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An Unbiased Witness?

A Dialogue with Naser Saremi on His Accounts of War

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Reviewing the Iran-Iraq war when you are geographically and temporarily far from those turbulent years allows you to return to that context with less emotional involvement. Eight years of conflict with more than one million casualties that brought neither reparations nor a single change in borders evokes a dialogue between one of the Fortinbras's capitans and Hamlet when the latter asked about the reasons of the war and the former answered «we go to gain a little patch of ground that hath in it no profit but the name».

Compared to Iran, Iraq is a less homogeneous country from the religious point of view and this issue has always caused more instability in this tormented country. As a result, a review of those

years can direct our attention to some significant details that throughout years pushed these two countries towards different political status.

Published in 2012 and 2014, *We Ourselves Started the War (Jang Ra Ma Shoroo Kardim)* and *When Khordad Comes (Khordad Ke Mishavad)* are two first-person narratives dedicated to the memories of war written by Naser Saremi; a soldier who later became a teacher, an artist and an author. The second book i.e. *When Khordad Comes* is much longer and more detailed than the Saremi's earlier narrative. Divided in 29 chapters, *When Khordad Comes* depicts the years of the Saremi's military service performed in two Iranian cities Semnan and Arak where there used to be camps of war prisoners. He invites us to observe a very particular and unusual situation through his lens: the grotesque theatre of Muslims jailed by Muslims.

Mino Mirshahvalad. You know that differently from you I do not have particular interests in literature and my concerns for your works come from my enthusiasm for political sciences and the history of the Middle East. Therefore, this brief conversation does not aim to scrutinize the literary structure of your works.

Like many other readers of these two narratives, I appreciated your original illustration of war, its brutality and above all the image that you had masterfully depicted of the Iraqis' sufferance in the Iran's camps. However, due to two reasons I decided to hold a dialogue with you instead of writing a simple review on your books. First, we all know that, despite years having passed, the Iran-Iraq war is still such a sensitive issue that it can come up for discussion only with a great care. Therefore, while I was reading your works I was constantly asking myself how much of what you have written is censored and how much of it comes from your own speculations. Second, in a review it was not possible to have your responses to my observations. In that way, it would have become a unilateral description of your books. Consequently, being aware of impossibility of a direct dialogue with you, I ask my questions through an email. It allows you to pause to reflect on what you wrote some years ago, however, our distance prevent us from having an interactive conversation.

M.M. Why did you decide to write another book on the war, with almost the same contents, two years after *We Ourselves Started the War*?

N.S. Actually, the first one, *We Ourselves Started the War*, was not a complete work; it was just a small part of my short documentary stories. Having in mind the Iran's situation, I did not imagine that such a book could be published; as a result, I decided to get only 100 pages to the press. The publication of the first book then gave me hope. Therefore, afterwards I began to write the second one.

M.M. In different episodes of your books you underline the fact that Iraq had started the war, why don't we have even a gentle hint to the Iran's responsibility for the continuation of war after the conquest of Khorramshahr?

N.S. I have shown some evidence to prove that we did not start the war. Through these stories I intended to offer a general outline of bad effects of war. The question of its continuation after the conquest of Khorramshahr requires deeper knowledge of the issue. As I mentioned in *When Khordad Comes* it is important to know that a war must not begin because wars have ambiguous ends. I had nothing to say about the continuation of war.

M.M. Despite my deep admiration for your honest attempt to depict Iraqis as human beings rather than evils (as the Iranian movies of the early 1980s used to do), it seems that you are still associating Arab-ness with some derogatory remarks such as being irresolute, demotivated, lazy and even illiterate. Don't you think that it is another outcome of our long-lasting struggle with the humiliating Arab invasion rather than the real nature of the Iraqi prisoners?

N.S. What I have written is completely based on the things that I had seen and nothing else. I have considered the prisoners as human beings. In my eyes they were all the same.

M.M. The real nature of Islam seems as complicated as the Koran itself and this religion since its birth has faced numerous people who claimed to be its best interpreters. There was a certain point in the *When Khordad Comes* (p. 93) where you talk about some Ba`thi prisoners who seemed to be repented and as you termed it «have fallen in love with the “real” Islam». What do you mean by “real” Islam?

N.S. This question shows that you have read my book carefully but you should take into account punctuations. At the end of this sentence we can see (!). It means that they (Ba`this) pretended adherence to the specific reading of Islam that was strongly promoted after the Revolution.

M.M. Somewhere in *We Ourselves Started the War* (p.71) you maintain that your accounts of the Iraqis' cowardice and irresolution are judgements of an unbiased witness. Don't you think that most of our conflicts with others stem from this illusion of being unbiased judges of others?

N.S. Surely sometimes, but in this book my goal was to provide the reader with a realistic illustration of a forgotten episode of the Iran's history. This war caused dramatic social, cultural and political changes, not only in Iran but also in the whole Middle East. As my aim was to register whatever I had witnessed I could not deny that they often were prepared to betray one another even for a cigarette. They did not have any desire for escape from prison, because there was no motivation for it.

M.M. The most moving part of *When Khordad Comes* is the 17th chapter which is dedicated to letters and their vitality to prisoners. You have succeeded to depict those moments of anxiety and frustration masterfully. How much of what you have written derives from your imagination and how much you have remained loyal to the reality?

N.S. What I have written is completely based on reality. Living with war prisoners was a very particular and unique experience, far from ordinary life. I can understand that it is extremely difficult to comprehend it. I think such a war will not happen anymore. We will never see another conflict with more than 100.000 prisoners in the future.

M.M. Iran has a long road ahead to join the globalised world. Do you think that art and literature can help Iranians overcome previous hostilities towards others?

N.S. Certainly. Literature can help every country and every culture. It works as a bridge among people of different nationalities in different times. We can build this bridge revealing the true face of war and avoiding old clichés. Under censorship, authors should try harder to speak with the world. However, it does not mean that hostility of other countries can be completely justified. Perhaps if this war had not started and it had not been sponsored by imperialists now we could have had more friends than foes.

M.M. Are you going to write other works on war?

N.S. No, because I have nothing else to say. I hope that my books can be translated in the future.