As Linda Anderson summarises de Man’s views on self-writing: ‘The author reads himself in the text, but what he is seeing in this self-reflexive or specular moment is a figure or a face called into being by the substitutive trope of *prosopopoeia*, literally, the giving of a face, or personification.’ De Man claims: ‘Prosopoeia is the trope of autobiography (...). Our topic [i.e. autobiography] deals with giving and taking away of faces, with face and deface, *figure*, figuration and disfiguration.’ P. de Man, *Autobiography as De-Facement*, ‘Modern Language Notes’, vol. 94 (December 1979), p. 926. The giving of a face, *prosopopoeia*, can also refer to the disfigurement or defacement of the autobiographical subject through tropes.

⁴ Among the short stories and novels concerning traumatic experiences in the post-revolutionary period, the following can be mentioned: Hušang-e Golširi’s, *Šāh-e siyāhpušan*, Hoseyn-e Sanāpur’s *Virān miyāyi*; a collection of short stories by Ali Erfān: *Les Damnées du paradis: et autre nouvelles* and *Selāh-e sard*, Nasim-e Xāksār’s *Morā’yi kāfer ast*, Atā’ allāh-e Mohājērāni’s *Behešt-e xākestari*, et al. See also: Mohammad Mehdi Khorrami, *Who Writes Iran? Prison Literature in the Islamic Republic: ‘Les Damnées du paradis’*, [in:] *Critical Encounters. Essays on Persian Literature and Culture in Honor of Peter J. Chelkowski*, M.M. Khorrami, M.R. Ghanoonparvar (eds.), Costa Mesa, California: Mazda Publishers, Inc. 2007, pp. 106–144.

⁵ The proliferation of such memoirs recounting prison experiences (*xāterāt-e zendān*, *zendān-negāri*, *zendān-nevisi*) in the Islamic Republic, published mostly in exile and illegally circulated in Iran, is of particular interest. Among these are a considerable number of *xāterāt-e zendān* written by women, of which the following are a few examples: Šahrnuš-e Pārsipur’s *Xāterāt-e zendān* and its English translation, *Kissing the Sword: A Prison Memoir*; Parvāne-ye Alizāde’s *Xub negāh konid, rāstegi ast* (*gozāreš-e zendān*), Nušābe-ye Amiri’s, *Az ešq va az omid*, Sudābe-ye Ardavān’s *Yādnegāre-hā-ye zendān*, Āzar-e Āryānpur’s memoirs about the imprisonment of her husband, *Pošt-e divār-hā-ye boland* (*az kāk tā zendān*) and its English version, *Behind the Tall Walls. From Palace to Prison*, F. Āzād’s *Yād-hā-ye zendān*. *Xāterāti az zendān-hā-ye zanān-e Jomhuri-ye Eslāmi-ye Irān*, Katāyun-e Āzarli’s *Maslub* (*Xāterāt-e zendān*), Marina Nemat’s *Prisoner of Tehran: a memoir*. For a more extended list, see: <http://sites.utoronto.ca/prisonmemoirs/farsibooks.htm>; H. Bahār, *Ketābšenāsi-ye zendānhā-ye Jomhuri-ye Eslāmi* (a comprehensive but not a complete list of 68 books, mostly memoirs, in chronological order which were, in the main, published abroad or are in illegal circulation in Iran): <http://www.bidaran.net/spip.php?article148>.

literature so far and is commonly rejected as being inappropriate in a culture which strictly divides the world into public and private spheres (*biruni* and *andaruni*). This conservative attitude towards self-narration in Persian culture particularly applies to women, who, traditionally, were expected to practice self-concealment, hiding themselves behind veils, being proud of their inaccessibility and remembering that ‘self-representation may turn into self-destruction.’⁶ Therefore, those who dare to ‘unveil their voice’ are mainly women who have a sense of marginality or not belonging, or are living in exile, the so-called ‘outcasts.’⁷

One such outcast is Sibā Noubari, alias Zeynab, alias Zibā Nāvak, a middle-class Iranian woman who in 1978 was 18 years of age. About thirty years later, as Zibā Nāvak, living in exile in Germany, she wrote her memoirs in Persian. They were partly published in a printed version and also on the internet in 2007.⁸ Her life story is divided into three parts, a fact that is signified by the different names and strikingly different photographs of the author on the first page of each volume, thus reflecting the transformations of Zibā’s identity: ‘Sibā. Childhood, adolescence and pre-incarceration period’ (118 pages: *Sibā. Dourān-e kudaki, nou-javāni va qabl az zendān*); ‘Sibā-Zeynab. Time in prison’ (170 pages: *Sibā-Zeynab. Dourān-e zendān*); ‘Zeynab. Time after prison’ (331 pages: *Zeynab. Dourān-e ba’d az zendān* 2007) (619 pages in total).

A prominent Iranian writer, Šahrnuš-e Pārsipur claims that the shattered personality (*šaxsiyyat-e teke teke šode*) of Zibā Nāvak can shed some light on the social psychology of Iranians as a nation and thus deserves serious and thorough analysis.⁹ Though her life can serve as a model for disintegrated identity, Zibā conveys a coherent story of her marginal experiences within the framework of personal evolution, which leads to a final reconciliation of the dialectic modes of her self (Sibā and Zeynab) in the name of Zibā. Through a performative act of life-writing, the fragmented personality of Sibā-Zeynab-Zibā is bound together within the process of narrativisation,

⁶ F. Milani, *Veiled Voices: Women’s Autobiographies in Iran*, [in:] *Women’s Autobiographies in Contemporary Iran*, Afsaneh Najmabadi (ed.), Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press 1990, p. 4, pp. 6–7.

⁷ F. Milani, *Veils and Words. The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers*, Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press 1992, p. XIV (Preface).

⁸ Z. Nāvak, *Sibā. Dourān-e kudaki, nou-javāni va qabl az zendān*, Germany, s.l.: Našr-e Nimā 2007; Z. Nāvak, *Sibā-Zeynab. Dourān-e zendān*, Germany, s.l.: Našr-e Nimā, 2007. *Zeynab. Dourān-e ba’d az zendān*, <http://zibanawak.files.wordpress.com/2009/10/zinab.pdf> (accessed on 20.12.2009).

⁹ Š. Pārsipur, *Zibā Nāvak – baxš-e avval*, 20th March 2009, http://zamāneh.com/par-sipur/2009/03/post_238.html.

fictionalization and textualisation,¹⁰ in order to build a convincing ‘narrative identity’¹¹ of the subject.

We follow Zibā’s life from early adolescence, observing how it became inseparably intertwined with political events but also subsequently marked by the ‘rites of passage’ intrinsic to at least part of her generation, such as school, the university entrance exam (*konkur*), the revolution, imprisonment, release, marriage and exile (narrativisation).

As a teenage girl, Sibā was in love with the shah (a *šāh-parast*, as she called herself). She joined the parades for the official celebration of Mohammad Rezā Pahlavi’s birthday and wished to marry his son. Shortly afterwards, she learnt from her school friend about Mosaddeq and the political prisoners. When she reported this at home, her mother and grandmother looked through the window petrified with fear, making sure ‘a white car was not standing by their house.’ She was frightened by the vision of torture and banned to even mention the name of the former Iranian prime minister (I 61).

Soon after, however, that is in 1977, open opposition to the shah broke out¹² and the seventeen year-old Sibā could no longer restrain herself from becoming involved in politics (*siyāsi šod*). She recalls that she was enchanted by the revolutionary atmosphere and the rebellious students to such an extent that ‘even the smell of alcohol from their mouths was perceived as the smell of mouthwash used in oral hygiene (*rāyehe-ye behdāšti*)’ (I 61). ‘As always, I was extremist (*efrāti*) in this case, too’, she admits many years later (I 61–62) (fictionalisation of the self).

With a teenage girl’s enthusiasm, she decided to fight the shah’s regime within the ranks of the Mojāhedin. As a result, she became very pious, studied

¹⁰ According to Marie-Françoise Chanfrault-Duchet, both autobiography and life-stories are the product of: 1. A process of narrativisation: events and facts are organised into a dynamic, based on a chronological and causal scheme. 2. A process of fictionalisation: beyond the weight of the referential, of the factual, the subject is presented, in the narrative, as a coherent character within a significant, and thus reconstructed, world. 3. A process of textualisation: the autobiographical discourse tends to constitute itself as a closed meaning system, i.e. as a text *per se*. See: M.-F. Chanfrault-Duchet, *Textualisation of the self and gender identity in the life-story*, [in:] *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods*, T. Cosslett, C. Lury, P. Summerfield (eds.), New York: Routledge 2000, p. 63.

¹¹ See: P. Ricoeur, *Temps et récit III: le temps raconté*, Paris: Seuil 1985, p. 355. M.-F. Chanfrault-Duchet paraphrases Ricoeur’s definition as follows: ‘a form able to express the transformations of the identity as experienced through a lifetime.’ See: M.-F. Chanfrault-Duchet, *Textualisation of the self and gender identity in the life-story*, [in:] *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods*, T. Cosslett, C. Lury, P. Summerfield (eds.), New York: Routledge 2000, p. 62.

¹² See, e.g.: N. Keddie, *Roots of Revolution. An Interpretive History of Modern Iran*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1981, pp. 231–235 *et al.*

writings and transcripts of the lectures of Ali Šari'ati (*Fāteme, Fāteme ast* and *Mas'uliyat-e šī'e budan*) and prayed for hours, much to the astonishment of her relatives (I 62–63). However, entry to adulthood was not only the ideal time to be exposed to radical ideologies but also, more conventionally, the time for an Iranian girl to marry. Sibā, however, rejected her suitors, saying that she wanted to be a fighter instead of a housewife. Once a certain engineer informed her that as a mother she could continue the struggle if she brought up her children to be little Lenins. Though devoutly religious, she replied that she could become Lenin herself and not wait many years to imbue her children with revolutionary duty (I 64).

Nonetheless, shortly afterwards, during lessons on Darwin's theory of evolution, the pillars of her faith were shaken and Sibā began studying dialectical materialism and the manifesto of the Communist Party.¹³ A turning point in her beliefs took place during the nationwide university entrance exam (*konkur*) in which she hoped to attain the necessary grades in order to study medicine. She was caught in a moral dilemma whether to write 'in the name of God' (*be nām-e Xodā*) at the top of the examination paper but eventually decided against this habitual act in order to act in accordance with her conscience as an atheist (I 73). Relating this apparently trivial event is in fact a fundamental part of her narrative stratagem of being honest with herself and the reader.¹⁴ To reinforce the rhetoric of trustworthiness, Zibā recalls that a little earlier, in her secondary school, she had written a eulogy glorifying the shah in the hopes of receiving a good grade, which she did not, and therefore was taught a lesson, namely to always tell the truth and never try to flatter someone (I 74).

The beginning of her medical course coincided with a crucial stage in the revolution. As a student at the Mashhad University of Medical Sciences,

¹³ Shifting ideologies and, as a consequence, different appearances and outlooks were quite common for girls of her generation who were extremely vulnerable to any form of political agitation. To illustrate this phenomenon Zibā makes a casual remark about one of her friends, a girl called Nāzanin (Nāzanin Šeyxo-l-eslāmi) who became a follower of Mojāheddin-e Xalq, though earlier, as opposed to Sibā, had not been religious and had not worn a *hejāb*. Later, when they met in prison, Nāzanin was a pious girl while Sibā was an atheist and, on their release, they once again 'became different people' (I 72).

¹⁴ Sincerity (*sedāqat*), though hardly mentioned *expressis verbis* in the metatextual framework (which could in fact lessen the effect of authenticity), is the dominant figure in Zibā's self-writing and, as such, a means of textualisation of her 'narrative self' within the Persian connotation system. The rhetoric of *sedāqat*, based on the dialectics of truth and sincerity (*rāsti, sedāqat*) versus lies and hypocrisy (*doruq, riyā, tazvir*) is deeply embedded in Iranian traditions, from mythology and the Zoroastrian religion (Av. *aša-* vs *drug-*), to Persian sufism, particularly the *malāmati* tradition, and, last but not least, the classical *rendi* poetry of Hāfez.

Sibā participated in left-wing activities and ideological discussions, delivered leaflets and enjoyed a short-lived period of freedom.

After the success of the revolution in February 1979, she continued her political activities as a partisan of Fedāyi-ye Xalq, promoting Marxist-Leninist ideology (84). Shortly afterwards, however, following discussions with a friend who was subsequently killed in a demonstration, her views became more moderate and she joined the so-called ‘Line Three’ (Xatt-e Se). This group postulated developing the class-consciousness of the proletariat first, and then mobilizing the masses to fight (90).

Zibā recalls the ideological pluralism dominant in the early days of the Islamic Republic:¹⁵

[As far as political views are concerned], my family perfectly reflected the ideological divisions which existed within society after the revolution. My father was a liberal and an adherent of Bani Sadr, my mother was a supporter of Xomeyni, my elder brother, Mohammad, and [my sister] Simā were partisans of Fedā’iyān-e Xalq,¹⁶ and later joined ‘the minority’, I was a follower of Xatt-e 3, but later joined Sahand, my younger brother, Mas’ud was a *hezbollahi*, but later a follower of Peymān, and my two other sisters: Soheylā and Nāzilā did not follow any particular group (I 90).¹⁷

¹⁵ As Keddie notes: ‘Intolerance by some leaders of ideas labeled ‘un-Islamic’ or ‘counter-revolutionary’ has narrowed the range of permissible discourse, even though this, as of 1980, remains broader than it was under the Pahlavis. Voices of the secularist left, including the Tudeh and the Fedā’iyān-e Xalq as well as the smallest leftist groups, of the left-Islamic Mojahedin-e Xalq, and of liberal secularists may still be heard, and to a degree published, in Iran today, and there are signs of widespread hostility toward the mollas and their policies. It may be that the dominance of thought couched in Islamic terms is not as durable a phenomenon as it now appears, and that Iran’s long tradition of religious dissidence and skepticism, rationalist philosophy, and even secularism and anticlericalism will once again come to the fore. Whichever tradition is dominant in the foreseeable future, it is to be hoped that Iranians have learned that the ‘two cultures’ split, which separates the religious from the secular and the masses from the elite, does not benefit Iran, and that each of the two culture groups may strive to understand, learn from, and see the needs and contributions of the other.’ See: N. Keddie, op. cit., p. 230.

¹⁶ The Organization of the Iranian People’s Fedā’iyān (Majority) or Fedā’iyān-e Xalq- called ‘the majority’ vs. the Iranian People’s Fedāyi Guerrillas (Ārik-hā-ye Fedāyi-ye Xalq-e Irān), called ‘the minority’. See: N. Keddie, op. cit., p. 181. The Fedā’iyān were largely from modern, middle-class backgrounds and included more women than the Mojāhedīn, who drew their followers from the arts and social-science faculties and included a number of industrial workers. Ibidem, p. 238.

¹⁷ Cf. The testimony of Šokufe-ye Saxi: ‘I come from an extended family that included a political spectrum from pro-Shah (the monarchy ruling Iran prior to the 1979 revolution) to pro-Khomeini and the Islamic Republic, to Marxist-Leninist. And we were no exception to the rule. Many families had lost one member defending the establishment and lost another for being against it.’ Shokoufeh Sakhi, *The Iran Tribunal: A Justice-in-making*, p. 6. (Paper presented at: *Truth and Justice: Problematising truth commissions and transitional justice: Guatemala, Kenya and Iran*, OISE, University of Toronto, Nov. 29th, 2012. See: https://www.academia.edu/3602794/Iran_Tribunal_A_Justice-in-making).

Despite her disillusionment with leftist intellectuals, the hypocrisy of whom she vividly describes (I 79, 94–96) (and who in the connotation system of her story-telling correspond to the figure of the classical preacher, *vā'ez*),¹⁸ Sibā pursued her communist path and in the autumn of 1980, after returning to Tehran, she joined a small underground Marxist-Leninist group, Sahand (I 98).¹⁹ She soon became one of its leaders, in charge of 25 people. They carefully studied the writings of Marx (*Class struggle*) and Lenin (*What is to be done*),²⁰ distributed leaflets with slogans such as 'Down with Xomeyni!', organized debates and discussions, edited propaganda journals such as 'Towards socialism' (*Be su-ye sosyālism*) and 'Against Unemployment' (*Aleyh-e bikāri*) and stirred up animosity towards both the Islamic Republic and the 'bourgeoisie' (I 102–103, 106). Although the organization was clandestine and its members, operating under pseudonyms, had to respect strict security requirements, this did not deter the young Sibā from making friends and, inevitably, breaking the hearts of her comrades. The account of her ideological evolution is interspersed with memories of her collaborators, who usually fell in love with her (fictionalisation and textualisation referring to the classical figure of *del-robā*). However, instead of explicitly boasting of her amorous conquests,²¹ Zibā recalls her platonic lovers with sentiment, as the majority of them were later executed.

¹⁸ About the ambivalent attitude of the Iranian left towards women's issues, see: H. Shahidian, *The Iranian Left and the 'Women Question' in the Revolution of 1978–79*, 'International Journal of Middle East Studies', vol. 26, no. 2 (May 1994), pp. 223–247.

¹⁹ Sahand was a faction within the minor leftist organization Peykar (Peykār). 'The Peykar Organization for the Liberation of the Working Class was founded by a number of dissident members of the Mojahedin Khalq Organization, which had converted to Marxism-Leninism. Peykar was also joined by a number of other political organizations, known as the Khatt-e Se [Xatt-e Se, Third line]. The founding tenets of Peykar included the rejection of a guerrilla struggle and a strong stand against the pro-Soviet policies of the Iranian Tudeh Party. Peykar viewed the Soviet Union as a 'Social imperialist' state, believed that China had deviated from Marxist-Leninist principles, and radically opposed all factions of the Islamic regime of Iran. The brutal repression of dissidents by the Iranian government and splits within Peykar in 1981 and 1982 effectively dismantled the organization and scattered its supporters. By the mid-1980s, Peykar was no longer in existence.' See: Ch. Chafiq, *Repentance: a Strategy for Making an Islamist Man*, [in:] *Human rights violations in Iran: Causes and Modalities*, transl. F. Abigail/ABF, Human Rights and Democracy for Iran. A Project of Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation, January 1, 2002, <http://www.iranrights.org/library/document/481/repentance-a-strategy-for-making-an-islamist-man>

²⁰ Zibā recalls that together their group read *What is to be done* about 15–16 times and they discussed each and every word. 'Those gatherings were so sweet that I did not feel the flow of time and difficult conditions' (I 100).

²¹ Cf. A classical variant of the figure of *faxr* (boasting) which can be attested, for example, in the so-called 'autobiographical qasida' of 'the Father of Persian verse', Rudaki (c. 880–941).

Finally, she married one of her comrades and subordinates, Ali, who was a 23 year-old student at Tehran Polytechnic (*Dānešgāh-e San'ati-ye Tehrān*). Almost 30 years later, she confesses that he was the love of her life, though during her 'communist time' she was a very serious and disciplined person and did not indulge in feelings and emotions (II 2–3).

'I reveal all my feelings now, when I am 47' (II 107) announces Zibā and writes honestly about her unsuccessful married life and her emotional immaturity at the age of 21: 'I was emotionally like a 7–8-year old girl. (...) During sexual intercourse I could have read a book or (could have) written an article' (II 112).

She had no time, however, to work on improving her intimate relationship with her spouse, Ali, because two months later another turning point took place in her life. In July 1981, the Islamic Republic's suppression of the opposition and the vast number of arrests intensified.²² A few months later 21-year old Sibā was caught and detained in Tehran's notorious Evin prison.

Zibā describes her capture in detail²³ and admits that she 'stepped down from the high clouds to the earth' (II 10). Suddenly everything had a different meaning. She confesses years later, 'You preached sacrifice and resistance, but you see how much you love yourself and that you are not ready to withstand even one lash from a whip. You claimed that a human being should be brave and sincere but all these sermons are worth nothing. You don't know who you are [until you are tried]' (II 10).

In the case of Sibā, the prison ordeal led to a radical transformation. In one of her proleptic digressions, Zibā summarizes her almost five-year experience of incarceration as follows: 'During this process, with a recognition of myself, my husband, my comrades, the [Sahand] organization, my inmates, and things in general, I will revise my previous deeds and views and become a totally different person than before' (II 10).

As a political detainee, she underwent various forms of dehumanization, both physical and psychological. She was blindfolded, kept in confined spaces, beaten by her interrogators and betrayed by her own husband who was captured

²² After the Mojāhedīn's failed attempt to overthrow the regime in June 1981, the so-called 'Reign of Terror' began which lasted till July 1988. See more: E. Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions: Prisons and Public Recantations in Modern Iran*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press 1999, pp. 130–138. Cf. also the estimates of the average age among her fellow prisoners in August 1981 and 1982.

²³ Zibā's description of the capture confirms the theory of 'augmented narrative detail' in accounts of traumatic events and the dissociative alternations in consciousness (time slowing down, a general sense of unreality). Cf.: J. Pederson, *Speak, Trauma: Toward a Revised Understanding of Literary Trauma Theory*, 'Narrative', Vol. 22, No. 3 (October 2014), p. 339; R. McNally, *Remembering Trauma*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2003, pp. 48–61, 182.

some months later.²⁴ Nonetheless, her prison testimony is not intended to present herself as being heroic. Zibā admits that she was ‘somewhere in-between’ (*beynābeyni*) the brave and steadfast and the cowards, who gained notoriety for having revealed and betrayed everything before even reaching the gate of Evin prison (II 11). Though she used to admire the former, her views upon heroism evolved later on: ‘Some call them [i.e. the steadfast] strong and powerful people. I also used to admire them but today my views upon fighting, resistance and being a hero have changed and I do not feel justified in evaluating or judging [the others]’ (II 10).²⁵

Likewise, she does not bear any grudge against her spouse and writes about the physical torment she endured without any hint of complaint or bitterness. She admits: ‘It is interesting that when I write about the physical torture I suffered, I do not feel pain or revenge (...). Maybe they have faded away in the face of other pain’ (II 20).

By ‘other pain’ Zibā probably means the boycott by the inmates, particularly in Qezel Hesār prison in Karaj, where she was moved to serve a 12-year sentence (II 60).²⁶ She describes the informal divisions between political prisoners as follows:

[Everybody in prison] (...) with the passage of time received a nickname: steadfast (*sar-(e) mouze*), resistant (*moqāvem*), renegade (*boride*), repentant (*tavvāb*), traitor (*xā’en*), etc. Unfortunately, in our society, the culture of labeling others and stigmatizing them is very common, especially within prison life where the behavior of individuals takes more extreme forms (II 57). (...) in this oppressive system in which the political groups reinforce their stereotypes, those with the smallest objections or a slightly different point of view [who thus commit the sin of the unfit] are rejected and banished (II 57).

Though rejected by her former comrades, Sibā was determined to remain faithful to her ideals till the end: ‘I considered myself a Bolshevik and knew

²⁴ Zibā recalls that during her interrogation, when she was blindfolded, her husband, Ali, was called and reported her conspiratorial activities in minute detail. His relationship with their persecutors seemed friendly and he appeared to bear no mark of torture, which she could tell by the way he walked (no trace of the popular torture known as *bastinado*, *falak*). At first, Sibā was shocked but then she learnt that Ali’s only desire in prison was to see his wife and tell her how he missed her (II 36–37). Their persecutors had promised him that if he disclosed all he knew about the organization, they would release his wife and himself (II 43). After the betrayal of all his comrades, however, Ali was executed (II 50).

²⁵ This implicit appeal addresses the readers who should not judge her either, before listening to her story.

²⁶ Zibā relates that she was ostracized by her inmates and former comrades, because she had refused to openly call her husband a ‘traitor.’

that, even if I was completely alone, I should continue the struggle until my last breath. At that time, as now, I was a radical (*efrāti*) and “extreme” person’ (fictionalisation, II 67).

Therefore, as an insubordinate prisoner, who refused to attend mandatory prayers, she was transferred, together with other stubborn communists, to a variation on solitary confinement called ‘boxes’ or ‘coffins’ (*tābut-hā*)²⁷ (II 95), where prisoners were subjected to highly intrusive indoctrination. ‘Chained with invisible chains’ and ‘not permitted to show any sign of life’ (II 96), they had to listen all day long to political and religious propaganda: long prayers, readings from the Koran, Shi’i elegies (*rouze-xāni*), Ašura mourning rituals (*sine-zani*), (...) (II 96) as well as interviews with broken heroes, recantations of former leaders and friends who, in public self-criticisms, denounced their communist past (II 97).²⁸

The purpose of the so-called ‘boxes’ was to ‘turn prisoners into *zombies* by destroying their senses of self and dignity’, as one of Sibā’s fellow-inmates, who remained steadfast, reported years later.²⁹ Zibā confirms that she

²⁷ They were also called *qiyāmat* (lit. Resurrection), *qabr* (grave), *ja’be* (box), *qafas* (cage), *qarantine* (quarantine), *dastgāh* (device) or *taxt* (bed). This invention of the warden of Qezel Hesār prison, Hāj Dāvud-e Rahmāni, was introduced to Qezel Hesār in 1983 and used till 1984. Zibā does not give the exact time of her transfer to this form of solitary confinement and there are differences in the testimonies concerning the precise time this penitentiary experiment was conducted. One of the former *tābut* detainees, Šokufe-ye Saxi’s, claims that she was moved there in April 1983, whereas another, the anonymous ‘Nesrin’ claims that ‘boxes’ were installed in September–October 1983 (the month of *mehr* 1362 h.š.) and were used till July–August 1984 (the month of *tir* 1363 h.š.). The ‘boxes’ were about 2 meters long and 80 cm wide and consisted of three sheets of plywood which restricted the captive on three sides. Zibā recalls that at 7.00 am the blindfolded detainees had to stand up, before sitting all day in their ‘box’ and then at 9.00 pm they were allowed to lie down and sleep (II 96). For further details, see: e.g. Nesrin (pseud.), *Tābut-hā; šekanje’i farātar az selul-e enferādi*, Rādyo Fardā, *Barnāme-hā-ye viže/Mostanad-e rādyoyi-ye Enferādi*, 19.09.2012 (29.07.1391), <http://www.radiofarda.com/content/b18-commentary-on-solitary-comfienment/24745859.html>; *Interview with Shokoufeh Sakhi about the Iran Tribunal Proceedings*, ‘Committee of Human Rights Reporters,’ 29.11.2012, <http://chrr.biz/spip.php?article19499>; *Human Rights Violator: Davoud Rahmani*, ‘Justice for Iran,’ <http://justice4iran.org/english/human-rights-violator-s-profiles/10028/>; F. Sābeti, *Bāz-nevisi-ye yek jenāyat: taxthā (Rewriting a crime: The Beds – Takhtha)*, Prison Dialogues website, <http://www.dialogt.net>.

²⁸ Ervand Abrahamian writes about a public *e’terāf*: ‘a term that means, significantly, not only confession but also political and ideological recantation. Some modern states – especially in Latin America – have used torture for information, intimidation, and self-incrimination. But Iran uses it predominantly to obtain these ideological recantations.’ See: E. Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions: Prisons and Public Recantations in Modern Iran*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1999, p. 4, <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft3s2005jq>.

²⁹ Šokufe-ye Saxi (Shokoufeh Sakhi) who endured eight and a half months in such ‘coffin’ confinement, testified during the Iran Tribunal proceedings in The Hague in October 2012. See: *Closing Submissions of Professor Sir Geoffrey Nice, QC, Prosecutor of the Iran Tribunal*,

was ‘buried alive’ (*zende be gur*) (II 97), but later she describes this time of sensory deprivation and intensive brainwashing in terms of an opportunity for retrospection, which ultimately led to illumination and conversion. In a positive re-affirmation of a traumatic experience, she has no hesitation in comparing her isolation in the ‘coffin’ to the Buddha meditating [under the Mahabodhi tree] and the Prophet Mohammad in the cave of Herā (ar. Hira) where He received His first revelation (II 99). She admits, nonetheless, that she reached a state of higher consciousness involuntarily, thanks to her persecutors.

While observing the worlds inside me, I witnessed the truth, which was a return to myself and a reconciliation with the depth of my human self, and a close relationship with the Absolute Reality. I was not a great mystic, a prophet or an excellent scholar who was able to reach this Truth consciously and voluntarily. I was an insubordinate prisoner condemned to such a fate by a whim of history and put in the hands of my enemies but (...) [paradoxically due to my enemies] I could feel the happiness in the core of my unhappiness (II, 99–100).

Zibā confesses that, just after her conversion, she experienced the ten most delightful and beautiful days in her existence so far, which she wished could have lasted for the rest of her life and which, in fact, were later diagnosed by doctors as both the beginning and the climax of her mania (II 122).

As a result, after four months of confinement in the so-called ‘coffin’, Sibā underwent a radical transformation, changed her name to Zeynab (II 122) and became a *tavvāb*, ‘a repentant one’, a detainee who denied her ‘counter-revolutionary’ past, affirmed the Islamic Republic and cooperated with the prison authorities.³⁰ Moreover, she entered into emotional relationships with her

The Peace Palace, The Hague, 27 October 2012, <http://www.irantribunal.com/index.php/en/sessions/court/359-sir-geoffrey-nice-closing-submission>

³⁰ Pārsipur witnessed Sibā’s public recantation (*e’terāfljarayān-e eḡṣāgarī/mosāhebe*) in Qezel Hesār prison. See: Š. Pārsipur, *Zibā Nāvak – baxš-e avval*, 20 March 2009, http://zamāneh.com/parsipur/2009/03/post_238.html. In her *Xāterāt-e zendān* it is thought she is mentioned under the fictitious name of Āzītā. To Pārsipur, Āzītā’s testimony seemed absolutely sincere and, as she recalls, created great controversy among the leftist inmates. It was also in the context of Āzītā’s public confession that the author of *Memoirs of Prisons* heard for the first time of the ‘coffin’ confinement (mentioned as a ‘device’, *dastgāh*) in which the repentant had undergone her transformation. The writer was curious as to what had happened to Āzītā after her conversion: ‘Some months later I asked the inmates about Āzītā. After the confession, she had become the supervisor of one of the wards (*band*) but then she disappeared. One of the inmates told me that due to a mental breakdown, she was moved from Evin. The detainees living upstairs had seen her spinning in the exercise yard (*havā-xori*). Some years after my release, I asked a few people about her fate but they had no idea. Finally, somebody told me that she had gone mad. Her insanity had manifested itself in the following way; at times she called herself Āzītā and at other times she transformed herself totally into Fāteme [a fictitious name given by Pārsipur as a counterpart to the Muslim name taken by Āzītā]. She became lost between two personalities

oppressors, with Hāj Āqā Dāvud-e Rahmāni, the head of Qezel Hesār prison, being among them (II 76–77, II 110).³¹

The metamorphosis of a stubborn communist into a devoted Muslim was undoubtedly the most dramatic turn in Zibā's life and to address this trauma she resorts to symbolic language, illustrating the phenomenon of *enantiodromia*³² or her radical transformation using the metaphor of a spring mechanism (*fanar*): '(...) we resembled the spring (*fanar*): when you stretch it to its extremes and then release it, it goes to the opposite extremes in order to eventually regain its balance. (...) Many of us in that unconscious state (...) were drawn to the opposite position' (...) (II 98).

Retrospectively, she contextualizes her new identity within the framework of the theory of 'substantial motion', advanced by the 17th century Iranian philosopher and Shi'i theologian, Mollā Sadrā (c. 1572–1640):

Mollā Sadrā was right to say that: 'A man is the essence of creation and all the elements of being as well as the process of evolution, and transformation among the creatures can be witnessed in him.'³³ I myself have also without doubt proven the process of transformation (*prose-ye degardisi*) in human beings as in amphibians and reptiles. All which took place in prison helped me to emerge more quickly from the chrysalis of dogma and rigidity, and become myself (II 84).

When addressing allegations that she has mistaken the process of becoming herself with falling into another ideological trap, she eventually refutes these

and was beyond 'the circle of rational people' (*houze-ye afrād-e āqel*). Š. Pārsipur, *Xāterāt-e zendān*, op. cit., pp. 288–291.

³¹ Hāj Dāvud-e Rahmāni (1945–) was an illiterate former blacksmith from the Tehran bazaar and warden of Qezel Hesār prison from the summer of 1981 till July 1984. He gained infamy as the inventor of 'coffin' confinement and was notorious for his brutality against women. Before the revolution he had served a sentence in Qezel Hesār when he worked as a cook. After his dismissal in 1984, he returned to his previous profession in the bazaar. Cf. E. Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions: Prisons and Public Recantations in Modern Iran*, p. 136; *Human Rights Violator: Davoud Rahmani*, 'Justice for Iran', <http://justice4iran.org/english/human-rights-violator-s-profiles/10028/>. Zibā recalls that after her release, she made an effort to find her former persecutor in the bazaar. She does not remember exactly whether she took him flowers or cookies but told him that she had forgiven him, and even liked him, and that 'a human being, [no matter how many sins he has committed], can always start his life from the beginning' (II 130–131).

³² *Enantiodromia* – (gr. literally 'running in opposite directions') the tendency of things to change into their opposites, especially as a supposed governing principle of natural cycles and of psychological development. See: *New Oxford American Dictionary* (3rd ed.), A. Stevenson, Ch.A. Lindberg (eds.), Oxford University Press 2011. Database: *Oxford Reference*, Current online version: 2013. Also Jungian usage in relation to consciousness: the superabundance of any force that inevitably produces its opposite.

³³ No reference to the exact source of the quotation.

by asserting that her Muslim identity was an indispensable, though transitive, phase from the perspective of personal growth and becoming her real self:

I agree with you to some extent, but you should take into consideration all the phenomena in the process of evolution, which are part of a progression rather than independent entities. When you look at this process of transformation, you can witness in the abandoning of one system and even in falling for a period into the trap of another, the gradual approach to the real self. An evolution does not resemble a horse on a treadmill (...). I can see in this process of changes (*prose-ye taqyir o tahavvolāt*), a progress (*takāmol*), and a casting off, a shedding of the skin, a moving towards the sublimation of a human being (*ta'ālā-ye ensān*) (II 84).

As a zealous Muslim woman (fictionalisation), Zeynab was released from prison in 1986, determined to fulfill all her commitments regarding repentance, study theology and marry a war veteran. Alienated in a society, which she perceived as indecently westernized, she behaved as a revolutionary guard, *pāsdār*, constantly reproaching others and instructing them on how they should live (III 2).

Zeynab treated her life as a trial from God (*emtehān-e Elāhi*, III 50 et al.), and in order to fulfill what she then understood as God's will, she married a *hezbollahi* man, Jamāl, who had a wife and two young children (III 49). She did this contrary to her family's wishes and her own feelings, convinced that God wanted her to undergo such an ordeal, as once He had wanted a sacrifice from Abraham (III 52) (textualisation).

In her defence, Zibā addresses her accusers, who consider themselves to be Muslims, and justifies her irrational behavior, which was commonly perceived as being scandalous (*xelāf-e orf*):

You and your friends, even my friends and relatives, all, strictly speaking, can view me as wicked (*badkāre*), whimsical (*havas-bāz*), a prostitute (*fāheše*), a whore (*jende*), a criminal (*jāni*) and, if they are very gracious, a victim (*qorbāni*), perhaps one who was deceived (*farib-xorde*), but even if you do not agree with me, I ask you to listen to what I have to say, and that will be a big step forward for us. I converted to a religion, which fortunately or unfortunately, justifies having several wives and a temporary marriage (*siqe*). I also, as do many people in this society, felt negative emotions towards such matters but faced with such a dilemma I had to choose between my feelings and my faith, myself and God, and I chose God. (...) The same God who is worshipped each and every day by myself and by you (III 190).³⁴

³⁴ Pārsipur offers an alternative, psychoanalytical explanation of Zeynab's marriage to Jamāl, namely Sibā-the communist, who remained hidden in the depths of Zeynab's existence, wanted to retaliate for the oppression she had suffered at the hands of the Islamic Republic and thus

Despite Zeynab's apparent efforts to 'fulfill God's will', her misalliance with Jamāl was doomed, a fact which was exacerbated by the long-lasting exclusion from her family and the ostracism she experienced from her former inmates, who had not forgiven her act of repentance (III 51, 148). She also experienced blatant hypocrisy from some of the theologians she had so been eager to follow (III 41–43). The spring mechanism thus was regaining its balance and a more sublimated identity was slowly developing within the chrysalis of Zeynab.

Another critical moment which gently pushed Zeynab towards sloughing off the cocoon of Muslim dogma took place when a friend who was facing a crisis of faith, asked her for religious support. Zibā relates what she told her in a sudden instance of illumination:

What you desire is in fact God's desire, rather than what you were taught to do in order to please God. Your contentment and the desires of your heart are the most important. Go and do whatever your heart tells you to do. Don't bother yourself to please God, because what your heart craves for is in fact what is called God's contentment (III 154).

Her friend became calm, whereas she herself became caught up in a mass of contradictions which eventually led to her most recent transformation, that is into a liberated woman. It can be assumed from the proleptic digressions in the incomplete third volume of Zibā Nāvak's autobiography, as well as from her other writings and internet activities, that the metamorphosis from the pious Zeynab to the free-thinking Zibā took place over a ten year period during which she became reconciled both with her family and her past, finished her medical studies and started a new life in exile.

Zibā's life story can be read as the testimony of an Iranian woman, a woman who represents the generation of the so-called Islamic Revolution. The dynamics of her personality reflect the radical ideological shifts in the contemporary history of Iran and the traumatic impact they exerted on the identity of her nation. She may be easily labeled as a victim of a revolution, a broken leftist, a repentant prisoner (*tavvāb*), cooperating with her oppressors and exemplifying the so-called Stockholm syndrome, a brainwashed *hezbollahi*, a *siqe* prostitute and finally, a shameless woman (*bi band-o-bar*), challenging taboos and publishing her naked pictures on the internet. As an outcast, she makes an attempt to re-negotiate her negative public image and therefore commits

destroyed the life of one of its representatives, a *hezbollahi* man. See: Š. Pārsipur, *Zibā Nāvak – baxš-e dovvom*, 27 March 2009, http://zamāneh.com/parsipur/2009/03/post_244.html.

the most audacious transgression, namely textual self-exposure. Balancing on the edge of exhibitionism, she openly writes about her unsuccessful sexual experiences, autoeroticism and her emotional shortcomings and mental disorders, using a strategy of sincerity as a rhetorical device to defend the authenticity of her inner transformations.

Although she is an immature militant communist fighting the Islamic regime as Sibā and a zealous Muslim devotee of Xomeyni as Zeynab, the permanence of her apparently shattered identity is marked by such traits as radicalism, sincerity and marginality. On a textual level her personification (*prosopopoeia*) is mediated by the classical figure of a provocative *rend* (vs social order), the heart-breaking *del-robā* (vs men), and the scandalous *Šeyx-e San'ān* who transgressed both moral and social boundaries along his spiritual journey.

Last but not least, Zibā's autobiography reveals not only the multiple identities of her generation but the dialectic potentiality of human existence in general, as Pārsipur notes:

I have no doubt that we all have masks which we put on in various situations. We all have countless personalities, and though we live with one name, we change our faces all the time. Zibā Nāvak has the power to admit to the existence of her multiple personality (*hāl-e čandgune-ye xod*) and this is an important confession.³⁵

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