

Porsa

In memory of Hammed Shahidian

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Hammed is mostly known for his research and scholarship in the fields of gender, social movements and exile. Some know of his translations too. But not many are familiar with his journalistic background.

In the 80's as a sympathizer of the O.I.P.F.G. (Minority), he was on the editorial board of the Jahan magazine, the organ of "Student Supporters of O.I.P.F.G. in Europe and the United States. The organization's split in 1985 differed from previous ones in that it turned bloody in Kurdistan. This dreadful event I consider as the end of an era for Iran's revolutionary Left. It was a time to contemplate. The vanguard elements of this movement had to reflect upon the causes of a regressive trend that brought about the failure. Research and theoretical work was the order of the day. A new beginning was to come.

Hammed joined this new wave. With a few of his old comrades he undertook the preliminary work for the publication of a Persian journal of Theoretical Research. My research has not produced information on the exact date of its publication; a reflection of exile where traces of identity are easily lost. Though we know the first issue came to life sometime in 1988 in Boston, Massachusetts. Porsa was the title, Quest. The name speaks for itself; a quest for the many questions the left leaning Iranian intellectuals had to investigate, study and find answer for before rising anew. I wish I knew exactly what questions were examined in the first issue. However, through a letter dated December 22, 1988 from a reader, Bagher Momeni the renowned historian, a general idea emerges as to the preface and some of the articles of that first issue. Above all we come to understand that Porsa perceives "the origin of all the problems of the revolutionary Left "in "the crisis and poverty of theory". To this effect there are two forty paged articles and two translations; one from Engels (Fredrick) and the other from Thompson (E.P?). Through Bagher Momeni's letter we also discover that Porsa hopes to become a "loud-speaker to reflect the viewpoints and examination of the past, present and the future of the Left"; yet avoid getting "involved in habitual polemics". The answer to Bagher Momeni, appearing on the last pages of Porsa No 2, which we have access to, is also revealing:

"We are of the intention to turn Porsa into a means of communication as well as a pedagogic journal for all forces faithful and committed to the cause of the working class. We began publishing this journal only as a consequence of a necessity that has become every moment more crucial with any blow and any split. We were hoping that those comrades who share our belief in the necessity of a serious and committed work on scientific and pedagogic problems of Marxism and strive to overcome the extreme cultural poverty of the Iranian revolutionary Left - wherever they are under this vast sky- not deny us their helping hand.

That we are not up to putting in print “cheap polemics” is precisely a result of our commitment. Everyone knows that which is abundant in publications of the Iranian Left is the settling of scores with one or another, without learning any lessons from the problems of the movement. It is our aim to find a way out, by learning from the shortcomings and wrongdoings of the Iranian revolutionary Left...

If our knowledge of the first issue comes in bits and pieces, the second issue we know in its entirety. It is book size in 172 pages. The cover is blue, with a black and white question mark at its heart. Right under the question mark, in a space between two black and white stripes is inscribed: Journal of Theoretical Research, Number 2, Winter 1989. The next line reads: Special Issue on Women's Question. As we turn the cover we learn that the journal has a council of writers (Shoraye Nevisandegan) whose names do not appear but are “entitled to edit incoming manuscripts”. Price of a single issue is the equivalent of 5 US dollars. The subscription rate for 4 issues is the equivalent to 20 US dollars. Thus we find Porsa is a quarterly.

What strikes immediate attention on the opposite page is the black band across the top. In a framed paragraph that follows, we read: “In the strife to prepare this issue, we were informed Mansour Yaghouty, son of the masses and revolutionary writer, was also sent to the slaughterhouse of capitalism and reaction, like thousands of other militants. We dedicate this issue to the memory of Mansour and all blood throbbing victims of this new onslaught of the regime. Honored is their memory and long lasting their path”.

On the following page we find the Table of Contents: Preface by the Council of Writers, pages 1-12; Feminism and Socialism: From the Era of Enlightenment to the First World War, H. S. Roja, pages 11-81; Thoughts on Women and Society, Eleanor Marks-Aveling and Edward Aveling translated by H.S. Roja, pages 81-107; Communism and the Family, Alexandra Kollontai, translated by H.S. Roja, pages 107-122; Women in the Writings of Akhoundzadeh, Hamid Parsa, pages 122-140; Political Roles of Iranian Village Women, Mary Elaine Hegland translated by R. Ajkan, pages 140-161; Up in the Mountains all is Different, Maria Lupe translated by M, pages 161-169; From the Readers and with them, pages 169-172 and Sketches by Bijan Assadipour, pages 76-80 and M, pages 126-129 are the last two items on this Table.

The name S. H. Roja that appears frequently is none other than Hammed's. He chose the suffix Roja from the dialect of his native land Mazanderan, a province in northern Iran. A morning star that heralds the light of dawn, Roja was a perfect pen name for a left leaning Iranian intellectual who wanted to contribute to the reconstruction of the Iranian Left movement.

The essence of this contribution is manifested in the preface that starts with commemorating the 1988 massacre of thousands of political prisoners all over Iran and honoring victims of this unprecedented crime in Iran's modern history. Although it does not waiver in the least bit to condemn the criminal regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Porsa dares dig beyond the political sphere and examine the cultural roots of this horrendous crime.

“We continue to be of the opinion that the extent of the regime's brutality is a sign of cultural poverty in our country as well. That is why the more the regime treads on

very basic human rights, the more resolute we become in the belief ...that we should insist more on the principles of democracy, freedom and the necessity for cultural advancement.”

On this premise Porsa determines... “The endeavor to disseminate the idea of abolishing capital punishment is as necessary as the assessment of the State...and the study of the theories of imperialism as urgent as the review and appraisal of the thoughts of Hafez, Mowlana, Khayyam and Sa’di.

This approach and emphasis in Porsa on culture and cultural dimensions of socio-political phenomena, extending even to the realm of theory is central and the underlying theme in all its articles. In so doing Porsa attempts to remove this deficiency of the Iranian Left and bring to light the importance of critical approach in tackling backward elements of the dominant culture.

“Our revolutionary Left has always evaded confronting the cultural beliefs of the masses in general and views on the men- women relationship in particular as a measure to avoid keeping away and driving off people from the forces of the Left. This approach Is rooted in an idealistic and populist interpretation of the concept of hegemony amongst the forces of the Left. An interpretation that seeks establishing hegemony in the working class movement through keeping silent on many controversial and sensitive issues of society. If the masses are sensitive towards religion, the examination of religion and struggle against its superstitions and reactionary ideas must be shunned. If people are sensitive towards problems related to the two sexes, the situation should not be antagonized... This line of march has had no outcome other than the Left losing its identity and facing defeat of its policies. The passive cultural and ideological policy of the Left instead of ensuring proletarian leadership for Iran’s revolutionary Left,became an agent that turned it to a docile follower of the spontaneous movement of the masses.”

This brilliant analysis carries the clue to the understanding of one of the important reasons the secular forces could not exert leadership of the anti dictatorial struggle of the Iranian people against the Shah’s regime and why the Shiite clergy won the hegemony of the revolution.

Had the liberals, democrats and Left forces paid attention to the “cultural poverty” of the Shah’s Iran, had they took to themselves the task of “cultural advancement” of a society that had lost its identity, had they waged a struggle against the fanatic and superstitious clergy while fighting the Shah’s regime, the destiny of the Iranian revolution would have been radically different.

Perhaps nothing manifests this paradigm of the February Revolution of 1979 better than the question of women. Porsa dedicated a whole issue to this question that still “is a conjuncture of the most important and most essential theoretical and practical problems of the revolution”. Reviewing the articles of this issue leaves no doubt as to the importance of the cultural factor in the subjugation of women. Obscurantism, religious fanaticism, patriarchy and patriarchal family are seriously challenged in article after article. While “confronting backward beliefs of each one of us” Iranians, is pronounced as the precondition of fundamental change in gender relations.

The critical examination of cultural factors, excavation of cultural roots of political phenomena, and passionate criticisms of the shortcomings of progressive social movements so well propounded in Porsa, became in my opinion, a contribution and trademark of Hammed in his post Porsa intellectual endeavors. His critical examination of the notion of “sole representative”¹ as synonymous to the stifling of all other voices within the Palestinian Movement, and his profound and courageous criticism of the slogan “Will kill, will kill one who killed my brother”² chanted in the Iranian student uprising of July 1999, are cases in point.

I have made no mention of other articles Hammed wrote for Porsa, as I could not find any. However, it is interesting to know that on the very last page of the journal we come across “Will Read in the Next Issues of **Porsa**” followed by 1) The independent Left and the crisis of identity 2) The Left, democratic struggle and the struggle of for Democracy 3) The Left and the women’s movement 4) Islam: socialism or capitalism? 5) Epistemology: A review of Thomas Cohen’s theory and its application in social sciences 6) Is Quantum mechanics a theory? 7) Class science and the development of science 8) On the laws of the development of science 9) Islam and Gender 10) A debate on house labor, Christine Delphy, Mary McIntosh... 11) Women’s sexuality in Fascist ideology, Masciocchi 12) Sexuality and the formation of women’s behavior in the working class neighborhoods of Tehran, Janet Bauer 13) The stories of Mr. Quiner, B. Brecht 14) A debate on responsibility in literature and art, Walter Benjamin and Theodore Adorno 15) Stagnation and progression of Marxism (Rosa Luxembourg) 16) How Iskara was nearly extinguished, V.I. Lenin 17) Mayakovski and the poetry of revolution.

Did Hammed ever write, finish or publish any of the above articles? Was there a third issue or did Porsa remain unfinished as many of his writings; like his short lived life? This valuable “Persian Journal of Theoretical Research” too, came to its immature end as another sad characteristic of exile, as Hammed’s book of life.

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1. Look at the preface of his Persian translation of Edward Said’s, *After the Last Sky*
2. Hammed Shahidian, *The Beginning of the End*, Noghteh, No 9, Summer 1999.