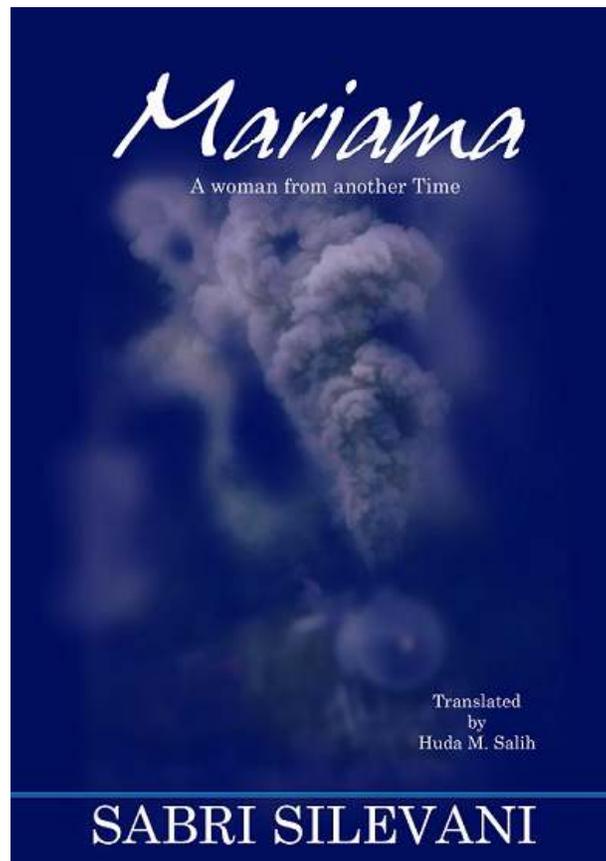


MARIAMA

A Woman from Another Time

Sabri Silevani



Translated by

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Introduction

Sabri Silevani was born in Zakho, on July the first, 1972, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. He received his diploma in Social Sciences from The Institute of Teachers, Dohuk, 1992. Silevani started his writing career in 1987 and wrote for different local journals and newspapers. In 1993, he left Iraq and settled in the Netherlands; an experience that enriched his knowledge in world literature. His first novel, ***The Tigress: When She Leaves Her Fish Thirsty*** was published in 2004; it was followed by ***Twenty years and a Night*** (2005), ***Mariama: A Woman from another Time*** (2007), ***Ten Dreams***, a poem (2007), ***The Autumn of Words***, nonfiction (2008), ***Silevi's Book*** (2009).

Sabri Silevani returned to Kurdistan in 2006. He currently lives in Semel, Dohuk and is a school teacher and the chief editor of the official website for The Kurdish Writers Union, Dohuk (www.duhokwriters.net).

Chapter One

July the First

As you know, at thirty six, I am still alone. You also know that this is the first time I am with such an honest companion as you. In an Eros atmosphere, I celebrate my birthday. Truly, till yesterday, I was hesitant whether to invite you or not. You are returning from a European country and birthdays there mean dance and ornaments; while in these countries it is all grief and sorrow, particularly the birthday of a hopeless woman like me. Do you believe in this? It is the first time I am with someone who lights and puts out candles with me, listens to music, kindly kisses me, and says “Happy birthday”.

I understand the reasons for your exile and isolation; nevertheless I have not been informed of the reason for your return. Is it to be my friend and spend what is left of your life with me?

- I wish it would be so.

Now and then, a person makes friends with someone, or loves someone, after only just making their acquaintance. For the sake of that “now and then”, one should think of tomorrow especially in times of uneasiness.

Apparently, this friendship strengthens my life; or at least my birthday, giving it a new sphere and meaning. For a trustworthy individual like you, it should be interesting to listen to me, share my pains and sorrows. But, I feel no sense of delight, for delight is so rare in my life. You may be able to teach me about it yet I cannot teach you my grief and complaints. Pardon me, I am not a sadist, my purpose is not to raise in you a doubt about the veracity of your feelings; or say you

have no sorrows or grief. No. An individual like that is heartless. For me, there is no doubt that you have a heart of gold, but mine is not less.

Nareen jan, give me the right to be proud of my own grief and sorrow - the toil of my thirty six years has been hard.

They do not understand; or rather they intend to. Who says I would like to change the world, or even to make it dirty? The world itself will change and become impure. My sole wish is to preserve my tiny world while not feeling estranged. Probably, the language that I talk with is unlike that of the others; but it is not foreign. Once in a while I try to translate it into many languages yet very few understand it since "very few" can be one of their colors.

"Truly, more than two, their interest lies in three colors"

Recently, you have asked me many questions which were mostly personal. I have had no chance or rather have not been inclined to answer. Giving answers frightens me; like many managers in this city as their monthly demands or the lists of their budgets begin to weigh upon them. Fear has become the reason behind my separation from this society. As well as being the reason for my death, it has also become the reason for my existence.

They, also, are terrified, and it is justifiable since they have been nursed by this fear. They have no guts to think loudly, ask questions or speak about their deeds especially in their darkness and solitude.

A person's individuality is formed by their behavior and acts. Some learn good things; while others are taught what is evil - fear is the worst thing they teach in this land.

Yes, jan. We have been taught to be frightened of everything; God, the day of Qiyamat (Judgment), hell and the cemetery, asking about Monkar and Nakir - above all we have become alienated from, and frightened of, ourselves.

Nareen, you should know that fear is a good but an odd feeling. My words may sound humorous, but I have doubts to whether you feel them or not. In the cold countries, humans fear only the rage of the seasons and taxes, but in these burning countries, all seasons are alike and there are no taxes; there are so many other things to fear. I feel it, therefore I say fear can be sweet: the fear of an eternal escape, the fear of hiding not only from the police, but, the fear of suspicion, other's and other's fantasies. Not only of the fear of Sufis, but the fear of isolation and gossip. The fear of one's family and one's neighbors. The fear of nights and nightmares rather than thieves. The fear of sleep and its ashen dreams. The fear of silence and the *ears* of silence. The fear of one's stepmother. Furthermore, it is through moments of fear that the strength of my feelings burn. My forbidden desires and their remnants thrive before I put on the pink quilt of shyness. Fear is a unique feeling, and its uniqueness sustains me.

Fear, hunger, and truth, are parts of a human behavior that are not concerned with the identity of a society. In spite of this, it is better to talk about what lies within the range of one's knowledge and most possibly what is close to truth!

- You are right Nareen, one can converse till morning, but about what?
- This is my point also, Mariama.
- An individual in our community is not in a position to express what lies in the heart since there is no vital language to converse with. That is why chattering has become the sign of rhetoric. As it stands now, you may hear that someone is quite an eloquent speaker even though no one understands what they say. Pardon me; it is an illness that we all may be infected with.
- I used to be like that too, but after fifteen years abroad, I have changed. When I unwillingly had to leave this country, I took no ill will with me. When I returned, I also brought no ill will back.
- There is no need to bring what already exists... it is too easily obtainable here.

* * *

I will unfold my story, hopefully it will not disturb you and you will desire to keep listening and trying to understand why I am describing to you my life's philosophy.

- I am pleased to listen, particularly to someone who has the will to have lived like you.

- Supas jan, thank you, many times, I use these two words "supas" and "bubora", pardon. Some get annoyed with them; I hope you are not one of them.

Nevertheless, now, you know about my age and that I am still lonesome. You also know my name. But, you should become more acquainted with the specifics of my life; it is your right.

Dewali, my father, chose this name for me. I was born in Dohuk dasinyan. My life has been hard. It is not of big concern which family I belong to because the stronger sex has killed in me my sense of belonging. Besides, most of the families in this city are similar to each other; they see with two eyes, hear with two ears, applaud with two hands, speak loud, like the same colors, and cherish the stranger. Lucky is the one who wins their affection; they take an oath on his life, hang his pictures on the walls of their old houses or new villas, give them amulets so as to keep them safe from the envy of others even though they do not believe in the false belief of superstition. But, what about the one who is only thought about once every thirty five years?

By the virtue of their standards of beauty, I am not ugly. I am slim, asmar (brunette) with a long neck and qabaj* eyes like my mother. In spite of this, during recent years some

white locks have shown in my braids; I think most would estimate my age to be over forty.

You know what? My fondness for children has given some the impression of false motherhood; some might think me a mother of several children and reject the idea that I am an old maid.

“Mariama min, you tire yourself out unlimitedly with your love for the people around you.”

Nareen, how come I do not tire when everything I approach turns male?

We are unlucky girls, what should we do?

Every man, before building pyramids, desires to be a pharaoh and we dance before his crown whereas our dreams become nothing more than onanism ending in narrow, dreadful lanes. I am thoroughly tired, of everything. I believe it is my strength that makes me go on, prolongs my demise; still I also suspect that I could move on by myself. Sometimes, I do envy *jarias*, maid servants; do you believe that?

I believe that the law safeguards them. Overtly, with no artfulness they used to be treated. In this city, where only colorful banners and buildings get high, there are many girls like me and you. All of them have a sense of loneliness. For fifteen years, I was all by myself in Europe; but in times of depression, I remembered God who is also alone and desires to be so. Unfortunately, not everyone has the ability to be alone.

I agree. As a female, I came into this world. Specifically, and as my identity card says, it was on July the first, nineteen seventy. However, on July the first there were many born and from uneducated parents. Yet, as a number and a date, it has no private meaning for me; but it has influenced the course of my life.

Many questions, that are worth being answered, I have brought with me. It is clear that it is not yet the time for questions. Like exhausted travelers waiting in the shadow of a station, I impassionedly anticipate the arrival of the train to take me to the far away stations I have not seen yet.

Nareen, I am afraid I will die before I see the train. My paintings show its fumes not the train itself.

I said I have just come to this world, I do not say I wish I had not because I have some other wishes, even greater. If, before some thousand years ago, I had been in Babylon in the mihrab of Meleta, for the first time I would have thrown myself into the arms of a man, only by that time anyone who gives the impression of a man would have kissed my hand. It was not my will, in a strange time; I opened my eyes for the rays of a red summer and its burned spikes.

During my obstinate childhood, I vehemently and warmly preferred the summer time to all the other seasons with a great sense of enthusiasm. Sometimes, I changed my clothes and went with the women to collect the spikes. For the fragrance and color of the soil, I opened all my doors and windows. From time to time I helped the other women and also

listened to the sound of their souls, their unconscious passions. I desired to build a mansion out of the spikes for the golden summers, green springs; and the other seasons white and red as the braids of my mother.

And?

My love for summer was boundless; imagine, I talked to myself saying “If it were within my power, the whole of the year would be summer not only one season”. It escaped my mind that some other people came into being in other seasons. Nonetheless, after thirteen years, summer has become cold for me. I am unable to regain the strength of my faith and love. My faith in the other seasons has been shaken; therefore I have looked for a fifth season. For thirteen summers I used to be a clean girl, tormented but a dreamer; but after twenty three summers I turned into a woman, sick with cancer in the agony of death, waiting for her end. As you know, according to our culture, death brings the end; I only believe in the beginnings of life, freedom, and those who love me, I am no longer sure if they love me or not.

Nareenamin, like any other Kurd in this country which bewildered the yar, friend, and nayar, enemy, I went through many experiences. Similar to any other woman in this muddled time I have been totally oppressed. I have also been through some other events; those which no one wishes to experience, especially in the cities where women are condescendingly coddled and men, employed.

For many years, they have been whispering to one another cheaply buying each other's sorrows. Oh, cheap life! Once the custom was to exchange women but now it is to exchange lies and interests... how pitiful, I am still silent and listening. There was no chance for me to reveal my own since I had some secrets on a land blessed with killing. Are the only things blessed, man, blood, and secrets that are worthless?

Nareen, I told you before, only a heartless person has no grievance and nags. I have the faith that the sorrows of my heart are boundless; but what is to be done when there is no honest listener. For me there is only you and my paintings. Let no one feel sorry for me because my treasure is not only old pains, earless nags, secrets and what lies beyond secrets; but among all these, my joy flies in the sky like a wounded dove before being crushed under dirty shoes. Like a dove, I cannot see unless I am at their height. I cannot live without my doves flying and this is only when I tell the truth. As far as others are concerned, truth is close to an unpleasing life; I have no idea how their doves fly.

In these regions where only bread, women, and weather are hot; sometimes silence is numbness and alienation. Before this, no one knew me and what had happened with me; therefore no body interfered in my life. I looked at it in this way. Nonetheless, when they came to know me, they cleaned their nose with their forefinger. It has been proved by history by them the indifference between ignorance and awareness, at least when acting hysterical has become enforced by law.

You do not need to be worried, Mariama, it is their own right to pretend that they have some joy. A volcano can kill hearts while a heart cannot kill volcanoes. Yes Nareen, in these times of misery when pockets are empty, as tired soldiers awaiting death, bored and with heads bent down beneath the shadow of crumbling walls, say “our pleasure is only a lie which gave our own value”. They say a lot of things.

As I understand, they do have some pleasure; but do you think it to be honest or of value? Na kher, No! It is worth it, for them, being disturbed or admitting being worthless because by that time they will understand. It is also not worth pretending to have a hidden-treasure of pain and grievances since their faces mirror everything. Each face is a map for one’s desires and abilities.

Sometimes a face is the word and the weapon, especially the wicked ones. This may be recognized best by those who are familiar with the art of colors and their shades.

For me, I am different, I have become like a pharaoh’s mummy; my face does not show my grief. Nevertheless, deep inside me, many things are alive as “old sufferings, heartless nags, secrets, and private terrors - instead of one sole dove, I have a whole flock”

I am not being sinful when I recognize and see them while they are not aware; becoming a truth in their lie and they, a lie in my truth. We may be similar in our dissimilarities; but we are not so in our sorrows. They think me naïve and make fun of my truthfulness and sadness. I do not concern myself with them for two reasons; first due to aesthetics, an element is composed of two different levels, soul and body. So neither their soul nor body has the correct form. They are accustomed to dealing only with the feminine part of a woman, while her essence escapes their mind and her emotions, they kill. They feed on her body. They fear to reach her soul because it is too far for them to travel - for it lies behind the borders of death. Secondly, they are schizophrenic or rather ill and their illness is not only in their personalities; it is between honesty and ego, between them and the one before them, between them and logic, between experience and truth. And yes, between them and me.

Pardon me, dear Nareen, for long women have been treated as a mule that the worst of men ride while the best of them let her carry their weight and ride. Those in between keep their mouths shut. Now, women have decided to speak up and reveal the deeds of men frankly.

“Such testimony has been belittled”

True, because I am a woman. Normally, everyone sees with his own eyes, but a woman is seen through her organs. “I swear by Zâre Mezin to tell nothing but the truth today”.

With corrupt, old fashioned laws, I have been judged. My faith and being are my only sin. Accordingly, I believed in bazband and hamayluk*and old traditions. As a reward, they have ended my virginity and now they are looking for their innocence even though there is no innocence where money exists. I am sinful as well not because I am bad but because there is still some candlelight in my darkness.

It was my wish to see them even for once admitting equality to prove God's caliphs on earth. I also longed for a court where rights are reserved but my sentence has been to let all men escape from me. For twenty years I have been bearing all my pains silently.

- Hold on, it is your own right, but do not resent your own rights; be sure that the sun does not rise for nothing.

They have so many things to fear; this is why they do not dare to speak. They also do not let anyone else does so as not to reveal their secrets. I am truthful therefore I have nothing to fear. It is their fault; they have left nothing for me to fear. We have many martyrs and I am ready to be the martyr of truth. I may not be well qualified for that since I am impure; nevertheless, impurity is the view of their society. With my innocence, sadness, warm blooded wounds and simple rights, I am still pure.

- With your patriotism. Do not forget.
- Maybe. The standards of patriotism have been changed. I will speak a little and let them do much talking; but I will do it loudly and they -as usual- with a whisper. It is not necessary for a shy and poor individual to speak with a low voice. In the east, thieves, cowards, dictators as well as TV hosts speak in this voice; also the poor and forgotten people when there is no water, electricity or fuel. The difference between me and them is considerable; I do not speak only for myself because I do not believe that I am alone whereas they speak only for themselves.
- I understand, but your love can be the difference.

Chapter Two

Love is the Main Reason

Love,

I love my father so much. My love for him made me love all men in the world especially those who were calm and bright and kind-faced like him. But, in the winter of 1981, I became frigid. Halima, my mother, died and after less than one year; Manjool took her place. I used to believe that one cannot replace another person; but Manjool astonished me. I lived in self-alienation while trying not to make my father feel guilty.

Time imposes questions which in turn surround faith. I bear in my mind, once when I was in sixth sarataye, primary, grade; the teacher of religious education said with pride “According to Islam, a man has the right to marry four women”. I can never forget when I naively asked “Sir, why do men have this right while women do not?”

He paid no attention to me. Instantly, his countenance showed his rage as his eyes reddened and the veins on his forehead grew like serpents. It was a sin rather than a question. He looked at me with anger; but silence saved me and put out the fire of his fury. He could not commence with the lesson, he left the door behind and my question with it.

Years passed, students forgot the teacher's reaction yet they kept my question in mind.

Pardon me for standing before an empty tableau, I am captivated by color; but when I speak I am the captive of words. Colors and words are both the questions and answers to, “Yes” and “No”.

Manjool's nine months passed smoothly, with his first scream, my brother Kovan announced a new life that would be more fortunate than mine. The life as a man. With gratitude to my pen, I recorded the exact date of Kovan's birthday; June, the fourteenth, nineteen eighty two. I did not want it to be July the first.

My father loved Kovan probably for being the first boy and for having fair skin, blue eyes, a sharp nose and a small chin similar to Scandinavians. On the other hand, he did not see my sister, Kajeen; she was still an embryo in her mother's womb. Like her mother, Kajeen was short and blond with small lips; her long nose, small and Chinese like eyes were not similar to her mother's. Unlike her stubborn mother, she used to be nice and loving.

- Right Mariama, flowers do not bloom only in gardens.

Manjool is truly stubborn; however she is a woman with a very strong character. With her charms she defeated all the women of the neighborhood. With the wink of an eye or a smooth rabbit-like movement she would invalidate a man's ablution. Similar to young men, she had her hair cut short, eye brows as thin as a line; but when new hairs started to grow around the brows, she looked sexier. She knows that men preferred them. With tight colorful dresses she embellished her body. The collar of her dress was left open; it showed the line between the breasts and her bra. She used to say "the beauty of an aged woman is in her breasts". She fed her infants on canned milk so as to keep her nipples youthful, not loose and aged.

After the death of my mother, I was all by myself. I became very attached to my father. My faith in my father's future diminished for I occasionally heard that men are unfaithful widowers. I recalled the story of a man who, during the funeral of his wife, started to search for another woman. Eventually I became desperate and hopeless, and then I began to trust in super natural powers.

- Yes Mariama, for sorrow and joy, an eastern individual's reliance is on external powers. As a source for better and for worse their own potentials are denied.
- When alone, I am conflicted.
- Your father is not so young; it is not right to spend what remains of his life alone!
- I know that; my mother and I are to be sympathized with.
- Your mother is dead.
- Hush, she is not, I do not want you to speak about her like that in my presence again.
- She is dead while your father is still alive. Do not make him die too!
- You all kill those who are alive and worship the dead. I ...
- You what?

- I am afraid.
- Afraid of what?
- That my father would leave me alone!
- You should not worry; he will not do that. He is not like other men. I am afraid you do not know him very well.
- I do know him well. One may take another one's place; but no one can truly be the others. As far as women are concerned, almost all men think in the same way and we cannot deny he is a man.
- For him, it is an undeniable right to get a second wife!
- What right? Who gave him this right?
- Religion, Sharia, Islamic law, and society.
- Do they ever think of me or my mother, Halima? If they, like you, say "Your mother is dead" when I am still in this world. Let them consider my future, my feelings, my days and my destiny.
- This is sunnat, the norm of life.
- The norm of life or men's life?
- I feel for you.
- Really?
- Yes, because you are a flower trying to bloom in the wastebasket of our reality.
- I also feel sorry for myself, but...
- You cannot create spring in a wastebasket, but for a time you can preserve your scent and color.
- Who says I can? Have you forgotten who I am? Only a female in an age of males. Be confident I cannot while my father can take care of me. Let him bring no woman and I give my word not to marry and only devote myself to him.
- You cannot do everything for him.
- I will try.
- Mariama, you do not understand my point.
- I do not then, do you understand mine.
- "Us" who?
- You, Sharia, and society.
- Have you ever forgotten? Your father has always been the judge, you be the judge for yourself.
- If he marries then it will be like everywhere else?
- He is not married yet.
- What if he does?
- And if not? You should know later that it is all for you, he will submit to any decision of yours. You will care for him and carry out his decisions. In my opinion, the only one he loves is you. I do not think he loves anyone on earth as he loves you.
- And Manjool?

- It is not love. She runs after your father solely to make him marry her. Women like her are smart and eloquent; they use their minds not hearts. They chase men only to please their own lives. Your father knows this fact very well - he is obliged to ignore it.

Chapter Three

Festivity

Anyone who says “Men are strong and women are weak” is repeating the foolishness of others. Before uttering such words one should hold it to a light; I have been struggling with loneliness for twenty three years while my father could not bear loneliness for one. I will never forget when I, dressed in black, and Manjool in white, stood in front of each other. That day, I figured the dotted butterflies that circled my father were like the fish he could not see living in the coasts of my eyes. Eventually he reached for Manjool; My brother and I reached for each other and went somewhere beyond their borders. Death took my mother and Manjool took my father. For this reason, most of my paintings represent death and Manjool as its consistent symbol.

Later on, I brought bad luck to Manjool; on the first of July, nineteen eighty three, the corpse of my father arrived Dohuk. He was killed in the first Gulf war in the north of Iraq. First, I said “This is not true! My father could never die”; but after hearing the screams of Manjool, who rocked and bellowed louder and louder, I was glad it was true. What a shame! I did not understand how I could feel such a thing. I raised my head and said whole heartedly “It is for the best.”

In the graveyard, I stood right beside Manjool; I did not know for what reason I desired her to be there, yet, when she moved closer I drew further away. Manjool was tearing out her hair, and slapping her chest as kohl ran with her tears down her cheeks. She kept weeping "Oh, Dewali I am alone after you, your Kovan is all by himself, who will look after us?" She attempted, more than once, to throw herself in the grave, but the men stopped her. Even if they had let her, I would not have allowed it. Father wanted to be with my mother, Haleema.

- May they both rest in peace.

- Thank you Nareen. My father left his will. Death is bitter and the dead are miserable; for they cannot take with them their own will.
- Right.
- “You would certainly know that. It has been said that in war the opportunities for death are greater than those of life. If I die, let not my body be placed in an open coffin. My will is to be buried on a high place like Shaxke.” Manjool did not fulfill his wish.
- “Maybe Manjool herself is closed and low”
- Maybe she is wicked.

Among the consolers, I felt like a stranger, an unexpected guest; the only one I knew was my father who was wrapped in his coffin. The consolers were throwing dust over the coffin. I imagined it was afternoon and he was working with his shovel in the garden. Nonetheless, with the voice of the molla, I was terrified. I went around his headstone festively; then I went to my mother’s headstone. I wanted to fly, yet after my wings touched the stones they could only cover my face.

All of them were rewarded: my mother reached her end, my father reached his and then Manjool became one of fake humility, jealousy and contempt. It was my father’s generosity and courtesy the shaped her: the house, a martyr’s salary, a piece of land that grew more and more expensive, many relations and even more good memories. Nevertheless, she was not at peace yet; she thought that I was superior to her simply because I was a virgin.

A speech helped to console poor Manjool. As usual, silence was my sole comfort, or at least that was what I thought. But, this time silence did not rescue me, instead, it condemned me. July was so hot, but I was shivering, as if I was soon to be with my dead father. My blood was thickening, my body was cold. My tresses were like two black snakes preventing any one from wanting to be close to me. Most would think me a man because I was wearing a stripped jacket and his cover on my head.

Men say: “Silence is a sign of satisfaction”, yet my silence was a sign of something else; not pleasure. I never knew that it would teach the silent Manjool and Mohammedi Mayri to speak.

Chapter Four

The visitor (Kabra)

That same afternoon in the emergency section of Azadi Hospital- at that time it had a different name*; my eyes, like those of a wounded person who had survived an ambush – were tired and full of fear. I was lying on a bed covered by a filthy white sheet, my legs hung upward. Every other minute an angel, wingless and white, placed a wet piece of cloth over my forehead and chest for my temperature was 42.

I told you before that my silence would not deliver me to the brighter side of life; you must realize that I passed out and fell under their feet. My neighbor (Mayri), assisted by her husband, God may not bless him, took me to the emergency. Nareen, it is not my habit to accuse others; but the sin of that panderer is bigger than the sin of Satan. After my eyes were open, Mayri kissed my forehead with the tenderness of my mother. That was before she told me the details of my illness.

Mayri is poor and sterile; she was almost fifty three years old, yet she never gave up. Constantly, she visits the graves of Sada especially Sheikh Sa'adi Balqosi. She is a wise woman, she deserves the best. Her impressive personality has made all respect her, particularly older women; for them she represented the symbol of patience. I can still recall the evenings in our garden when my father frankly asked her “Do not think us all pure of sins; yet yours is greater than ours because of your marriage to Mohammed”. Nevertheless, my father never said “God damn you”; but he said “as long as you are alive; eat a loaf of bread and give ten to the poor because you have Mohammedi Mayri.

Mrs. Mayri called her husband, she asked him to bring his car in order to take me home. All the way to Grebasi, a thousand times he said "I am like your father"; at the same time I saw his eyes devouring me in the mirror. I felt that he was lying; he always wished my father to be out of the way so he and Manjool could be together. When my father was still alive, they used to meet each other; sometimes in the small room in the second floor in Mayri's oriental house, sometimes at the back of his store after closing. Like many other men in Dohuk, Mayri was horny and playful; he stayed, occasionally, before his shop like a guard examining the bodies of the women and young girls and sometimes on his wooden chair like an eastern president; he seated himself with the sound of his radio high blinking his eyes to the passers - by. He knew all the women of the neighborhood. His flirting tongue used to find a way into their hearts. With words like "Yes" and "Indeed", he endeared himself to the widows and teenage girls.

I did like either the cabra or Manjool. I dreaded him and had fears for Manjool; but they both were reckless especially Manjool who was like an old maid. After all she was my stepmother, I thought, I had to excuse her failings. I was not old enough to advise her; yet sometimes I did try. She knew that Mohammedi Mayri was known in the neighborhood, people were aware of his intentions in particular when it was concerned his disrespectful relations with women. I made it clear to her that my father disliked him since Mayri was unfaithful and undependable. Eventually Manjool destroyed my life, sometimes she used me as a dirty cloth and others made the *Dorka Kheri* over her head.

Manjool tended to transform in order to preserve herself. When my father returned home during the weekends, Manjool looked like a bride; she did not let him see anyone except for herself. She attempted to play the role of a loving and warm hearted mother. Artfully and impudently, she said "Mariama is a young girl and I am a mother to her, therefore she ought to listen to me or she will be in serious trouble". She did not make it clear how serious.

Her words easily convinced my father. Accordingly, every time he bid goodbye he called me and said "Dear daughter, show your respect to Manjool, she is like your mother and cares for you. Be certain, that whatever she says is for your own benefit".

Manjool knew how to manipulate him with her words while I was not aware of their true meaning. Yet, I still knew enough to fear their consequences. Eventually I realized that fear hindered me. Fear itself could not fill the emptiness.

Before my father's farewell, my distrust in Manjool was much more than my awareness of her behavior; while afterward the awareness increased and my suspicions subsided. My language was now "Suspicion, resistance, strength, responsibility, concern, and re-birth."

Meanwhile, there was no one prudent enough to teach about strength and emotions. Thirteen was a crossroad in my age which was passed somewhat aimlessly. My legs became shapely and formed, my breasts grew bigger, and bare parts of my body before were now covered with black hair. The young birds in my head learned to fly but now there were limits. I could not relate to children because I was now associating with girls and women of my age. At the same time I became an object of fun for Manjool and her unbearable sex that could not accept change.

The whole matter of physiology was so hard that I could only struggle with it uneasily. I also felt changes in my blood, my cravings for food, my desire for solitude and the suffering of unbearable weariness.

It was a time when I needed my mother more than any other. It was only then I realized that my mother's early death was more important than I thought before.

Like the refugees of the nineties – or those for hundred years, I was wandering in a safe shelter; but one without the ability to cross the geographical borders. I was absent, and I desired to speak about my own state but I did not know how to express myself. Who could I speak to and who would listen to me? As a spontaneous reaction, I wrote things on whatever I could find; notebooks, books. Finally, something spoke to me “Mariama, there are not only letters, colors and their lines can also be one's language”.

Since then, I have asked myself “How can I portray what I see or think?” I do not know yet.

- Pablo Picasso knows, Mariama.

Chapter Five

Another Time

After the wicked Kabra took us to Grebasi, his wife kindly asked me to spend the night at her home as she was aware that our own small house was full of commiserating mourners full of condolences – they were mostly the relatives of Manjool herself.

Mayri wanted to repay my mother's past courtesies so she offered me her own bed and took me in her arms, stroking my shoulder until I fell asleep.

I travelled into another time.

It was spring. The green landscape was adorned with colorful flowers; I heard the harmony of the waterfalls accompanying the chirping and warbling of the birds, especially the nightingales. I wandered in the meadows and gardens with bare feet as if it was in paradise, Eden or the hanging gardens of Babylon. The raindrops glittered on the leaves of the grass, my limbs, and my hair. My body was maturing, especially my breasts; they were no longer hidden by the black dress which now cleaved differently to my body. The rainbow looked so charming. I then realized that a single color would not be able to represent the true sense of beauty. In the name of all those colors, the rainbow talked to me and said "Give me your hand!"

I flapped my wings, the rainbow gradually and amazingly lifted me up. In a high orchard of soft cotton, my cheeks grew rosy. I was gratified with the flirtation and courtship of the rainbow. A chill went through my warm bones; the wind lifted the braids from my

shoulders. The horizon faded midway before my animated eyes. The joy I felt made me unsteady; I fell down instead of vanishing into the bliss of the rainbow. A strange man encountered me; his legs were formed of water, his chest of soil, his head was shaped of wind and his hands were fire. He unclothed me without burning me and cleansed me with colors. There was a shiver in my belly; I knew that I was being purified by his colors.

Nareen, being so shy and ashamed, I could not tell a soul about this story.

On Mayri's iron bed, I awoke and could not close my eyes again. No paradise, no hanging garden, no stranger, nothing but a filthy cave of a room, and a man, who had tied up his belt, leaving the room and closing the door.

I was found shivering and with a fever, but this time there were some people to help me. I was unable to say a word but they could see everything in my eyes. No one believed or wanted to believe what my eyes were telling them. It was inconceivable, therefore absolutely unbelievable.

You might say, I was dying and waiting for their forgiveness. With looks of suspicion, madam Mayri sat by me on the bed rubbing my hand; Manjool sat anxiously by the bedside counting my breath. The man, God damn him, who stood like a witness after taking an oath to say the truth, remained silent.

It was so hard for me to convince them to what happened, especially madam Mayri. She was extremely attached to me. Some awaited my death while others awaited my recovery. Between death and life, I was waiting for my mother Haleema so I could tell her the truth. Yet, when she came and held me close to her chest I was shy and troubled; I wished to speak, say something - anything. I wanted to explode like a volcano, but I was hindered by a lump in my throat – I awoke to no one around me.

Yes, this was not the first time that I had seen blood; I had seen it taken from the sheep in the mornings of the Greater Bairam and at children's circumcisions; I used to be annoyed when I was forced to see it, but never distraught.

Mayri thought I was having my period so attempted to simply comfort me. I tried to talk to her about my dream; however it was too difficult for Manjool was listening to us. It never came to my mind that she would know it later. Due to the blood I was losing and the sweat of fever, Mayri changed my clothes and the sheets of the bed constantly. I did not let her see between my thighs for it was swollen, and a mature woman like her would absolutely know that a woman's period would not be the reason for this. She was a tender hearted woman and so she hurried to Manjool. Manjool on her part offered to set me in

the hands of the Kabra. I did not understand what was going on. Manjool told me that a visitor was coming to charm and heal me.

I did not believe his invocations. But, who could mention such a thing - such suspicion? Doubt did not only have a negative denotation; it was considered the same as sin.

In haste, Manjool brought some warm water in a *masin* (a container) and a basin with soap and a colorful towel. On purpose, the visitor washed my arms and legs before the eyes of Manjool and messaged them, then dried them with the towel. I did not know why the moment I looked at his eyes, I remembered the old man from my grandmother's fairy tales in winter nights. Every other minute he mentioned the name of God and the Prophet and read Ayat al Kursi for me. He had a mouth that looked like a drainage whole close to my ears and said "Utter, there is no god but God"; I was a disbeliever and he wanted to convert me to Islam.

Now, that visitor, Mayri, is sixty eight years old and no one is aware of his spider web: sometimes he is a holy man, sometimes he is a magician – I don't think even Moses could cope with him.

- He was not only bad but ugly too.

Ugly! He is truly the creation of God but disagreeable people like him are rare. I am unable to understand how a piece of beauty like Mayri accepted him as a husband. At first, I thought, like my father and many other men, he had his hair cut with a razor because of the heat, however after he removed his turban, he was bald. No, not only bald but beardless. When he was seated, his chin was flabby like that of a turkey. His potbelly like a *mashk* (a fabric bag) moved right and left.

You know, he did not work in spellbinding solely; he had the power to do other things: make shoes dance, change the color of water into red, and break glasses with his glance.

At the beginning, as all the others in the neighborhood, I believed in him. But, later, I understood that mixing sodium bicarbonate with milk can create the color of red. As for breaking the glass; it could be related to the power of one's eye sight, or perhaps it was not so. Concerning the shoes, I think it is not a miracle since everything is shaking in these regions - not only shoes.

Chapter Six

The Twenty First Year

I greatly believed in time and was quite hopeful that he/it would show me the light at the end of my tunnel. I hoped that we both shared this mutual understanding.

- You and time?
- Yes, me and time. Nevertheless, alas, time too is male, side by side with the visitor and Zari Mazin. With questions I prolonged my life. In the sunless *Rojhalat*(east), how many great Zaris are there? How many little Zaris? How many Mariamas? How many visitors?
- It was my twenty-first year- As the visitor said, he wanted to commence on an exorcism to destroy the Zari Mazin that haunted me. The question is this “How can he exorcise me after he ended my virginity with a sealing wax?” He had taken not only my virginity; he had ruined everything beautiful in my life; my dreams, yearnings, names, histories, behaviors, and the images I held of my society. He broke them all. People in the neighborhood assumed that he was a God fearing man but the truth, simply, was not as such. Certainly, a man should be judged by his actions, but there are other ways one can judged.
- Like?
- The color of their clothes. What they eat and drink. Their doorsteps, sociability, the way one sees a person before knowing him. The right questions can be enough to identify a person. Whatever the case may be, a man is known almost through his deeds. Be it as it may, most of the people could not come to know my visitor because his deeds were all underhanded and hidden.
- In other words, people were aware of his deeds in the mosque but not what he was doing in the attic or in the shop.

- That is what I meant too, Nareen. At times, I console my heart; appraise my own being, saying “Undoubtedly there are still honorable individuals in this nation who would never pardon him if they were aware of him and of his true character.” It has always been said “stories of name, honor, and vengeance get old but never forgotten.” Then all of a sudden I panic and say “No! They will disgrace me”.
- Probably, within any honorable person, there lives a wild man that he is forced to constrain.
- Nareen, I was killed once by him, besides, he little by little made me habituated to the pains of death. Nonetheless, my community and those who estimate themselves as honorable, murder me every day, recklessly without any sense of honor, with meaningless fear and pain. Such people are opportunists they concern themselves with their interests only. They exist in all times but at times I believe that their existence is the outcome of some errors in Nature' equations. They feed themselves on the expense of the poor and needy. I am never intimidated by them myself since they are null, tiny and short, with long tails and tongues only. They have no stance or identity. Their fate and destiny are represented by the power of authority, no matter what color the power takes on; black, yellow, green or some, with no colors at all. What really concerns me is the crumbs they grow up with. He who marries their mother becomes their father.
- Right.
- Truly Nareen, they never terrify me. I pity them. This society treads on my neck decreasing the burden of “The Visitors” while over-burdening “Mariamas”. I eagerly wanted, and still, that he be justly punished; he himself decides his penalty. However, he is too cowardly to prosecute himself.
- Mariama, who dares to quest for forgiveness so he can pass judgment on himself?
- Indeed! They made him or he made them? You do not know the answer; neither do I. I do not have the power to take any legal action then, refine him, or his immoral desires. Who showed him the way and blocked all the ways for me? Who gave him power and left me powerless? Who has been protecting him?

Sometimes, I tell myself in solitude “I must sue my parents in the graveyard; my father taught me love and forgiveness in such a corrupt time. My mother with delicacy nursed within me purity.

I cannot mention what happened in the dark to any person; besides, no one can listen to me. Do you have any idea what they are afraid of?

- What is that dear?
- First their own present being, then their future being that will be so unlike the present one. I am a female living and heavily burdened by this male dominant society... and the utterances concerning one's virginity draper has become a mark of womanhood, a

condition for virginity. However, if any part of a woman's body has a draper, then do you think there would be a virgin all over this country?

- I do not blame girls Mariama.
- Me neither, Nareen. I pity them. Men are to be blamed since, for them, namoos, honor, is tied to a draper which they themselves tear. As you notice in all my paintings, thread and curtains exist. No one yet questioned what they tell because they engage themselves with the form of the portrait not the spiritual indication.
- If they cannot understand words and colors how can they accept them? Accordingly most of them are mute and colorless. Threads and drapers are everywhere. Most of my paintings contain threads and serpents, yet no one has stopped to think of them. When a woman owns a thread in her heart, then a man has a serpent between his legs.
- Cry Mariama... you can shed tears.
- Pardon me Nareen. I cry for me, you and all the girls of our nation. I get fatigued at night, tears, No, not for me. I do not shed tears; but sometimes I have nice dreams. For twenty three years, I have the same dream every night: I am a delicate little girl, just going on by barefoot. My parents are calling for me and I try to move but my feet are holding me down.

On the last day of my father's funeral, which lasted for seven days by that time, I regained my health. Mayri helped me to take a shower; she washed my hair and took me to my empty my room, one abandoned for the cockroaches, spider webs, and blots of dampness and darkness. I do not know; it was not the dust of farewell or the dust of fairy chivalries on my colorful paintings. I longed for my own room; it seemed to me that I had not seen it for seven years although all that was between me and it was the wall of Mayri's room which still stands there. I longed to see Charley Chaplin and Aristo van on the wall; both were awaiting me. I thought one of them, at least, would cry or laugh; while the other one would be screaming at the door step or on the roof to inform people of my arrival. Nonetheless both remained silent when my visitor raped me in their presence. Then, he told me and his wife that the sultan of spirits sent a messenger who required a response.

Mayri was shocked; looked at me with surprise and did not get the chance to tell him it was not true. On one hand she feared her husband and sympathized with me on the other; between the two, silence was the joker in her husband's hands. He dismissed everyone else from the room; he was so eager to turn to me, he did not believe it. He took his lighter from his pocket and lit a candle before turning it to its place. With the same candle he lit several other candles with different colors; he brought some incense which almost strangled me. As a serspi, the old woman who took off my clothes, started to counsel me. He made me lie down on the back then turned me on my stomach. Before he commenced with his sin; he covered me up with a blue sheet. He cited some ayat from the holy Quran

and uttered his own interpretation for some other phenomena that could terrify any person; for instance he referred to “Chalen ghazlini, snakes as tall as palm trees, giant scorpions as beasts, women hung over from their breasts...etc.

It was as if he had mounted me. His words gave me such indication that only hell existed, he never mentioned heaven. He rubbed my back as I was gazing at the Persian carpet which, as a prize, my father brought with him from Shireen citadel. I was looking at the two edged sword held by Imam Ali. It was not different from the other two on the wall.

On one hand, as a violent wind, the visitor put the soft blue sheet over my body and said “sit on your feet”.

I became so bashful, the feelings of fear and shyness mixed like electrical currents; yet I was not shocked. I was shivering. I hid my breast with one hand and put the other over my groin. He threw me on the floor as a doll under his feet and turned me around. With a strange language, which I believe no one else except him understood, he spoke to the walls; once in a while he put his palm on the crown of my head, held me with my shoulder, raised my arms and made my legs into a high bridge. My chest was facing the wall and before being crucified, I passed out, defeated before his woolen white footwear.

- What happened afterward, Mariama?
- Afterwards, he dragged my lifeless body like a statue to the middle of the room, looked at me and passed his hands down my braids releasing them.
- Your braids are so charming indeed, black and long.
- Thank you. I have these braids as long as I can. I do not know why, I have never braided yet. Anyhow! Afterwards, he passed his hand along my back reaching my legs. He stood behind me and touched my lips, my chest, between my breasts like a skilful thief who can enter a house without being noticed. Similarly, he went as far as the hair under my stomach. Believe me, he held me tight with all his strength and before he said “I knew that spirits had haunted your body; but do not panic, I will exorcise them even in their twenty first year”.

Being undressed, I felt I was lost; but liked my state of loss, unable to be aware of myself. During those moments, I called for my mother, Haleema. He called Manjool informing her that my treatment would last for forty days because of the many spirits inside me therefore it needed much effort to exorcise them. Later, with a voice full of suspicion, he said: “the sultan of evil spirits, Zari Mazin says -you man of faith, let Mariama daughter of Haleema obey you, and she should not harass you”.

The question he desired to hear from me was asked by Manjool: “what do you mean for God sake?”

In advance, he had the answer: “It is not my will; Zari Mazin says that a man, known, should get into Mariama daughter of Haleema so that he can terrify the spirits. That man must be a *mawla*, holy man, carrying a holy name”. Meeting my visitor, one would think him naïve. Yes Nareen, appearance can hide reality. Thirteen years were not enough to enable a person to unveil the truth. However twenty three years are long enough to make one forget that truth.

Chapter Seven

Cinnamon

For forty days, every day by the virtue of his orders, I was on ablution. I put a white sheet on my brunet body as if I was in Mecca and Medina roaming the Kaaba. At the beginning, I was double minded as I did not see blood for some days; later I became familiar with the whole matter as my damned visitor filled my windpipes with incense. My thirsty deserted land was waiting for a loving rain in order to get watered. I prayed for that moment to come. Do you believe Nareen? In that darkness the Pal’s candles came to be the sun and the hair of my body, sunflowers. I have faith in and perceive that only love and our desires weaken a woman.

It was a normal language, not a special; but different, as eventually harsh miseries and girlhood fire taught me betrayal. The blood of each month ceased; I realized I was pregnant; this time not with the colors of the rainbow, not with touch of the stranger but with the waste of my visitor.

Days passed, and the signs and indications of pregnancy came to be clear. I was craving for cinnamon, unfortunately it was available in his shop in particular; for people it was a supermarket. Only the needs of women were found in his shop. However, even a cigarette for his wife, one which she had to light, was not there.

- He had identified his clients in advance?
- Yes, so proficiently.
- During the three months of summer, school vacation, I completed the first three months of my pregnancy; it could not be denied especially before married women. It was a very

hard misfortune for me. I grew gluttonous, eating twice the food I used to eat before while Manjool endeavored to keep me hungry and thirsty. Nights for me became as yilda nights - started but never ended. When still dark, I stood as a maid in front of Manjool's door begging her to give me money to buy some cinnamon. I was being tortured; I made her shoe a crown on my head that never bowed for anyone. I threw myself before the cradle of Kovan, my brother, crying and crying waiting till she would pity me. She almost killed me, until she gave me one riyal. She used to accompany me to the shop, and impudently said to the lady's man: "Give some cinnamon to this trouble maker and send some home for me please".

Later, I realized that the cinnamon was a necessity for me; nevertheless it was a charade for her. Every time I pleaded for cinnamon he stopped a young man on the lane and whispered into his ear as he put his hand in his pocket before sending him to Manjool at home. Once, he told me, when we were together, with wickedness "Manjool is a widow but not a steel woman". I did not understand what he meant?

- Was my visitor a panderer?
- Probably. He would not allow the sheep of others to graze in his own pasture. Wicked, in the twinkling of an eye, he closed the shop before he commenced the events of darkness; he sucked my blood like a bat. My eyes were on the cinnamon container without being aware of anything around. Nareen jan, imagine the taste of the cinnamon drove away all my pain. He gave me a little of it so that he made sure that I would be headed for his cave again. Even though I strived to be stronger and never let him touch me; I was in his hand - the silver ring that he swirled - Villain!!
- Go on Mariama... as if you are painting a tableau.
- After all it embarrasses me to speak about those happenings of the darkness though, frankly, I feel a kind of relief for it helps me move closer to its sick reality.
- One rarely gets the opportunity to be close to reality.
- The villain, he leaped on me. He spread a red lined sack in the middle of the shop. Like every time, he uttered some rituals to praise God, he spit under my tongue then said: "Utter, there is no god but God and bow down for Zari Mazin". I put my head on the ground while keeping the rest of my body high. He ran his hand over my back as a *bagordan*, compacter, so my chest and stomach touched the ground. My back bone hurt me intensely. He pressed on my body with his claws and loosened them later; I did not understand why but from time to time he reached his hand for the container of Vaseline. I screamed before his toxin fell between my legs as a lifeless snake. I tried to picture him a young man of this town but the moment I turned to him I saw only a snake and his tongue.

I was hysterical; I was emotionally dead. Impudent, he showed me death so I could be satisfied with what was less. I was unable to justify the strange feeling that it was not a human being in me, but an animal.

I returned home exhausted and worn out, past young men walking in the lane pleased and contented.

By the virtue of my cinnamon, the occurrences of the darkness recurred like Egyptian drama. Thereafter, craving for cinnamon meant being in his shop; or it is better to say his cave. Since then all the shops for me turned to caves as all owners became my visitor.

He was careful and therefore he always longed to go on with his victories in my own home. He did not dare for fear of his wife Mayri whom I turned to for security without telling her about cinnamon or Zari Mazin.

She had her own suspicions concerning her husband. Hearing what was going around about her husband and seeing Manjool's manners created feelings of fear or thoughts of uncertainty. Then she had concerns towards me. She was well aware that I did not like her husband; talking to him was death for me. She is a woman after all; she could not help being jealous.

- I have a question Mariama. It has been said that a woman never forgets the man she shares a bed with. Wherever or whenever, once she catches a glimpse of him, she still yearns for him! Is that true?
- I was not in love with him so I have no answer. He imposed himself on me as a painful reality. I never felt like I was sleeping with a man. After all these years, he has never released me. Some times as a ghost while others as a nightmare, he encounters and besieges me. It causes great agony in me, I lose my breath, it makes me wet with perspiration. I was not traumatized the first time only; but all the times he was with me. It was all unexpected for me; he appeared in my life against my will. If only once I was happy with him, I might forgive him. I have an absurd question Nareen!
- Please Mariama.
- Will he be able to make me forgive him one day?
- Once I read an article that said "Love can be created". For instance: one could love a cat or fish after breeding them for some time.
- Perhaps, but this is not a cat or fish; this is my rapist.

Chapter Eight

Samyan and what a Samyan

Nareen, I wish I could believe that this country was still my home and its people are still my people; the absence of answers causes wild questions to fly across the borders of my intimacy and faith.

We constantly pride ourselves on our home that has been raped. Is there a dissimilitude between home and woman? In times of distress, this country was our home and its people were our people, however during prosperity new landlords made us into strangers. For some, alienation could be home, while for us our homes became our alienation.

- We, all, have become strangers.
- Yes, that is true. You are a foreigner in a Scandinavian state while I am alienated within my own country for which I have constantly shed tears. Frankly, we have been strangers for a long time, since heaven is *Dar Al baqaa*, the hereafter. We have come to this life as strangers and will leave it the same. Believe me, all the others are strangers too without being aware of it. Indeed, they hear each other and coexist together because toleration is not alien to them. But their souls? Oh Nareen, tell me about one individual that is not spiritually alienated by this homeland.

This is not a question addressed to you or an answer with absolutes; it is nothing but a soliloquy in moments of solitude at nights. Our fresh and wild questions wander past banned borders. Be that as it may, everything is available, except for freedom, not only children or unemployment; answers are in abundance as well.

- Who asks the questions? Who answers them?

- The more you inquire the more I become skeptical about the answers. Who gives answers when the smell of exile fills my breath, tears, my curtain of loneliness, misfortune carries the perpetual seasons to the edge of weary eyes, quenches the horizon of the spirit and sets hell's fire within? Only then, great love remains in my mind while little faults wallow in theirs. Why does love not forgive faults?

Who can answer when the sensation of melancholy chants the unseen song, when the elders of the exile make their *darbastin*, coffins, from broken expectations, embellish their braids with memories of home, and with run down voice recite their death? At that time the Tigris would be left without waves and fish would sleep on the surface, like Manjool's locks, the moss dries and moments of drought reach my eternal thirst. Then I find the line of barzax, divider, but there is no pure water?

Who can answer when desperate windmills make poor Don Quixote cry in my arms and hang the rebellious Rembrandt's paintings on the walls of temples? Escaping then will take all, leaving only one's last breath in their mind; opening a new Holocaust. The figure of smoke would extend higher than mine; my sighs would be louder than the echoes of rootless liberty and older than the corruption of perverted rulers. Except for a handful of ash and the anxiety to see the misfortune of an unborn child, what else would remain for me?

I used to be an adorer longing to be immortally clotted in a sea of skepticism. With Cypro-Apetti pills, taken on an empty stomach; I surpassed the norms of hunger. Panic stricken, I eliminate the ghost of fear as my virgin lands grow barren; terminate the legend of Zari Mazin in my head, with infant gypsy teardrops at the doors of mosques; all that is blessed looks wounded for me. By that time, a meaningless life and humiliating death will hold an auction over me; they give each other a hand. Who can hold my hand, then? I do not know Nareen why every time I rub my eyes, I remember Oedipus!

- I am unable to say any word, Mariama.
- Me either. Besides, how can I figure out who has the answers when the dust of the horses of Troy falls on hill tops, at night, midnights, fear and panic shake my books (filled with verse and codes) removing the dust of skepticism before reading a foreign alphabet for me; a river of blood drawn from my nose, sweat eventually dries out on my smooth brunet skin, feelings gather on the doorstep of my heart, like Noah's Ark my body awaits the flood.

The end approaches, the torches of Mariama's nights die. Hence, she can see no one as no one can see her too. What is the need for two eyes then Nareen? Once again; Mariama is me or I am Mariama?

Who would answer when in spring my sorrows grow with branches; in autumn my joys are dispersed in the air in the threshing floor of my virginity? As a leafless *chinar* tree, my branches bend themselves before the wind of grief; my bosom gets filled with leaves, and I become cold as the dawn beams of a villain flirting with the sweat of my wet body.

All of a sudden I recall the writer of “Hairan, Darling” in which she says;

*To God and prince of aspirations, I implore
With the scent of your sweat,
The arid pores of my body are filled.*

My forehead then would be Newton’s apple as my hands make a land. Then all die of laughter and I laugh to death.

Who would answer when my shadow’s tail speaks, and my wings are broken by winds? Then again flying is unpermitted, grief is festivity. Once the truth is hidden in my bosom when I walk past houses, mouths will water.

Who can answer when in solitude my paintings are clothed with death’s dress, my chest is a coffin for wounds and pains? By that time silence is a language, halting is a language. I have just realized that the drape of virginity is of no significance. From a distance an echo: “Allah taketh not a soul beyond its scope” At such a time I become happy and proud of myself.

I am in no need to proclaim any individual’s death, no. I told you before: between life and death, I am awaiting my mother, Haleema, so I can tell her the truth... I would proclaim only my own death; but it is too early for that. I have decided not to die any more.

Many people often say that once they have fulfilled all their goals, it is only death, God’s will, which they need; I will not say that since I do not await death, I await God. I need God. Within my unbounded thought, I put together the letters of Rahman and Raheem, Compassionate and Merciful, and make an idol of them just so a truth can exist within my mind. My strange sensations would satisfy some but Jabbar and Mutakkabir, Almighty and Omnipotent, have no impact on them so they do not leave me.

Nareeni, in her heart a woman probably may keep more than one man; however she can never intellectually worship more than one deity, I am a woman and well aware of my words.

- If the fall of a leaf is an act of God, then how could your rapist bury you alive?
- A long night! You are speaking truths. You may ask questions but do not await responses. I would be able to answer but till this moment I, myself, am still an unanswered question.

Perhaps I have been created by someone but beyond his kingdom though I have brought into being many within my own kingdom. Actually out of that kingdom I am being consistently trampled underfoot, deprived of my rights even though they are constantly there; immortal in my charming ideal kingdom.

Like whom?

- Like many, for instance: my father, my mother, my son Samyan!
- Who else?
- I do not know Nareen, I have the sense that some other individuals whom I do not know, neither they know me, exist. I believe that my simple plain aspirations are beyond my limitations. I do demand the stick of Moses so I can cross the sea of sorrow and my complaints and grievances are able to reach the benevolent.
- Who says there are still benevolent people?
- Anyone virtuous is beneficent. Do you think that there are no wrongdoers? Look at me; I am sinful too.
- No, you are not. You might be guilty though. You are not an illegitimate girl; your mother's name is Haleema and your father's is Dewali. Do not beseech any person. You are Mariama; a female in a male time; a lover with a broken heart. The ship of your love was heading toward the coasts of motherhood.
- That would be right. A lover with a wounded heart and my ship was heading towards the coasts of motherhood; but before reaching there, it stopped and sank.
- It sank, yet the waves of immortality saved you.

As in the present time, I was forsaken by all, even those doing good. My own home was directed toward estrangement. Barrier after barrier, town after town; I was looking for a free handful of soil, a piece of an identity card, an innocent kiss; but alas. I wish if for once a man kissed my forehead or my eye to prove that an innocent kiss still exists. Do you know what would frighten me then?

- Men?
- Look, even your answer is a question! No dear; those days, the first Gulf War eliminated men's curd; some died, some were wounded and some are missing. It left nothing but a

tiny hope with the bitterness of time waiting behind it. Their seeds ceased to exist, those who survived returned sick to be a burden on their wives.

There were no men to be terrified by; being pregnant terrified me, that one day would come and I would not be able to find a piece of bread so I turn into a dog seeking bites. Hitherto, seeing a loaf of bread strikes in me an unusual hunger and horror. Obviously, both of them start with “h” yet they can end many things without coming to an end themselves. I should have presumably been freed from the piece of bread and pain, and melodiously sung for my freedom, and pictured my life through my paintings. It has become apparent that I learned singing, painting and freedom in vain. I can recognize the great God in a painting, a lyric or freedom.

First my father and later God: first I was a little afraid of my father on account of Manjool. On the other hand, I loved him dearly. At the moment I entertain apprehensions of God on account of all the many others not only Manjool. Actually I have a great love for Him too because it is always said that He is pure, generous and merciful; in other words like my father. I saw my father but I have never seen God.

The being or nonbeing of a thing does not concern me in regards to its existence. Who would believe that my fear is enough to feed a whole city? Or my joyful life can satisfy all the malicious? It is not a matter of belief; I have the sense that God is there and sometimes I wish I could be in his mihrab to unveil my misdeeds, or even see myself as a communion, but...

- But what. Mariama?
- But why till now can the exhausted “I” not find the lost “me”? Oh Nareen, I have not cried since last night.

I wish for Him to knock on my door during bad times as He did in prosperity; some silent morning or late afternoon. With my father’s gomlaki, sweater, or my mother’s white dress, He would take me in His arms or put my head on His knees, tapping me on the back. Except for my parents, I am not indebted to any soul. If not for my own sake, let it be for my son Samyan. I have no one but God and Samayan who have not shown up yet... what do you think? Should I be waiting for their arrival?

In October 1983, the physical changes of my body intimidated and depressed me. Bored and uneasy, I was terrorized with everything and everyone except for myself because I am not hollow. Deep inside me a new life started. I was getting heavy, as if I carried a

mountain inside. Since I am not afraid of myself, let no one be afraid of me too, right Nareen?

- You know yourself better Mariama.
- Maybe...! At first my pregnancy made me dizzy, I fainted and threw up. Believe me I could no more join Mayri sitting in the doorstep. I had no appetite for food, with the exception of school, I kept myself away from people. Days were so long for me; lasted for more than twenty four hours.

After successfully finishing the first intermediate grade, I was so excited to proceed to the second level; but it did not turn out as I wanted. All sorrows fade, but the sorrow of our schooling grows greater day by day. Sometimes great things turn small in this nation, and small things grow colossal.

With the beginning of winter, like a cloud, I was half empty, weak and lost weight. But I was never broken. Like the moustache of Kreves* when they smoke, I was pale. After thinking deeply I decided to hold on and live close to my far off Samyan.

Only Samyan comforted me and no one else. He became Samyan, mate of my soul; this is why I desired to name him so. For me he came to be the dream of the last moments; the light at the end of the tunnel. I intended to share everything with him; my time, day and night, smiles and tears. I wanted him to compensate for all the years of pain and weakness. I waited for his joys and sorrows. I wished Samyan to be similar, both in virtue and behavior, to my father Dewali or my mother Haleema. Not the despicable visitor.

- It is clear that there is something common between the three.
- Yes, death.
- I stole the food of my father's own pains when I was starving. In the middle of night like a cat I searched in the pots hoping to find a piece of bread to fight the troops of starvation beyond the borders at least till sunrise. Nareen, death became my great dream. As a child who suddenly rouses from a deep sleep, I would awake. I talked to myself saying "death means my own death, but it is important to live because it will be for my Samyan".

The world was empty; death, life, Samyan and I remained on this earth. I held the dress of life and did not let go. Samyan, mistaken, reached for the dress of death. What should I do with all this death?!

Chapter Nine

The Other

Believe it or not, no one has witnessed death as I have, and no one adores life as I do. By now you are acquainted with my life but not my death. I am well aware why I cannot afford to have a life; even though I am still unfamiliar with a reason for being alive.

Please, pardon me Nareen; I wish if you to be tolerant and listen to me for I have no one else. I need someone who will try and understand me. Life is dark and cold; I have lots of pages to burn something which I do not want to do before any other person.

At such a critical moment in my life, a life of prolonged tragedy and occasional happiness; I would like to ask you a question: how do you see me; a maiden or a woman?

That would be not necessary. I will help you to give an answer; between the two options previously I dreamed to be a mother though I discovered that my wish is nothing but a mistaken or an unpermitted right. Homeless individuals apparently should not ask for much therefore I was satisfied with the little without belittling myself since my shattered soul is enough for all the prison walls in the Middle East. Now all I want is to be something, anything, a new thing.

- All girls can stay as they are, in other words, virgins, or turn into women; however between the two you have succeeded in being something distinguished.
- Distinguished or different?

- That is not crucial; the important thing is that you are not like any other person. Pardon me for my openness but you need to know that everyone else's life is entirely unveiled; it is torn in all parts. Eyes, ears, groins, and bedrooms in particular. All are unveiled willingly, while your veil was torn not by you but one of them. Mariama you should get to know yourself and never forget this truth.
- It sounds so odd, you know?
- What? Knowing yourself is odd?
- No it is not, it is impossible. I meant forgetting. I have forgotten many things, at the same time many others like death, snakes, shattered souls, Zari Mazin and...I cannot!
- And...
- And Kirmanj
- Who is Kirmanj?!
- Be patient; I will come to tell you about him, but later. He was an amazing photographer. If only everything could be seen through his camera lenses, especially truth. Oh Nareen, we are not aware of our needs. After thirty six years of hardship, each year equivalent to the other, he came to rescue me; for his part he was drowning himself. You will understand me after I tell you about Kirmanj.

Nareen, how can I know myself if I am unable to understand that self? Knowing oneself, how can one identify one's hopes and goals? How can I get to understand those around me? How may I identify myself if everyone calls me with by a different name, deals with me uniquely, communicates with me in their own language and charges me with a crime?

Alas, the peshmarga with the rifle did not realize me being a Kurd, the disbeliever could not know me a theist, even the molla with his rosary failed to recognize the faithful me. It was only Kirmanj who, to some extent, understood me. He knew me, the human and the lover therefore the police of God and the state vanquished him.

You know when I will be able to identify myself? I will tell you: with time's help I will realize who I am or what I am. Time can pause a human being; make one look into oneself and recognize the essence of one's own existence. And while we await this moment we are free to ask: Who are we? What are we?

I read both poetry and philosophy constantly though they did not accept my questions or answers. This is a tragedy of mine and many other women in this country. Sadly it does not end with the reading of poetry or philosophy, the problem is much grander and deeper. We all felt helpless and could not come to terms with the level of our own suffering. It is our right to ask questions or leave them unanswered.

By the way, whose tragedy is as great as ours? Who is as miserable as us? Who else spends a lifetime waiting on the station's platform? Above all, who forgets as quickly as we do?

Therefore, we cannot live without borders, or so we have determined; in other words, we have got fragmented ourselves. We are privileged to get close to each other and live for a while; a life both grand and tragic.

I occasionally think that we need to be under occupation; only then will we have a semblance of privacy, and a sense of appreciation. Only then can we preserve our hopes and dreams, and not have to sacrifice our values for the sake of worthless or tiny events and expressions. During the time of occupation, everything looked so sweet and valuable to us; our humanity, our nation, our future, life, death, and even the martyr. But now which one of them is still sweet and of value?

Of all the intellectuals, authors, journalists who are as numerous as grains of sand; none of them could speak of this tragedy and yet their pens are not broken.

I wish for the blessing of God and the *Meer*, prince, of wishes that Herodotus attends with *madad*, for help to save me from these twisted questions. Let him be here to write my story and the men of the late *Zaman*, time, to show me as whore in the throne of the **Melita** of the twenty first century only to please the rootless fate and the contradicted society.

Once you told me that a European holds the bridle of his fate and walks behind.

- Yes, because he trusts himself as well as his fate.
- A man in the Middle East does so, he believes in many things except for himself.
- In order to have faith in oneself, it is important to trust the others as well.
- In the east, the land of the prophets, 'the land of death and poverty', and Caliphs, who could believe in others? Trust is a right; if it existed, there would be no colonization or killing. Is there a span of land in the ruined east unoccupied yet? Love, respect, security; all are needed but all are missing for we are careless with them; we lack confidence in ourselves and others.

Although I have been nursed and raised as an eastern woman, I still believed in the other one.

I did my best to appreciate myself, and realize that Mohammadi Mayri is only one man in some forty million. It turned out that my estimation and trustworthiness contained too much optimism or self-deception. So far I have been deceived not more than four times.

- Only four times? Not too much if you have been living among some forty million persons.

You know what, in a city like Dohuk, one can unconsciously be deceived, alienated especially from nature, life, and self. After being estranged from something, one could possibly return back; but if the estrangement is within yourself, what can you do?

Although, Dohuk is surrounded by mountains many things are still lacking.

- Like what?
- Like lying, attitude, and initiation.
- It is alright with attitude, but how about lying?
- There is no lying, all that happens is true. We are not supposed to be embarrassed.

We are unconsciously estranged. It is unavoidable since we are deprived of many things; for instance, the fantasy of childhood, the enthusiasm of adolescence, conversations with schoolmates about villages and nature. Wholeheartedly I wished I could spend my life in a village particularly after that beautiful and colorful dream of the rainbow and wondrous landscape. That desire has currently vanished for a reason that society treats me as a weak and strange female, especially the men.

We have no relatives living in villages. We have a few families, like kinsmen, who live downtown. Occasionally, I consider the reason for the feeble communication between people and nature. Those who have no connection with nature are weak themselves. I have come to realize that this weakness is the bridge to extinction, the road to our end.

Nari, although I present myself to you as a strong woman, there were long periods of time when I saw myself as powerless. Now, I think of my death. Due to my honesty and my tender heart, I have been patient saying; there must be someone, for me, who will adore me. For the sake of that person I am still alive and have not committed suicide. I was sure that person, near or far, sooner or later, would take Samyan's place in my heart.

From 1983 till 1991 I became classified as a third person, though after that I myself became imprisoned by this "third person". Since that time a lot of things changed with the exception of the men of this country who remained the same; still working for their stomachs and sexual desires. Alas, there is no difference between them and animals.

A person has his own mechanism to influence his surroundings. Mariama, such people are not respectable and it is not worth to giving them time or space. Believe me; they can never frighten a soul because they, themselves, live in terror. They frighten themselves; for day by day they are getting more and hollower. They have sacrificed their wounded living history written in blood for worthless deeds and manners. Whether it is hypocrisy or corruption, no one can best them. It is a race to see who can obtain the most

possessions using nothing but false flattery. It is not logical that the outcome of our uprisings and revolts is just this...

This land has been liberated, but people are still occupied.

- Why?
- For numerous reasons; first of all, their essence is not pure. The essence of a human being is not a part of the body but rather, it is related to their social connections. I do not want to return to the past; we were not here then, although, I repeat, what a terrible present is this as well! We still exist, yet what have we become? The past was not like the present; our citizens had been suppressed because of a sense of honor and hope. He was sublime within himself; higher than the Directorate of Agriculture or Azadi Hospital or even the Grebasi apartments. The hotels and motels nowadays that have more stars than the uneducated *zabit*, officer. Our people are as small as those Lilliputians in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*.

Today, near any village, town, or governorate a *Hay al Malayeen*, Millions Quarter, has become a sign for civilization; there, Baroshki still stands for our last dream, the dream of existence.

Oh for old times, Nareen! In the past Mohammadi Mayri was only a shopkeeper, now he is a contractor or a company president. Before, he used to shave his hair off, now he has it dyed.

Chapter 10

The Revolutionist

Before commencing with Kirmanj, I will present to you three other persons; Hajar the Peshmarga, Islam the communist, and Hawar the Islami.

It is clear, each of us has our own identity. Three beings, three tongues, and three dissimilar names, however they have to some extent parallel means and components. I thought them to be unique - not like everyone else; day after day that idea faded. They were willing to be candles for my way was darkened by mischievous times. Eventually, they killed the "Honesty" in me and themselves.

When first I knew Hajar, he looked so respectful, gave me the impression of having the charisma of an ideal person. Later he turned out to be nothing but a nameless portrait I would draw for myself. He needed more than the self; he was in pursuit of belongings and properties.

In summer, 1992, in July as I remember, I was invited to participate in a gallery for the Kurdistan Parliament. *Shoonwar*, remnants, was my contribution for which I received the highest award. Sometimes I say "I wish I did not receive this award."

- Why Mariama?

- I do not know Nareen. What I am certain of is the fact that my own portrait placed me beneath the feet of the sterner sex, only to be trampled on with wit before the high hedge of patriotism. The painting showed nothing more than an infant held by his brother, or father, his head facing back, he was not crying, everything was gone. In *Shoonwar*, I wanted to say that pain crossed the boundaries of weeping. The visitors to the gallery filled my notebook with their signatures, including Hajar. A signature in the shape of a sword with a sheath, it was not the only thing on the page; a letter full of life and love was there too. Before he signed he wrote some words of yearning and a telephone number. It was impassioned. The words of affection were even more touching since I had never heard them from a man before.

Some days passed empty, some days full, and again bringing hajar, poverty, but not more than a name. I fought against many things, but above all poverty. He was looking for me. As he said “Your image never came”. Afterward when he discovered my address, he sent a letter with a child telling me about his longing, estrangement and remnants, both new and old.

When he went to the mountains, Dohuk for him was something to re-visit. When he was in Dohuk, he felt the same about the mountains. He was twenty one when he first left the city. I was thirteen at that time. Do you understand my point?

Like many other who strive for the Kurdish cause, he had gone through serious hardships. Looking at him one would say he was an old man without a walking stick and rosary. As a spirit, his eyes glittered with love. We shared in common our tranquility, grief, and silence and...!

- Fear?
- Right, the fear of the past.

- Fears of the past. Have you ever felt anxiety when thinking about your past?
- Yes, before I left for Europe.
- That fear sometimes does not let one have a normal day, or look for a bright future.
- A Mohammadi with a surname “Mayri” or “Mahdi” does not necessarily exist in the past of any woman in this country.

Hajar was not like the others. Later, after I got to know him I said “God bless Mayri” because he could not have offered a better thing; Hajar did not give what he possessed. Days passed...

Most of the time, Hajar was a narcissist, rich with possessions but poor with passion. When we started our relationship, he spoke about paintings and colors as if he was an artist himself or had studied the arts. He talked about the style of different schools and referred to the works Picasso, Salvador Dali, and Van Gogh. Not many people in Dohuk could speak about such a subject. I felt exhausted occasionally as he addressed me with controversial questions for which I had no answers. For example, the difference between: Symbolism, Classism, and Romanticism. Before I read books about the arts and philosophy, I had no answers for I had not been aware about these movements.

By virtue of my experience with time and the sterner sex, I came to believe that affection required no conditions; most of the time it exists on the basis of chance. It was not only due to my art, but I also think that the absence of females with the peshmarga made Hajar become a friend and then attracted to me.

Our relationship lasted for two years as friends first and then as lovers. The times we were together were full of romance and passion and when there was not a chance for us to date; he would send me love letters, which I still have. We had spent really nice days, sometimes we were as two pairs of Tigris fish, and sometimes we were like two pairs of white doves in the “No fly zone”

- Other times?
- Two questions.

It subsequently became evident to me that Hajar’s experience in the mountains had, to a certain degree, a negative impact on his behavior and psyche. Psychologically, he was a real revolutionary; that is he would risk everything for the sake of his own goal. In the second year of our relationship I started to hope he would treat me like a female, not a puzzle or an enemy. But he sought out a secret or enemy hidden deep inside me and I cannot comprehend how he found them. He was in a sense aware of all geography and natural phenomena; he knew the names of most of the roads, towns, plants and flowers, animals, and illnesses.

From time to time, I questioned him concerning old days when he was still a peshmarga: What did you eat and drink? Where did you sleep? What did you do when you felt homesick?

I just wanted a picture of his past, but instead he got angry, he disliked the idea of being reminded of those days. He indicated that he wanted to forget, even though such days in the history of any person would be enough reason to make them proud.

- How did you break up?
- That was another tragicomedy; time gradually unveiled his personality. As I remember, in *Nawroz*, it was a Sunday of 1994 when I sent a card inviting him to attend an art exhibition. I told my friends that Hajar would be there. They were curious to meet him. With the excuse of having no time, or being busy, he apologized and did not show up. A week later he called me and talked to me in a harsh and arrogant tone. He tried to belittle me and my career. With bitterness he said “Mariama, try to find another job, arts will not feed you”.

I grew suspicious and wondered “Is it possible that *Zari Mazin* has come wearing the mask of an old peshmarga? Or it is my father, Dewali who wants to warn me and dares not to reveal himself for he fears me. Or could he truly be an honest lover who decided for once to sacrifice his own interests in favor of his love and principles?

A few months later, after he realized he was harsh to me, he tried to seek my forgiveness by inviting me for a night in his palace in *Shakhki*. It was Friday, a blessed day in Islam. That was the first of July as far as I can recall. At noon when he was still at work, which I did not know about it, I was still exhausted due to lack of sleep. I went to the market and bought some grape leaves to cook for *eprakh*, his favorite meal, with green beans for desert. I was so enthusiastic to have a well organized night; *eprakh*, hookah, deserts, drinks, portraits, music, incense as well as my femininity.

I had a bunch of keys given to me, for I had formerly cleaned the entire household; everything in his palace was polished and bright. The neighbors thought I was a maid in the house. Accordingly, I cleaned the Persian carpet spread out in the hall together with those hung over the walls. I prepared the hookah after dinner with enough appetizers to cover the wooden table. The patterned curtain moved together with the afternoon breeze, the sound of music and the smell of the incense. Since the windows were shaded, I moved freely, wearing only a full slip in the household. A night I felt it would not be nice to leave him empty handed; so I drew a new painting “A red apple on a leafless tree” as a gift for his bedroom. Giving him the gift was delayed to end of the evening. He did not know about the painting which was wrapped with some newspapers behind the sofa. I was under the tent of time until one o’clock in the morning. My neck sank down like dry basil. More than once my eyes closed and suddenly I’d awake. I washed my face with

some cold water; I did not want him to find me asleep when he came home. I was longing to embrace him, to feel the warmth of his passion and to never let him go after being apart for so many days. As he mentioned, he was with some friends working. When he returned, the entire atmosphere of the house was changed. Like an agha who fondles, he took me with one arm. I wished for him to kiss my forehead or my lips, it was just the beginning and I desired it to be so passionate.

His frigidity caused me great despair; as if I was a scarecrow shaking in the wind in the plantation of doubt. I could not feel my limbs; I had the sense that my feet were not touching the ground. He lay down on the sofa like a sultan on a throne. The hookah was in his hand; I was like a maid awaiting a gesture. I seated myself at his feet shaking off the towel to clear the smoke. Sporadically, he examined my body, sometimes with a glance and other times with his finger tips. Up until that moment he had acted with coldness; however when I reached for his back with my fingertips, I sensed his warmth. It was then that he threw away the hookah and said "Tonight you are the bride and I am the groom".

I do not understand why this sentence sounded so sweet to my ears. What a pity! Afterwards, I was sure that it was too early for this to have been his intention.

He put his hand on my head with the impression that he was dying for me. At that moment I saw my father and my eyes were filled with tears without being able to shed them. I wished moments like that lasted much longer. On the other hand, Hajar turned into a wolf ready to attack me when on the television he saw PKK's guerilla girls in the snow and in the caves. With a look of rage and an odd tone he made our night uncomfortable, or worse, he destroyed it. He said "Kamal Ataturk says; money should be spent, enemies should be killed, and women should be fucked."

For the first time, ears were not necessary for me. Truly I cried for Hajar, the revolutionist, and seriously laughed at Hajar, the lover. With the morning *azan* I left him. He followed me up to the end of the lane but I did not turn because many others were running before me; Mariama, the orphan, the artist, the trembling adorer and the true Kurd.

And now, Mariama, the weapons dealer, trading at the border of death.

Chapter 11

The Infidel

I endured a long and dark isolation, until July 1996. That was undeniably hard; but no one humiliated me, for no one hurt my feelings. In this city weaned on terror, being on the offense is of great importance.

True! No border could stop anyone. Those days were full of illusions but at the same time they meant liberty and openness. I was simply able to say “Yes” and “No”.

Except for experience and liberty, the best opportunity to evaluate one’s potentialities is solitude. There was nothing specific that terrified me. During two years of isolation, I attempted to learn more about arts through reading and practice which, in my opinion, was creativity to a certain degree. In the meantime, I finished twenty portraits, enough for a gallery of my own, though that was not my intent; psychologically, I was not well.

July the first, thread, torn curtains, snakes, and train smoke were the major symbols in my paintings. In some paintings all of the symbols were used – and all related to me.

For most of the attendants, my paintings looked so feminine, maybe because they were painted by me, a woman. They thought only moss grows on my shores, only apples hang down from my branches, or only lotus blooms on the surface of my waters. Among that entire crowd, just two

understood my pictures; Kovan and Kajeen. They could not tell anyone since the symbols were related to my pain, and they did not want others to be aware of it. I could not understand the reason for their silence, all I know is that they said with pride “You are our elder sister”.

In the third and the last day of my exhibition, a nice young man caught my eye in the hall. He seemed a stranger. A folded newspaper was held under his arm. I have a good memory. What I mean is that if I had seen him before, I would have recognized the man.

That young man was looking closely at my work. It was as if he was looking for a lost painting, or was a dealer examining a piece of art before buying the purchase. If there were critics, one would think him a critic. He stood still before each portrait and pushed his glasses on the top of his nose so as not to miss even the most minute elements of the work. Although his blue eyes were obviously tired, they were still charming. He turned after examining every picture, and, among the crowd, would glance at me like a politician while giving a speech. Honestly it was not his interest in my work that attracted my attention, but his elegance. He was dressed completely in black. His slender figure was covered by an overcoat whose darkness appeared to be stolen from the night. His sash was the same color of the coat. He looked like an Eskimo that had lost his way.

Like many others of the visitors, he put his signature in the guestbook and congratulated me. His perfume magically drew me to him; unlike the smell sent by the armpits of others which would burn one’s nose. The few white locks of hair on both sides of his head reminded me of the various seasons of the year, especially *buhar*, spring. I got the impression that he wanted to talk to me but could not because of the crowd in the gallery; he slowly walked away. There were some visitors waiting to speak and get introduced to me. Every few moments he looked at his golden yellow watch with a black belt. With the gentleness of an artist, I took the initiative; “Sir, would you be patient please? Can you stay, because I have something to say to you.” He understood and smiled to me saying: “Thank you *khanim*, lady”.

“Mariama khan, thank you for this opportunity, and for initiating it. I am fond of art galleries for it is not necessary to know who the artist is. I did not know your name at first; but I saw it on your portraits. I do not know how to start; all your paintings are in fact, valuable, your art is extremely beautiful. I have a word for you but I do not know whether, for you, it will be a question or criticism or something else...”

I was looking at his eyes; he was examining my features and the color of my clothes. He felt he had the freedom to say “You are a portrait yourself, more charming than all the others”.

He said his words with hesitation as he adjusted his spectacles with his finger tips. I did not hear all of his words for I was surprised that a man could speak as he did. There was a slight breeze moving between us. I felt like I was a teenager flirting with a boy of the same age. In those moments I forgot all of my bitter memories and felt more like a woman than a painter. It was as if I was not in a gallery but in another time in an orchard of cotton after being carried by the rainbow I spoke of before.

“Please sir, you can speak”, I said while folding my arms like a poor student in primary school would while listening to their teacher.

“Honestly, the colors of your paintings are pretty, but, no offense, most of them look cold. Why is the colour red absent from your paintings?!”

I thought that was the end of his speech. But before I could reply he stared again “I was pleased with your paintings and I was moved by them a great deal. But, I must I repeat myself; you did not use the colour red.”

Pardon me sir; you have not introduced yourself to me yet. Would you tell me your name?

He answered me with pride, “Islam, my name is Islam”

With a slight smile, I expressed my pleasure as a compliment lest he should be a mystery like Hawar, the peshmarga. Then, like a tutor I asked him; “*Kak*, Mr. Islam; would you tell me about your profession?”

I worked formerly in various organizations, but later I was a member of the communist party. Presently I have no job”.

Nareen, I know what is it like to be unemployed, but I have no idea how one can overcome it. He was excited to hear my answer about the colour red. Deliberately and wickedly I said; “Because I no longer believe in revolution and love.”

Due to the directness of my response, he turned right and left as one would in a mosque taking the folded newspaper from one underarm into the other. Once again he adjusted his glasses, and said “So you are not only a painter but a person with an enlightened mind too”.

My surprise was expressed with a glance and a reckless, “pardon!” because all artists are illuminated to a certain degree. It apparently had slipped out of his mouth, therefore he apologized at once; “Excuse me *khanim*, lady what I meant was that you are able to deal with colors as well as words and thoughts too...”

In one way or another he wanted me to realize that he was also an artist with both his words and his expressions. I tried to tell him about trueness and appearance as he used “truly” when he spoke. I wanted him to understand that all kinds of people should strive to be so honest; but I kept silent. He was a communist and it was unbelievable that he did not recognize such a fact.

An artist or a party member should be honest with himself as well as others; there is no need to swear and ask other people to believe him. Truthfulness is just like the *zakat*, almsgiving, to be given not claimed.

He took a chance and began to speak about himself before I asked him. He said that he sometimes writes prose and literary texts; he wanted my permission to write about some of my paintings. I expressed my approval and gratitude. In good humour, I told him to be aware of my symbols.

He put his hand on his chest and said; “Promise. As a matter of fact, I want to understand your use of symbols in your drawings... I wish whole-heartedly for us to see each other again. What do think?”

Trying to be kind, I said “As our Muslim brothers say, *Khodi Kareema*, if it is God’s will”.

He gave me a card with his phone number and said; “I will be waiting for you. Do not hesitate if you want to contact me”. Then he left.

I hid his card like an amulet in my lap. Unconsciously I remembered Zari Mazin and Mohammedi Mayri. Some days passed without contacting him for I had lost the card, or misplaced it! I do not know for certain. I was busy with my art and my daily routine. I forgot him. Nevertheless, whenever I saw a man in black, I remembered him instantly. I also recalled his words, especially; “You are a portrait yourself, more charming than all the others”.

Sometime later, as I do every week, I purchased the local newspapers and magazines before I went home. I also bought some books about art which were very cheap since they were old and most probably not of interest to anyone. In the taxi I had quickly gone through the headings of the newspaper before arriving home where I could read them in detail. And then I saw the title of an article which said; “I no more believe in revolution and love.” I knew they were my words, to whom they were addressed, where and when.

In another newspaper, I saw the picture of one of my drawings (The train smoke) and read Islam’s article. It was written very artistically. It was a well composed piece of writing. What was odd about the article was the point in which my story started; it said “If the painter of these magical drawings does not believe in love and revolution, then let no one can claim to be a lover or a rebel.”

At first I felt suspicious of him. But then, I really desired to see him so I could express my gratitude. But many days passed and my desire began to fade. Eventually I could no longer contain my somewhat contradicting feelings. I decided to go to the office of the newspaper and ask the for Islam's phone number and address. Undoubtedly, they would oblige me because I am a woman.

- Maybe. And then...?
- Then fate rescued me. Before my trip could be turned into the subject of rumors on doorsteps; I encountered Islam at the entrance. I said to myself, "God, I have been looking for you in the skies while you are here on earth."

He was lucky; I told him all that he wanted to know without him having to ask. Then he invited me for dinner, "an artistic dinner" as he said. There were no such private places as there are now, so we went to a remote place in *Zawita*. It was a nice place. Above us pine trees stood still in front of the afternoon breeze under which people walked, thought, and talked softly; in a location where one could never feel free. Those who pass by us did not speak loudly; but their eyes said many things. It is useless to let oneself become disturbed by them since life itself is but a phenomenon in our countries where I feel the climate used to be the only good thing - and now it is deteriorating too. Who would deny their glances have a positive denotation, in other words, as it is said their "expectations" or "envies" or any other expression that should necessarily declare their sorrows?

Our people are apparently still unable to express themselves properly. Consequently, if one desired to explore their thoughts, one should explore their minds. And to discover their *niyaz*, hope, one should enter their hearts.

Nareen, as a matter of respect to Islam's invitation, I stayed in his company all the afternoon, but Hajar, the peshmarga was with us in every moment as well. Nevertheless they were two different individuals of the same gender. Their only similarity was in the way they ended with me. When I looked at Islam, I saw the image of Hajar in his face.

We had a meal together. I still remember it clearly, as if I was there now. I ordered kabab while Islam had *qozi*, meat with rice. Before our meal we had a course of appetizers. Islam intended to entice me with his thoughts, his philosophies. I tried to persuade him to talk so I could become better acquainted to the gravity of his thoughts. I felt the appropriate topic was my Train Smoke and his article. After he had put his overcoat by the side of the table, he said "for the last few days, I have been thinking of you; I have visited many galleries and met many painters. Your exhibition was the first one I attended that was convincing. You are the first true painter I have met. "Mariama *jan*", before it was Mariama khan, Mam, "with the communists, one learns many things except lying therefore I am telling you the truth."

When Islam was talking I responded as a guest would when listening to a host; I graciously nodded with my head once in a while. I wanted to ask him about his black overcoat, why he wore it in the summer, but I remembered what he said when discussing my paintings, “My soul is cold, I never get warm”. However, he interrupted my question when he started to speak about honesty; I asked him “What honesty sir?”

- The honesty of my feelings Mariama *janim*, my dear, *jan* has turned into *janim*; I am quite hopeful that one day we will understand each other more and by that time my thoughts perceptions will be plain for you because my words and your colors will never be able to understand them.

I understood and sensed his purpose. His eyes were not only able to interpret his feelings but communicate them too. I was sure it was early for a new relationship for I was not over the pains of my previous experience.

“I probably overstated your paintings in my article. The idea of being a critic worried me to some extent; my sentiments dominated my thoughts and the articles meaning.” He said abruptly.

I tried to change the subject but in vain; the pressure of his feelings and emotions forced him to rush his questions: “Mariama, can I ask you a personal question?”

How can I have privacy when I live amongst babblers and the unemployed! If not with violence it is violated with etiquette. I did not have any idea about his question therefore I nodded. Timidly, he asked “Do have a friend?”

I answered him softly: “No, I have no friends”. I understood what he was hinting at. Unfortunately he did not understand my answer. I knew he meant “a boyfriend”; but he did know that I referred to “a friend”.

In fact I had no friends; although it was important for me to have companions. In an Islamic, eastern and highly conservative society that still adheres to outdated traditions, can one be satisfied, or can one accept the company of a girl who has been raped?

I took a cigarette from his packet which he lit for me before I uttered something just to kill time. Occasionally, time is certainly one’s enemy.

I became anxious; my intense thoughts were scattered. I put out the cigarette and held my bag like I was preparing to return to Dohuk. He immediately rescued us from separating when he said; “Mariama jan, I have been with The Communist Party for twenty years. I have done a good deal of reading. To help improve my knowledge, and, as a member, the party sent me abroad; I went to Moscow, Brag, and Syria.

“As you see, my hair has turned white, due to the sorrows brought on by politics. Theoretically, I have a good knowledge but practically it is very limited. I have been trying for sixteen years but alas. People are only good enough for their own parties, and I have been going on only because I believed in my principles. Do you have any idea what “principles” were brought to me? Sixteen years is not a short period of time for anyone who spends them working; they are also long when they leave one poor and miserable. More than once I have been arrested and tortured. But why then did no one rescue me? Especially my colleagues in politics...”

Nareen, at that time I had the sense that Islam was being honest with me and himself. Honesty was shining in his eyes. He put out his cigarette half smoked and before lighting a new one, began to talk to himself without any restrictions. There was no censorship or fear, he had moved beyond the shyness and complexities involved in feeling inferior to the listener, he was not like the men of this nation who fear revealing what is kept in their hearts in front of a woman.

With a smile like a breeze drifting across my face, I looked the attentive listener while he continued; “I am a friend of radical anthropology, in my heart, the little of it that remains, I have sympathy for the poor, day and night I think of them. I believe I am so keen and concerned with their efforts to provide for their daily needs as well as developing perspectives and methods for the sake of improving their state on all levels. I want for them to be strong enough to know something about their destiny. I wish for them to live in happiness and for their financial condition to improve so that new horizons will open for them.

I rose unconsciously and gave him a hug, not because he spoke well but because I was one of the poor he was referring to; he did not know that. His eyes glistened. His lashes held back his tears. He kissed my hand and said; “Mariama jan I love...” but before he could finish his sentence I put my hand on his mouth and said “Do not be in haste, it’s still early.”

He was not hurt and when he kissed my finger tips a love as great as an ocean was released throughout my dry body. Before returning home he gave me his phone number again but this time he wrote it on the palm of my hand so I would not to lose it.

I knew that sooner or later he would reveal his love for me since I had felt it; but I was waiting for him to initiate it. How nice Nareen! To see love’s butterflies in the range of one’s vision fly and perform the dance of liberty. Behind the torn curtains of truth those butterflies were terrorized; I was weeping for them. I wept for all, my mother, my father, my son, being a virgin,

the last dream. They could have remained; I needed them but each one of them decided to leave and reached for their own lot. I remained with my nation; secretly we cry for each other.

Islam called me every night especially at midnight. And when he did not call, I called him. My ears were used to his melodious voice. He had a very nice voice particularly when he read poetry and prose. Sometimes as a joke I told him “Alas for this voice, you should call to prayer in mosques instead of the rude voiced salafi mallas!” I laughed but he did not.

When the city was asleep we were as awake as border guards. At the beginning our conversations were formal; however we soon raised the white flag of love and wild desires. We yearned for each other. Though we did meet every day, we talked on the phone nightly. The telephone satisfied our longing. Many times we crossed the lines and flew with the wings of our desires till we reached freedom.

- Europeans say that a human body never lies.
- Right Nareen. Even though it does not lie, people have no faith in that since no one is interested in it.

Islam was so transparent. He knew how to treat a woman when he confessed and wanted to make love. Many times I took the phone to bed with me; it sometimes became his hand, one that was passing over my body. At other times it was his lips and some other times...!

- Then what Mariama? Go on.
- My grief and how it ended made me weep. I cursed the community, culture, and law since they were not aware of the fire that was burning me. In the evenings I fell asleep half dead, half wet and half dry; I was dead in my bed, broken and all was broken for me.

Until the end of the summer, for almost three months, we continued along this path; by day we were two adults and by night, two simple thieves.

- Then...?
- Then one night he called me speaking strange words, after which we broke up.
- You said before that you started your relationship with a strange sentence.
- Yes, I said so.

- And now you are telling me that the same person broke up with you also with a strange utterance?!
- Yes, Nareen. Believe me. Odd ha? Do not forget that time itself is odd. Do not knit your brows or raise them surprised; a human mind can accept many things.

On that last night, as we were talking in the phone, I almost reached orgasm. I asked him to make love to me, but not from behind so that I could feel my femininity and put out that fire inside me. He said “you are still a girl and it is better if we do it from behind. My request was different and apparently his own too, therefore he misunderstood me. He did not directly say “You are a whore and no one would marry you”, he also said nothing like “You are an old maid imposing yourself on others”; he said “you want me to do as you want so in the end I will be obliged to marry you?!”

Do you believe that a communist would speak in this manner?

- Mariama, I understand. It must be so hard to find out that the man one loves thinks in that way.
- I am sure Islam did not know that I was not a virgin or that I had been raped. So I must ask myself: “What would he say if he knew that fact?”

Love is part of a man’s being, but it is the whole of a woman’s. Islam was not aware of this as well.

Chapter 12

Molla

During the winter of the same year, I was totally isolated. A long vacation was what I needed; away from people, community, and those places where I met Islam. Memories are truly sweet but they also hurt.

Like old times, I was all by myself. I comforted myself with my old paintings. I decided to open a private Mariama gallery only for me, but how? This city is a shelter for spies - nothing can be hidden.

I did not want to promote it like before or write "Under the sponsorship of so and so". I also did not want anyone to attend and with arrogance sign a guest book. I disdained the idea of being obliged to explain the paintings one by one for the guests who kept an eye on the painting and the other on my breast or thigh; they nodded their heads as if they understood my explanation. I disliked those who pretend to have knowledge; on behalf of some silent guests they ask and repeat meaningless questions. All I desired was to be alone within my tragedy.

Nareen, once a politician, standing before my painting said: “If we don’t have trains in Kurdistan, why do you paint them?” I did not figure out which Kurdistan he meant; ours or that of the poor “inside us”, or that of the officials and “their wallets”?

Trying to sound educated another man said “Your paintings are so gloomy, try to add some optimism. Life is very sweet; it is too early for you to be this depressed.”

It was odd for me to hear a man who I considered one of the ‘walking dead’ speak to me of the pleasures of life. Who was he to say “it is too early.” As if my age was written on my forehead and he was intelligent enough to read it. I was not hurt but laughed inside. He would have never spoken in such a manner if he himself had had a dream, knew change or life.

Eventually I decided to hold a gallery in a very private place; do you know where Nareen? I do not think anyone would know because it was not announced by the media.

- Where was it Mariama?
- In my tiny room, at night... midnight.

I put all my drawings in one line including “the train smoke”, “the red apple in the leafless tree” and the one before the last “Samyan”.

- One more painting and that is it?
- I wish if I could but I want to go on at the same time; because of this art and these paintings I am alive till now eating the bread of the living. Let us shift back to our subject.
- Please, Mariama, I am all yours.
- I went to the bazaar, not to look for the latest fashion of cloth for Kiras and fistan but to buy white fabric to cover the paintings – to hide them like the dead in a coffin. During the day the paintings were covered while at night I removed the covering and lit a candle under each one. My gallery was a graveyard during the day and a kingdom over the clouds as one hears in the legends of salafis at night. It lasted for three days.

People, snakes, thread, headstones of the dead, train smoke, all became alive; they tore the white cloth and came out of the frames to move into my room.

Each one, Nareen, turned into a friend; they talked to me and I talked to them one by one. Those moments made me feel like I was an Inanna or Anahita. Only when I heard Manjool’s noise with Kajeen in the next room, would I remember I was still Mariama, the unfortunate and miserable Mariama.

I spent the time between October 1996 and 2002 all alone. This time I seriously attempted to keep myself safe and tried to avoid being entrapped by another man. Somehow I was able to manage; but honestly, pardon me, but after Islam I am used to saying “honestly”, it was extremely hard for me. I am a woman and an artist, I cannot live without love. And because I am an artist I love a myriad of things since art itself is love. Do not forget, the absence of a man in a woman’s life would alter her existence while turning her days into more than deserts of time.

- But what men, Mariama?
- I can understand your point. Here all men are men as all women are women. They all marry in the same way. That is not how I think; but I am aware that I am unable to make others change their minds. The standards of being a man or a woman are still related to the physical form. I sometimes think that people’s evil thoughts have come from their physique; they need a surgical operation, do they not?

Their thoughts are crippled but an operation would cripple the body. That is obviously true.

Whatever the case may be, Dohuk is a city with enough stories. Due to my memories with the two men, Hajar the peshmarga and Islam the communist, Dohuk became a graveyard to me. I felt estranged, I was troubled, in the lines that get longer and longer as days pass, I realized I am but a number, and nothing else occupied my mind. My financial state declined; except for selling a number of my paintings I had no other income to make a living. I found myself obliged to take writing as a craft and occasionally I wrote for some newspapers to make a little money. Sometimes I published the same article in different papers. Writing was not my profession, but as you know there is no specialization here and writing, not unlike many other things, has become a job for the unemployed.

I was ready to learn other trades like tailoring so I would not have to become a miser. I think an artist can succeed in learning any craft or trade as long as they are determined. An artist views the world differently, and in many respects is more sensitive than other people.

By virtue of tailoring, I was acquainted with some girls in the neighborhood and then with diplomacy, which I learned from politicians who I became friends with. During those five or six years my financial state improved a little. For a while I abandoned art for

it made me greedy, I wanted to achieve success in various trades as well as the arts. I was rational and thought of a private project of my own.

Nareen I had been through enough poverty and misery. I remembered my father therefore it was time for me to create an environment that would enrich my life financially. Do you have an opinion on what I just said? If you have please say it!

- No dear, it is normal. It is also an undeniable right that one should try to establish one's independence and then preserve it afterward.

Why can't tailoring then be the main source of income? Why can't I try to prove to Manjool, the visitor, and many others that I am able to move on without them? I will never forget when I had to throw myself before the cradle of my brother Kovan begging Manjool for a riyal to buy some cinnamon... I will always remember when I had no money to hire a taxi to go back home from Azadi Hospital after the abortion of my baby. There were some events that no painting could bear; I would not like to talk about them.

My confidence in men loosened, but projects needed men, especially in such a male dominated society. I did not know what to do or say until I got to be acquainted to Shaima. She was a dependable person. Before every feast or social event, she came to me so I could fix her makeup. Even though she belonged to a rich family, she was so generous. As days passed we became close friends and sometimes we went out together. She needed a friend like me to listen to her when she talked. Shaima was like a blocked river that could burst at any moment. Where could she be now? What could she be doing?

I have not seen her for ages. She might be in Dohuk or she might not; I do not know exactly, she might be married and if not, I do not think she would be working because she was their only daughter. The aristocratic tradition of the family would not permit her to accompany just any person.

After Shaima became attached to me, I revealed to the idea of my project. I assured her that working is the only way for a woman to obtain freedom. That the work must be private and when a woman is financially independent many things change in her life. As I had hoped, and not as Shaima had expected, her family decided to help with the project. Her brother, Hajji Hawar, offered the reserve capital for the shop; but under the condition that neither me nor Shaima should work as salesclerks in the boutique. If we did his gherat, honor, would not allow him to help. I was satisfied; Shaima aspired for more but she could not have it all. In the middle of the bazaar, we opened our boutique and hired two eloquent girls, Maha and Rima. They worked out front while we ran the shop.

- As a name, Shaima, has religious connotations.

- Right, but she was a charming girl, she was only twenty five years old. Her face was as white as snow; it was covered with a veil. Her family members were all hajjis; they performed the hajj, her father was Hajji Haji, her mother hajji Rand, and her brother hajji Hawar. Shaima was different; I think if she had wanted to visit the holy lands, she would have told me.

For Shaima, I was not only a friend but an elder sister too. She asked my opinion for anything that came to her mind. It was my pleasure not Hawar's. Whenever he saw me, he turned his face away and with the excuse of ablution, he did not shake hands with me. He made me feel impure. He told Shaima more than once to have Mariama put on a head-dress. He did not know that Shaima herself desired to take it off but dared not. As a poor observing woman, she felt estranged; only when with me did she find herself. She always told me: "Mariama, dear sister, I recognize I will not be able to change you to be like me, so I guess I will be like you."

- What was your response?
- I said "Let us just be ourselves"
- And what did you tell her about the headdress?
- I said "Tell your brother that Mariama says Allah kareem, Bountiful. If it happens you encounter a person like him you need to be aware of the tools for dealing with him and to specify your options immediately. You cannot be free in your choices with people like him for you cannot be honest with their different measures of reality. People of faith like Hawar would like to mention the name of Allah and the prophets, uttering "peace be upon him" constantly and everywhere.

"Allah is bountiful, if Allah will, may Allah be pleased with you" have become the idioms of their natural vocabulary. Using them has a positive affect for on them, for it puts whatever they are about to say in a positive light. Accordingly I decided to use them too especially when I spoke to hajji Hawar.

- But in this way, your behavior changes, you are obliged to adjust yourself, are not you?
- Perhaps. Do not forget that I said "People of faith" and most of the people in our time are skeptics.

Nareen, currently, one can hardly remain true to oneself. In Europe, as you know, no one has to acclimate, the needs of an individual are respected to a great extent; people respect

the individual. In the Middle East, you are highly regarded and respected when you act as you are told. You cannot be what you want. What makes these people eccentric is their wretchedness.

Hajji Hawar was a decent and to a certain degree a dogmatic person. His actions were greatly influenced by the book and *sunna*; he also used the *dar Siwak*, the tooth cleanser. He wanted his daily actions to be based on all the principals mentioned in the sunna without taking into consideration place, time, and change. It spoke in “Absolute truths”. He said that the *govand*, folk dance, was forbidden; any society where the name of Allah and the prophet was not mentioned was corrupted and damned. He said many things that do not go in agreement with anthropology. However, no one was given the chance to answer him or at least ask questions of him.

As he said, hajji Hawar was well aware of what he wanted in his life and what he was doing. He used to say “This life is passing and mortal; a human is an unwelcome guest who soon heads toward and into the real world. He meant the afterworld, the subject we just talked about. I was willing to speak about Plato’s philosophy, the subject about which he wrote so profoundly; but I hesitated lest he should misunderstand me.

For me and you, he is to a certain degree a fundamentalist; but in the view of many, he is an example of a virtuous man beyond his times. He had a long beard but it was clean. He was a very good looking man. He was tall with dark hair and a white complexion. He had graduated from a college of Sharia, Islamic Law, though he did not want to be appointed since he managed his father’s trade. For a long time he wanted to get married but he “had not found the right woman” as Shaima said.

- And then...?
- Then he found her.

Since we continued spending time together, we grew closer to each other. Many times during the afternoon, and as he desired, Shaima and I had a walk with him. Shaima purposely tried to leave us by ourselves. I think it was his wish; there was a change occurring in his morality and he shook hands with me. I felt I was with a gentleman but when he encountered someone who said to him “hajji Hawar...” my feelings grew old. I took a small mirror out of my bag and looked at my complexion, unconsciously I laughed.

The time we spent together was a good chance for me to give him a sincere impression of who I am, away from his world of daily idioms. Unfortunately, he always treated me as just a woman; as if he was Adam and I was Eve created from one of his ribs. Shaima made it clear to me that he was pleased with me and he constantly asked about how I was. And I finally understood why he desired me to abandon all of my odd and old opinions.

He knew that I did not pray or fast; I did none of my religious duties. I was a Muslim only on my ID card. He had believed in himself and his power, he repeatedly said "If God wills it, you will do the duties".

If I had wanted to, I would have attempted to do them, but I did not. I do not feel it is God's will for me to pray or fast. Did God order Mohammadi Mayri to rape Mariama?

After some days passed I thought of using my woman's wickedness. I needed to make sure of my feelings while giving him the opportunity to realize his own. Did he question Shaima when I was not there? Did he miss me? Has he thought of me? Was he afraid of me? Or was he afraid for his own sister after sensing something about my past?

In order not to find myself waiting in another empty station, it was necessary for me to ask some questions. A few days after my period of isolation I went to the shop to make him stop looking for me; I had left no means of communication between the two of us. The moment he saw me he wanted to come and hold me in his arms; but I had decided to act apathetic, and wanted to see how he would react.

After my days of isolation, I now found that he had changed and that I hadn't. Whatever we conversed about, he said "As you wish", he agreed with me all the time. If I said red, he said red, if I said black, he said black etc...

Hajji Hawar became a man of manners and etiquette. He called me every night and we talked for hours. During the day when we had walks together, he wanted to be by me to attract the attention of those who passed by us. He drew my chair in at restaurants before he seated himself.

Truly, he was respectable; he cared about my feelings and my fancies for he saw me as a person of good will. I was held in the shadow of a cherry plum tree. I did not imagine that he would awaken my skepticism concerning religion and the purpose of our existence. I thought that his love for me changed him. My thoughts, like a flock of birds, flew away from me and died in the sky of his faith, a faith that later fell downward like it was struck by a stone. He wanted to be a new god, to be created out of me, not of mud, to give me death while he soared immortal. I was the earth, he was the sky; but soul?

I was tired of listening to tales of mythology about justice, equality, looking for immortality, more than one marriage; however he tried to retell them in a different way.

I doubted that he would forgive my past sins with sacrifice, prayer, and fasting; he would give me the chance for re-estimation and rehabilitation. Will he punish me one day?

Deliberately and frankly I addressed him with a question in order to kill all of my doubts, “Hajji Hawar, a sin for me is to disrespect others, what is a sin for you?”

- Mariama, a sin for me is adultery.

Chapter 13

Mohammadi Mahdi

In my opinion, my initiation was bold; but for him it was decisive for Hawar had been ill for some days. It was very hard for him; he was pale and suffering from hepatitis. Day after day he became weaker. I did not see him myself; Shaima told me all the details about his health by phone; she told me how they kept him in the hospital for eleven days. He neither ate nor drank anything; he only raved. In moments of semi-consciousness he forgot God, the prophet, prayer, praise; he only mentioned my name.

Just the three of us were aware of his illness and subsequent treatment. This was a heavy burden to bear. It was not my choice though I felt no remorse of conscience. I had the ability to make my choice or at least realize that hajji Hawar was not the treatment for my wounds. I had

sympathized with him and according to my principles and conscience I wanted to do something for him. But sometimes one's principles and conscience are weakened by the heart and our sentiments.

One can discipline his or her mind, interests or impressions, but only liars claim to have the capacity to suppress and subdue their feelings.

- In Scandinavian countries they say that one cannot control their own heart.

True. The feelings of a person are free. On this land that is burdened with blood, a one's emotions are captured and caged, rather than set free. With hajji Hawar, both heart and feelings freed me. I became certain of my situation and decision; he was not the right man or I might not be what he needed. Therefore, it was impossible to live together because we were two different beings.

In the period between July 1983 and July 2005 I reached a state of freedom; not so long, is it?

- No, especially for someone who lives in the Middle East.
- During those dark years I was able to reconstruct Mariama the human. I am still proud of my wounds even though they could not be healed. What if one gets injured in the battle of life and death? The World Wars, The Gulf War and the Anfal Operation all came to an end, while my conflicts with the remains of this filthy culture are still persistent. I am determined to prove to Manjool and the three knights with no flag on the gates of Mariama's castle that they chose death while I chose life.

Hajji Hawar was gone, taking with him our future plans and ventures. With impertinence, he dismissed me from the shop and kept it for himself. I was willing to stay and share the boutique with him, for its income was beneficial for me. I thought if he would not stand, I could buy his share and be the owner myself; I would keep Maha and Rima in the shop since I might never find such hard workers as they were. Apparently hajji Hawar wanted revenge and even Shaima tried to justify his actions. I sold my share without even asking for more than he paid, I would sell it to anyone.

I had no income for two months. I thought of many things, of selling all the gold I had, rings and bracelets, and together with my share of money from the boutique I would buy a taxi. I was told that the idea of buying a taxi was good but only if the owner is the one who drives it. And being a woman, I could not do this. Working in the trade was not possible, being a female; I could not go to Dubai or China alone.

What should I do?

I was afraid that I would run out of money. Since then and until you came, the idea of going abroad has been in my mind, therefore I told you early in the evening “I still do not know the reason for your coming back.”

I have understood that being abroad is hard especially for an artist or a lonely woman with no relatives. It is hard here too. I have no one except Kovan and Kajeen who are busy with their studies. What would one expect from them? With all my troubles I feel pity for them for being left to be raised by Manjool.

I was lost in a maze of thoughts; should I travel or should I not?

For the first time geography terrified me. Believe me I had many fears; unemployment, men, my stepmother and poverty.

Abroad, there is no unemployment, no poverty, only men. And even the men there have become like robots, working day and night, they do more than elongate their moustaches or tear curtains. They believe in light not darkness or curtains. By all means...

I am convinced that I no longer have a place in this country for I do not have anyone. As long as I am a stranger here and people, especially men, treat me as a stranger, I might as well move to another country to live amongst other strangers far away. I made up my mind and began my preparations in secret. Before selling my furniture and some paintings, I went to the black market to ask for a passport and to know details about traveling. In the market I saw many faces and heard many voices but they were helpless. One man in the market knew who I was; he said that he was interested in my art and that he visited all the galleries I took part in. He bought one of my paintings. He was pleased to see me and offered to help me. I explained to him that I had no idea about the tricks of the black market, and told him that I would be grateful if he could teach me one.

His name was Bekas. He was not a journalist but due to his knowledge in the matter, he asked me as a journalist would: “Mariama khan, why do you want to travel?” Like a confident convict I answered him “You are not the only one who is lonesome.”

Bekas told me that traveling would be easy, but two things ought to be ready: a new passport and a man with whom I should leave Kurdistan. Afterward, he said with self assurance “Do not worry, just depend on me”

Everyone said “Leave it to God” but Bekas said “Leave it to me”.

A few days later, Bekas called and told me that everything was complete; both the man and the passport were ready. I had to just pay the money, everything else was their responsibility.

I was very happy. Quick as a flash I was in the bazaar having my photos taken. On the way, I imagined that I was wandering in the streets of a European city like Stockholm or Amsterdam. Eventually I reached a photographer who had just opened. Fortunately he had returned from his lunch quickly.

After a greeting, and with rare smile on his face, he said; “Come on in lady, you can prepare yourself in front of the mirror one last time before I take your picture.”

His shop was so pleasant. Once I sat on the chair I felt uneasy even though it was different from the execution chair. The chair, like the barber’s chair, belongs to no one; many sit on it every day leaving their spirit behind.

Three things needed to be fixed; my make-up, my collar, and my hair. For a little while, I stood before the mirror and was not disturbed. I wanted to take the pictures soon so I could catch the black market, but after being seated, I did not want to rise again. The movements and the looks of the photographer attracted my attention. He was confused; every other minute, he turned to me and directed the lens of his camera towards me. Once he said “Your hair is in your face” or “Smile” and others he said “Look at me as if you are the photographer not me”.

His last sentence moved me. Honestly, who is snapping who?

Before he gave me the sign with his hand to look at him, a picture on the wall caught my attention; it was a black and white photograph. One of the people looked very artistic... it was a woman. Her features were similar to mine; but I looked younger. I delivered my question with shrewdness “Who is that woman? She looks familiar to me”

I was waiting for an answer when he pressed the bottom and took a picture. He was waiting for the moment when I would look spontaneously at his camera. Like a Roman Emperor, he held my hand as he led me out of the studio. That moment aroused in me a certain melancholy: as if I was lost and he found me. He sent for a tea for me and lit a cigarette; he said “The story of this picture is long... sitting over a cup of tea does not offer me enough time to tell it”.

As he was talking, he looked at the picture with a slight smile. Before developing my pictures, he asked me a question which I do not think he would ask anyone else, “What are these pictures for? A passport?”

I nodded with “yes”.

- You are going abroad?
- Again, my answer was brief; it hardly made sense. He already knew that I was not traveling to study because I looked too old for that. He also knew I had no invitation from any country for I had no passport; he only said “I was in Sweden for five years, in Uppsala. I was given asylum but I returned to Dohuk and ...”

His eyes were two nests; the birds that flew from them could not perch on my branches for they were moved by the winds. Before I could bid him goodbye and leave, he turned his face, I thought he was talking to himself when he said “I returned and I do not regret it. You would say I am an optimist. Our strife was in a way also our ideal; we had a faith in it, and endured hardships for the sake of our beliefs. Today, we cannot stand people who believe in Utopia. Here lies the tragedy of a person, especially when that person is a Kurd...”

Instead of going to the black market to give Bekas the pictures; I went home to isolate myself. All that night, I stared at my pictures and remembered the photographer’s studio, particularly the picture of the woman that had become an enigma to me. I had neither the name of the photographer nor his phone number. I stood before the mirror looking at my body. I did not know why the image of the woman was still before me. For a few days, I forgot about the mirror, although I stood in front of it for half an hour every morning before leaving. During that half hour I put on my makeup and brushed my hair; but that night I looked at myself. Who am I? Who is this woman? Who is the person in the mirror? Who is the photographer?

I did not know that his phone number was written on the white envelope where he had put my pictures. Jihan was the name of his lab; two phone numbers were just above the stamp. One day later, in the morning, it was the thirty first of July, not the first in 2005 when I called him with the excuse of thanking him. His voice and his poetic tone assured me it was him on the phone not someone else. I also sensed that there was no one with him. We were involved in a long conversation afterward. He said: “Our conversation is not over, but there is not enough time right now.” I answered him softly “we can have tea together, but under one condition; you make a copy of that woman’s picture for me”.

Before I arrived, he copied the picture and wrapped it in some old newspaper; it reminded me of the painting I made for Hajar, the peshmarga.

As I was drinking my tea, I listened to the story of the woman. The story sounded like it was taken from an old novel. You would think that the woman was sitting with us. His eyes sometimes were on my makeup and at other times on the street which was crowded with people and cars.

My name is Kirmanj, also called “Camera Kirmanj,” for a camera is always with me. In July 1995, I left the country. I traveled through Turkey reaching Sweden. Some months after I arrived to Sweden I was given asylum; I was given what would make any refugee pleased, residence, a salary as well as a few other privileges. What is given does not mean a great deal for I was a refugee and a refugee is a stranger after all. I lived in more than one city in Sweden and I felt like I was unwelcome in all of them. They did not say “We do not want you here” but a thousand times daily they showed it with their looks and behavior. As I said, it was all in vain, living in different places. The feeling of isolation and alienation unconsciously estranged me from the

Swedes and from myself as well. I attempted to learn their language but at such an age as mine one cannot learn all that he desires. Studying cinematography was my goal, though my age became an obstacle. In Europe, one's age plays a role in their education, work and their sex lives. When it was night I started to feel my existence and belonging, I was an individual whose companion was time and from whom place broke away. While in Sweden, many things within me began to change. In exile one unconsciously melts away Mariama Khan. Change is good for children and adults but no for someone in his forties..."

Nareen, from the beginning of our relation till the time it came to its end, he never mentioned the word "man"; all he used was "human". He continued to tell me the story of his return to Kurdistan and how he visited the institutes concerned with returning refugees as they looked with surprise at him and his answers. On his part, he frankly told them his real sentiments and attitude. He said that it was his time but the place did not belong to him. He might have taken someone else's place who did belong there. Before he had returned home, a Swedish newspaper in Stockholm interviewed him and he was asked about his reason for leaving Sweden; he said "Sweden is a beautiful and clean country, and it is understandable why every Swede is proud of his country. People like me should envy them. Actually, I am in need of a country where one's rights are reserved but Sweden is not in need of me... There is another land that needs me more than Sweden; it is called Kurdistan. I have to return.

In July 1995 he went abroad and in July 2000 he came back to Kurdistan. Obviously I am not the only one whose life was changed by July; some other people's life changed as well, but they do not have the courage to talk about it.

Since the photo lab was his only source of income, I did not intend to have a detailed discussion with him. He did not want to visit me at home so I would not have to encounter Manjool. I had told him my story with her. He felt sympathy for me. You can say that he liked me and I felt the same for him; the more I learned about him, the more I grew fond and attached to him. First I was double minded "Should I tell him the truth or should not I?" Even rocks and trees work for the Intelligence Department, or the Secret Service, nothing can be hidden; he would certainly find out the truth one day. The sole excuse for not admitting, or lying, about my story was my desire to explore his life and world. I never imagined that I would sooner or later find my other half. I felt that I was, as a woman, the world while he was Mohammedi Mahdi who came truly for me.

My eyes, that were once like two dry springs, started to pour out life not water. My heart whose wings had been broken more than once, broke the cage and headed towards the rainbow once again. I turned into the Mariama of 1983 when my father Dewali and my mother Haleema were still alive and I was healthy girl, not a damaged one. I recalled those days... the virginity lost, the disgrace Manjool brought upon me that will last forever.

During this time, I forgot about all the cracks, blind snakes, and cinnamon of my past. I also forgot about Samyan as well. My parents were forgotten as well as the others, I stopped going to the graveyard on Thursdays or any other day. Nothing was interesting to me. All I felt that I was growing old and time would never stop waiting for; it was my last station where I met my fate, “Camera Kirmanj.”

Nareen, I had no more stations to stop at. This was the last stop, no train, no passengers, only me and him or sometimes he and I.

If only you saw me then, you would think I had never seen a man before. I forgot all about what had happened to me at the hands of men.

One year passed. We were together till July; a whole year full of promises, love, and romance. Like two adolescents in love, our desire and passion stopped at the borders of a kiss. Many times our bodies escaped from us wishing to catch each other, we were both thirsty and hungry but with the smell of our breath as we kissed each other, and the smell of the sweat from our bodies as we embraced each other, we put out our fire.

For him I was a piece of crystal that would be broken if dropped. To him I was “delicate and beautiful.”

In July, 2006, I felt confident that our feelings were mutual. I really wanted to ask about our relationship and where it was taking us for I did not want it to end! I was afraid of such a day, a moment when even the last stop would be empty, when my eyes would dry up awaiting the arrival of an unknown traveler. Whether I like it or not such a day is on the calendar, a day that will bring with it a new decision.

The opportunities I have lost number the same as the minutes that passed, Nareen. It was a time for self-realization, confession, and of asking the hours, days, and the future for forgiveness. I have never been as horrified as I was that day because I have never realized the value of love and life as I did then. When I looked at his face, I panicked, his rough voice, his curly hair, his short beard and moustache, the black hair on his arms, and his pipe; all said “Be aware Mariama, do not ever tell him the truth. He is a man from the east like Mohammedi Mayri, Hajar the peshmarga, Islam the communist or Hawar the Islami. He is, or will be, a prisoner of our society, and cannot do anything for you”. Once when he said “Mariama *min*, my Mariama”, my wings spread out like a griffon’s and I was lost in the sun of his face. That day, was the first time for me to see a man crying in front of me. It was usually me who cried. Kirmanj cried a lot... he was weeping like a little child in the cold.

“Mariama *min*, I love you, but...”

It broke my heart to hear “but.” The echoes of all the old cracks were still in my soul. I did not want him to finish his question; I just wanted him to love me for all time. As I bowed my head

down I realized what had happened. I was so confused that I decided to set fire to myself or shoot myself; but he turned his face away from me and put out the fire of my anger.

“Mariama, I do whole-heartedly love you and know you. Do not think that I have no idea about your story, no dear; I know when your mother died and when your father left Manjool a widow. I also know when Mohammedi Mayri made “man” a synonym for a “wild animal”. I am aware that the three mujahideen, strugglers, returned empty handed from the conquest. I know much about you. Concerning me you still have not found out anything yet. It is time for you to be well acquainted with my story. You are so respectable and should know the truth; I am unable to marry you because I am not what you need. I ...”

- Nareen!
- Yes, Mariama.
- Why do you think Kirmanj did not want to marry me? Do you know what he said?
- No, but I am interested to know.
- He said “I am unable to marry you because I am not what you need. I was wounded in combat. I was shot. I cannot have children - I am a lesser man.”
- And then Mariama...?
- Then what Nareen...?

The End

Glossary

Ch. 1

1. July the first: It refers to the birthday given to many people in Iraq in the past. By the time many parents went to register their child's birthday, they could not remember the exact day.
2. Dasinyan: It is the name of the old Yezidi tribe who first inhabited Dohuk.
3. Qabaj: Refers to a bird that exists only in Kurdistan.
4. Jaria: A jaria is a woman who serves in the castle of kings in old Arabic history.
5. Na kher: It is the polite way to say no in Kurdish.
6. Zari mezin: He is the head of the evil spirits in Kurdish mythology.
7. Bazband and hamaylok: Bazband is a kind prayer written by a religious man on a piece of paper and folded in the shape of a triangle while a Hamaylok is a blue bead; and both are usually carried or put on one's clothes to protect one from evil or envy.

Ch.3

1. Shaxki : It is the main graveyard in Dohuk.

Ch. 4

1. Dorka kheri: Refers to the bread people distribute as a form of charity for the sake of a fulfilled wish or for the sake of a dead person.

Ch.6

1. Rojhalat: Means 'East' in Kurdish.
2. Ser spi: Is the old woman who accompanies the bride on her wedding night in Kurdish culture.
3. Chalen ghazlini: It refers to deep wells full of dirt where unbelievers are drown as mentioned in the wholly Quran.

Ch.8

1. Barzakh: It is the divider between heaven and hell in Islam.
2. Chinar : A kind of tree.

Ch.9

1. Madad : It is an Arabic word meaning help; it is used in a religious context.
2. Late zaman: it means the last period of human existence on earth in Islam.
3. Melita: The goddess of love and fertility in old Babylon history.

Ch. 10

1. Shoonwar: It means 'remains' in Kurdish.
2. Nawroz: It refers to the Kurdish new year (naw roz= new day) that is the 21st of March.
3. Eprakh: It is a public meal.
4. Agha: It is a title that refers to the rich man who owned lands and used to be the head of certain groups or tribes.
5. Salafi: It is an Arabic word for mystic people.

Ch.11

1. Kiras and fistan: Names that refer to Kurdish female clothing.
2. Anahita: The goddess of beauty in old Kurdish.
3. Anfal: It refers to the operation Saddam Hussein did against the Kurds in Iraq in 1988 when almost 180,000 Kurds were killed. It is also the title of one of the ayats in the Quran; it referred to the fighting of Muslims against unbelievers.

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Afterword

A civil society cannot be achieved without the peaceful coexistence of democracy and human rights for all. Violence, especially against women, will destroy any chance of peace in any society.

Sabri Silevani's novel analyzes the outdated traditions still practiced in our society; women are the victims. The novel, after all, represents Silevani's reflections on certain negative yet accepted behaviors based on outdated and unacceptable political, ideological, social, and religious customs.

The novel also shows the contradictions that are still dominant in the men that the heroine gets to know throughout the story; such as the peshmarga, a religious man, and a communist. Mariama believes in their ideas and principles at first until she discovers the reality hidden behind them. In the end she meets Kirmanj, a photographer whom she thinks is the man she has been waiting for all her life, and with whom she can begin to share her life. But again there are problems.

The story makes it clear that our society is a society for men only and women are imprisoned by the traditions set by these men who are unable to realize that they, themselves, all are enchained and enslaved in one way or another. Silevani's novel is worth reading for it analyzes our regions problems and will hopefully help us to reconstruct and develop ourselves into a new and better society.

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