



## Struggling with Destruction

By [Fatemeh Ekhtesari](#) / November 1, 2020 / [Issue 21, Exile, Magazine](#) / 7 minutes of reading  
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Whenever someone asks me about the “immigration experience”, I unconsciously get angry. The first thing I say is: I have not emigrated! I have fled my country.

Some, like me, may have “fled” their country, but their purpose in leaving the country is similar to the purpose of an immigrant. They want to gain the opportunity to live and study in a better environment. Choosing to live in a better environment is not the same as “living in exile.”

Many may not realize the profound difference between immigration and living in exile. To me, it is the difference between traveling and falling out of a twenty-story apartment! It’s just as intense!

**Experiencing asylum is like climbing stairs that were not built for you.**

In this text, I will not write about the circumstances that made me stand on top of a 20-story apartment. I will not even say anything about who pushed me from above and why they did it. The only thing you need to know is that after that, I would never go upstairs again. There was no way back. I was dead.

I did not have a parachute. For example, I was not a European who could live in a neighboring country with a similar culture; I did not have a Schengen passport. I did not have dual citizenship, so losing one still gives me hope for the next. My language was Persian and I could hardly communicate with anyone in my second language, Arabic, or my third language, English. I had to close my eyes when I was saying goodbye to all that I had lost; To my

family, friends, the flavors and smells I loved, the memories I made, my car, my dolls, my library, and everything else.

When I opened my eyes, I expected to be on the ground with an exploded brain, but I saw that some people had put a small inflatable airbag for me, right under the apartment. They had been waiting for me.

I was a poet and writer who, after being thrown from the top of an apartment, had the chance to be taken care of by ICORN. In fact, although I had fallen far, I had been injured, my body had been bruised, and I was going to start from scratch, from the ground, maybe from under the ground, at least I was not dead. I was not done.

I would like to answer the question of what happens when a writer is forced to live in exile.

The main thing for a poet or writer is language. I have to live in language deeply and be in close contact with people so I can know their problems and concerns and reflect them in my writing. Staying away from people definitely hurts my writing. In a new country, I have to learn a new language. At the same time, I have to study the English language in order to communicate with writers and poets from other countries. This wasn't as necessary before the exile, but of course, now it's much more difficult to connect with others. Although studying English has its benefits, it takes time and may reduce my fluency in Persian. It also takes years to reach a level of mastery of the subtleties of the new language so I can use it for my poetry.

Certainly, since my new books will not be allowed to be published in Iran and my previous books have been taken off the market, my audience in Iran will be significantly reduced. I am no longer present at the poetry sessions that were my way of connecting directly with my society. There are many internet access limitations for my audiences who live in Iran. Many of the older generations do not have access to the Internet at all, while those who do have access are prevented from using social networks by filtering and low internet speed. In countries like Iran, where most social networks and websites are filtered, watching a video on YouTube is a dream come true. Only a small part of my audience remains, usually Iranians living abroad or literary audiences in other Persian-speaking countries (such as Afghanistan and Tajikistan). In fact, they were among my audience before the left, and their presence outside of Iran does not increase their number.

All of these things are part of the situation of a refugee; that is, the difficulty of making a new life, financial problems, re-education, psychological trauma as a result of leaving the homeland, and facing a new culture. Experiencing asylum is like climbing stairs that were not built for you. They do not suit your walking style. Worst of all, by going through each step, you remember that step that you took years ago when you were a child when you graduated when you got your first salary in your country. You have gone through it all before and now this constant repetition hurts you.

Of course, this life in exile certainly has its advantages. Especially people like me who have faced government pressure and repression, whose writings have been censored, who have experienced arrest and solitary confinement, and even worse, heavy prison sentences and floggings, there is no hope that they can survive and operate in their own country. There is no possibility that they could continue on in their homeland. A feeling of safety, even if it is not so complete, is a driving force for literary activity. I am sure that the distance from Iran will eventually hit my literature, but I'm just as sure that a long prison term is incredibly harmful.

Being secure and free allow the author to present his or her work to the audience without censorship. It is certainly more enjoyable for the audience to read an intact book.

Compared with a writer who left his or her country 20 years ago, I am so lucky. Social media and the Internet have helped me connect with my audience. As I said, organizations like ICORN and PEN, by supporting exiled writers, enable them to find their own path or build a new one for themselves.

And a strange point: when a writer lives in their own country – especially in countries like Iran, where the language is abandoned, the borders are closed due to the existing dictatorship, and communication with the world is weak – the writer is as proud as a peacock! He or she thinks that his or her name should be written after Anton Chekhov, Albert Camus, Henrik Ibsen, etc.

There are translations of almost all literary books into Persian and Iranian authors are familiar with them. International literary festivals are set up in Iran and writers travel to other countries for international literary festivals, but this sense of “being the best” and “being enough” exists because of the language which is local and not has directly related to the languages of contemporary authors from other countries.

If you were open-minded, after exile or emigration, after contacting other contemporary writers from other countries, even if you still feel that your work is valuable, you no longer see yourself as the center of the universe. I wish I could inject this feeling – without all the bitterness which is its side effect – into the poets and writers of my country.

Finally, I have to say that exile is like an earthquake. An earthquake cannot be good because it destroys all good things and takes them away from you. I may not have been able to stop the earthquake, but I have tried to rebuild my life. Not everything will go well and many things cannot be rebuilt, but Middle Eastern artists learn to fight from childhood. From destroying things and rebuilding them. When I was a child, there was a war in Iran and many houses were destroyed and many people died, but those who survived rebuilt the ruins and continued. When I was young, the Iranian government imprisoned me for writing poems and destroyed all my manuscripts and works forever, but I got out of prison and rewrote from scratch. I am in exile now. I have lost my family, my language, my friends, and my fans, but I am still writing and moving on, brick by brick, building my new home on the ruins.

**Fateme Ekhtesari** is an Iranian poet, writer, and freelance filmmaker. She has a master’s degree in midwifery. For some of her writings, which the Iranian government found objectionable, she was sentenced to 11.5 years in prison and 99 lashes. She has been living in Norway since 2017 as a guest writer. She has published nine books, including poetry, short story collections, and novels. Her most recent publication, *Vi Overleve Ikke*, is a bilingual poetry collection in Persian and Norwegian, published by Transfer Forlag.



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