Love in the Time of Despotism*

Essay by Abbas Milani

In prison, time is a pharmakon—a curse and a cure, a poison and a palliative. It is a curse because prison time lingers monotonously. If it’s political prison time, then time plods on even more painfully—poisoned by the mendacities of guards, interrogators, and wardens who in their behavior emulate the regime they obediently serve. In the words of Bahman Ahmadi Amouee, an acclaimed prize-winning journalist and prisoner of conscience in Iran,¹ for the Islamic regime that style of management has been to eliminate the questions “instead of trying to answer” them (p. 258).

But prison time is also a cure as it allows for contemplation, and if it’s political prison time, the unbearable heaviness of being is lightened by amity and humanity of comrades, the inner conviction that they are fighting on the right side of history, and most important of all, by reminiscences and tokens of love—love of family and friends, and when lucky of a singular

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beloved. When that beloved is Jila Baniyagoob, a tender muse and a militant feminist, a loving wife and a fearless journalist who herself has spent time in prison, then the same gritty prison memoir also becomes an affectionate monument to love.

In reading *Life in Prison*, we must however remember that prison authorities in Iran claim the right to read, confiscate, or censor anything prisoners write.\(^2\) To keep pen and paper from the prying eyes and grabbing claws of the guards, before going to sleep, Amouee had to hide them “in his underwear” (p. 145). In a moment of despair, not knowing whether his letters would ever reach Jila, he laments the fact that all letters have to be sent in open envelopes and “any petty excuse can be a reason for the letters not to be delivered.” He ends by confessing that at times he “has no idea of what he should write” (p. 257).

In spite of these obstacles, the author’s sincerity, his shining humanity and humility, and his defiance afford a kind of narrative alchemy to *Life in Prison*—moving seamlessly from shards of memory and laments of a forlorn loving husband, to acute observations about life in prison and unsparing yet never bombastic indictment of a regime whose treatment of dissidents in prison is a tragic reflection, indeed a continuation, of how it treats Iranian citizens in society. In the characteristic fashion of all despotic regimes of a totalitarian hue, in prison as in Iranian society, “everybody is a criminal unless the contrary is proved” (p. 5). *Life in Prison* is, in this sense, also a eulogy
for idealist dreams of a democratic revolution shattered on the hard rock of a creeping ideological sclerosis and political despotism. Each chapter focuses on one aspect of these shattered dreams.

Such episodic structure, as well as the narrative’s dialogical form with an intended interlocutor, has been a recurrent style in prison writing. Invariably done in secret, prison writing as varied as by Thomas More in Tudor England and Antonio Gramsci in Fascist Italy has “used the implied dialogue of letters” to complete the author’s meaning. In this case, because of the narrative’s alchemy, the episodic structure of the story has in no way diminished its engrossing suspense. In *A Thousand One Nights*, Shehrzad told stories to survive, and her fate, as well as her distinct ability to tell a good tale, brought cogency and suspense to the episodic narrative. We eagerly read Bahman Ahmadi Amouee’s episodic narrative in *Life in Prison* because we care deeply for his epic fight with despotism and for his tender love for Jila.

Amouee is one of his generation’s most accomplished journalists. While tireless in his defense of freedom of expression and of journalists in general, his area of expertise has been economics. For the last twenty years, he has worked, either as a staff writer or editor, with some of the most important reformist papers and magazines inside Iran. His books on the political economy of the Islamic Republic and his monograph on the
labyrinthine world of Islamic financial institutions are considered among the most reliable sources on the topic. His pioneering work on the spread of corruption in all facets of the country’s economic structures brought him the ire of those who benefited from this corruption, rent-seekers in what economists call Iran’s rentier state. At the same time, Amouee’s desire to find a nonviolent resolution to Iran’s tormented transition to democracy is evident in his translation of Desmond Tutu’s *No Future Without Forgiveness*.

But it was Amouee’s support for Mir-Hossein Mousavi, the reformist presidential candidate in the contested election of 2009, that eventually landed him in prison. In what can only be described as Kafkaesque absurdity, apparently one of Amouee’s “crimes” was also publishing a few lines of *Shahnameh*—Iran’s widely distributed millennium-old masterpiece epic poem about the country’s mytho-history. Amouee supported not only Mousavi but also what came to be known as the Green Movement. The movement effervesced into the Iranian political landscape when Mir-Hossein Mousavi ran for president in 2009. It began with an unusually creative campaign and ended in unprecedently large demonstrations in big cities to protest massive electoral irregularities—what many, including Amouee, have since declared to have been an “electoral coup.” For his support of Mousavi and the Green Movement, Amouee received and served a sentence of five years and
four months in prison. He was released on the third of October 2014.

In prison, at the urging of Jila, his fellow-journalist activist wife, he wrote letters to her describing his life there. Herself an acclaimed journalist, activist, blogger, and author who has worked to defend women’s rights, prisoners’ rights, and freedom of the press, she knew the power of language and writing as a source of solace and a way of bearing witness for history. She asks him to tell her “about this place and the people in it” (p. 166). Maybe the best characteristic of her singularity can be found in his loving description of her. She had once before his imprisonment, in a tender moment, asked him what “would you write about me” if you were in fact to write anything. Taciturn and shy by nature as well as honest in disposition, he confesses that for him, “raised on provincial culture…showing feelings is not that easy” (p. 56). Thus, albeit silent in her presence, he chose to answer her affectionate query in prison. He was then in the infamous “ward 350 of the Evin Prison” (p. 42), where some of the most noted dissidents have spent their prison terms. It was a day upon which he was celebrating her birthday, and writing was for him at least partially a way to lessen the pain of her absence.

Even then in describing her, he is more professional than personal. He writes,
You are very determined in your work…and it makes no difference whether your colleague is your sister, spouse, friend, or a stranger. Everybody must be serious in their work, orderly and hardworking. The imperfect work you would not accept…. That a journalist has no sharp mind and a questioning attitude will make you anxious…. In Iraq and Afghanistan [from where they were both reporting at one time] you would encourage me to use more and more of the time…. I would ask myself, how much strength and energy does my 48 kilo Jila have.

But finally he ends his description in a more personal note by wishing his “dear Jila” a happy birthday and saying, “You are the greatest event in my life” (p. 42). This intense sentiment is repeated more than once in the narrative.

On another occasion, he again becomes more personal and shares with his “dearest Jila,” and with us, that “I look at the scenery with you in my mind. You are with me when I read a book; you are with me when I murmur a song, and you are with me when I look at the lonely mountain” (p. 248). We as readers and future historians, curious about the calamities in the Iran of our time, will be indebted to Jila for her role in the genealogy and completion of Life in Prison.

But in Life in Prison, Jila is not just the recipient of the letters but is a constant presence as a source of pride and perse-
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verance for Amouee. She is also at the center of virtually every memory he conjures to fight the mendacities he faces. If Iran was not a pariah state and if horrors of the regime did not overshadow much else that happens in the country, she would possibly have become an even better known figure in the West.

With an eye for detail and a knack for narrative, Amouee walks us through the daily life of a political prisoner—its tedium, tensions, torments, heroisms, and clever tropes for fighting the monotony of prison time. It is important to remember that in the two decades before Amouee’s time in prison, the same cells and buildings had witnessed far more brutality and the death and torture of thousands. To be sure, the cruelties and brutalities during Amouee’s turn are horrendous enough. What remains the same are the prisoners’ heroism and the tropes they use to fight tedium. A dentist, serving time as a dissident, took upon himself the task of examining “the condition of prisoners’ teeth.” Of the 58 prisoners checked, “128 teeth needed to be fixed, and 91 to undergo surgery, 141 needed protez, and 25 had to be pulled” (p. 214). On another occasion, Amouee walks us into a cell, sharing with us the graffiti on prison walls. Some was jocular in spirit, others from those who had spent the “last days their lives in these cells” (p. 249).

But Amouee is by profession an economist. He thus also gives us such microeconomic details as the price of commodities in the prison store. He criticizes the authorities for their
gouging greed, adding that prices are higher for prisoners than they “are in a middle-class neighborhood” (p. 8). He is no less eager to delve into macroeconomics when he quotes an informed cabinet minister of the regime. According to the minister, from the time of the revolution in 1979 until 2003, because of sanctions triggered by the ill-advised decision to take American diplomats hostage, Iran had paid an extra 400 billion dollars for “acquiring technological equipment.” Amouee then himself adds that if we add other corollary costs such as the war with Iraq, “lack of investment attraction, and increases in the cost of the country’s defense,” then the total cost of the regime’s policies would “surpass 1,000 billion dollars,” which is a little more than “all of Iran’s oil revenue in the past thirty years (p. 24). If we try to calculate the cost of such rash radicalism since 2003, the price to the Iranian economy would be far more staggering. Regime stalwarts, Amouee tells us, defend this shocking economic cost as the necessary price of independence. Amouee is too much of an economist and pragmatist to buy the argument. Prudent independence, instead of bombast and bravura, he believes, could have been realized at a much more reasonable price.

He describes in detail the great pains and small joys of life in prison. He writes of parting with fellow prisoners with whom he has bonded; one is “transferred to another prison, another is released, and yet another is executed. A couple will
even die in their sleep before your eyes” (p. 216). He gives a chilling portrait of the last few days of a prisoner about to be sent to the firing squad. He writes of the anguish and anger felt by other prisoners who witness the experience, and he describes the remarkable stoic calm of the prisoner about to be executed. Even faced with this stoicism, his rendition of what other prisoners do just before their cellmate is about to go to gallows is haunting: Some wail in tears, others hug the prisoner, a third group sing songs of resistance, and yet a fourth group loudly curses the Islamic regime for its many cruelties. Haunting in an altogether different vein is his innocent account of how each Friday, prisoners gather in a “200 meter courtyard” and imagine themselves “in nature and green places” (p. 53). On those occasions when there are women prisoners just on the other side of towering walls, he writes of how the men “clap heavier and shout louder…[We want them to know we] are still alive, and that we are innumerable.” The women too laugh and clap louder, wanting perhaps to “share their happiness with us” (p. 54). With a hint of prudery, he is quick to remind Jila, and us, that there is no subliminal message in his tale of mutual loud cheers and laughs by men and women. He declares that recounting all of this is his “pretense for remembering you more” (p. 53).

But such moments of amity and compassion are regularly marred by the harsh realities of the life of a prisoner of con-
science in a paranoid regime. He describes the desires, hallucinations, and physical transformations he experienced when he went on a month-long hunger strike to protest some of the perfidy he had witnessed or experienced. He writes of his body first craving food, then gnawing at its own fat, and finally causing his mind to all but forget the desire for food (pp. 134-135).

It is important to remember that in our dark times, some of the most effective, and widely read prison memoirs have been either love letters or writing with a strong component of love interwoven throughout the narrative. The intolerable inhumanity described in lives of prisoners in despotic regimes is made more human merely with a touch of love. From Nelson Mandela’s letters to his wife, Winnie, to the remarkable letters of Bophana and her husband, Ly Sythra, caught in the nightmare of Cambodia’s Khmer Rouge, love is what makes life tolerable for the prisoner and renders the narrative engrossing for the reader. Indeed, in the tradition of prison writing, the “agency of a supportive feminine ‘other’ has been” a common theme.

Given Amouee’s honesty, as we can expect, Life in Prison is not just a love story or a panegyric of political prisoners. He is not averse to criticizing his fellow prisoners. Some, he writes, lose their humanity to survive. They can become “coarse, senseless and indifferent” (p. 217). Those in prison on charges of having Al Qaeda affiliations only want to memorize the Quran and take pride in how many “infidels” they have
killed. Others, driven by dogma and extreme “Aryan nationalism,” even celebrated Hitler’s birthday (p. 187). At the same time, he offers a loving portrait of members of the Bahai faith, in prison only because they dared create an underground university to educate themselves. If Iranians write on their college applications that they belong to this faith, they are denied access to the university. Amouee writes of others who grow angry and despondent, seeking solace in silence or solitude. But fortunately for us, Bahman with the constant urging of his Jila never becomes indifferent or silently indignat. In the luminous humanity of his narrative, we have a most detailed, at times dispiriting, but inevitably ennobling, account of the calumny of the Islamic regime in Iran and the endless resilience and resistance of brave souls such as Bahram and Jila.

In the dark days of Stalinist terror in Soviet Union, Anna Akhmatova spent “seventeen months in the prison queues in Leningrad” hoping against hope to visit her beloved son and husband. One day, another lady “emerged from the state of torpor common to us all then” and asked in a quiet but unbelieving whisper, “And Could you describe this[?]” and Akhmatova answered, “I can.” The result was a masterpiece called Requiem, 1935-1940. In it she writes, “The Hour of remembrance is with us again,” and she talks of her hope for a monument that will be built to the poet in front of that infamous prison. She brings her poem to an end with the line, “And May the lone
We are fortunate that Bahman Ahmadi Amouee, encouraged by his tireless muse Jila, was that lone prison-dove that has given us not so much a Requiem as an engrossing, sometimes disheartening, always enlightening, monument to the light of humanity that survives in Iran’s be-nighted days. Maybe instead of Akhmatova’s cooing dove, Amouee is our version of Khayam’s solitary bird of dawning, sitting hauntingly atop the ruins of “the palace that to Heave’n his pillars threw” and calling, “Coo, coo coo!” to remind despotic, arrogant knaves that their day, too, will end.

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Also, for all his arrests and confrontations with authorities, see, http://iranhr.blogspot.com/2014/07/update-bahman-ahmadi-amouee-released.html

2 The brutish behavior of the regime against political prisoners often forces us to lose sight of the fact that such restrictions are against international laws and covenants. Article 12 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights declares that “No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home of correspondence.” Article 17 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights declares, “No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home, or correspondence.” Principle 19 of the Body of Principles for the Protection of All Persons under any form of Detention, or Imprisonment, adopted by General Assembly Resolution 43/173 of 9 December 1988 states, “A detained or imprisoned person shall have the right to be visited by and to correspond with, in particular, members of his family.” The only accepted limits are “reasonable conditions and restrictions specified by law and lawful regulations.” Political prisoners are regularly denied these rights. Life in Prison is replete with examples of such breach by authorities.
5 Tuto, Desmond. *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York, 2000); for his translation, see Tuto, Masir Ashti, Tr. By Bahman Ahmadi Amouee (Tehran, 2017). The book has already gone into four printings.
6 For my brief account of the Green Movement, itself a part of the *Iran Primer*, edited by Robin Wright, see, https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/greenmovement
8 For a brief account of her accomplishments and views, see https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2014/sep/19/jilabaniyaghoob-iran-freedom-journalism-rouhani-un?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other [Date for no 9, Vol. 16?]
10 Zim, Rivka, op. cit. p. 6.
12 Fitzgerald’s rather free translation of the Quatrains is, “The Palace that to Heav’n his pillars threw/And Kings the forehead on his threshold drew/I saw the solitary Ringdove there/And Coo, coo, coo!’ she cried, and “Coo,coo,coo.” The more literal translation of the poem would be, “That Palace that reared its pillars up to heaven/Kings prostrated themselves upon its Threshold/I saw a dove that upon its battlements/uttered its cry: Where, where, where, where.” See for example, Edward Fitzgerald, *Omar Khayyam*, edited by Robert Arnot (New York, 1903), p. 109.