

May-2004

# Crossing Borders: The Extent to Which the Voices of Exiled and Refugee Women Have Adapted to their New Western Diasporic Space

Jennifer Langer

Follow this and additional works at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

## Recommended Citation

Langer, Jennifer (2004). Crossing Borders: The Extent to Which the Voices of Exiled and Refugee Women Have Adapted to their New Western Diasporic Space. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 5(3), 66-74.

Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol5/iss3/7>

**Crossing Borders:  
The extent to which the voices of exiled and refugee women  
have adapted to their new Western diasporic space**

By Jennifer Langer<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract**

In this article I will consider the extent to which the voices of exiled and refugee women have adapted to their new Western diasporic space. I will examine whether women writers consider exile to be a safe place in which to describe the horrific experiences of gender specific persecution and of being a victim of violence in conflict or whether taboos restrict the women's voice. Is exile providing a cathartic space to write openly? Do the exiled writers as reflected in their literary work, relate to their British physical space and interact with British people and society? What is the situation in exile in the case where women functioned as strong collective groupings in their countries and created and developed their own oral literature through these collective groupings?

*Key words:* Refugee women, literature, exile

**Introduction**

For some women, border crossings are more than metaphor. This article will consider the extent to which formerly repressed voices of exiled and refugee women have adapted to their new Western diasporic space. I will examine whether women writers consider exile to be a safe place in which to describe the horrific experiences of gender specific persecution and of being a victim of violence in conflict or whether taboos restrict the woman's voice. Is exile providing a cathartic space to write openly? Do the exiled writers as reflected in their literary work, relate to their British physical space and interact with British people and society? The issues raised here stem from my work in researching and editing my book *Crossing the Border: Voices of Refugee and Exiled Women Writers* (Langer, 2002) and from my work as director of 'Exiled Writers' Ink!' *Crossing the Border* is a collection of literature by women refugee and exiled writers from Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Afghanistan, Algeria, Iran, Iraq, Kurdistan, Bosnia, Turkey and Kosova. Does exile represent rebirth for exiled women writers?

Mahnaz Afkhami in 'Women in Exile' makes the point that:

Along with the loss of their culture and home comes the loss of the traditional patriarchal structures that limited their lives in their own land. Exile in its disruptiveness resembles a rebirth for the woman. The pain of breaking out of a cultural cocoon brings with it the possibility of an expanded universe and a freer, more independent self (Afkhami, 1994, p.45)

However, I think this is quite idealistic and is certainly a long process. One wonders how this can be reconciled with the feelings of isolation and absence of roots articulated by so many of the women writers who have also articulated feelings of conflict between their traditionally accepted role of the disempowerment of the female voice and the freedom to express themselves in the West. In exile, there is to a

certain extent a reproduction of social relations for women writers in terms of gender and power. At regular gatherings of exiled writers in London, for example, some of the women writers told me they were concerned about reading their work because of the men present from their communities and the strong honour and shame ethic. Social taboos are still very strong leading to a process of self-censorship by women and censorship by the family. It seems that traditional gender power structures within cultures are maintained, so women remain within the social, cultural and religious codes to maintain the given boundaries. In addition, women often feel frustrated, isolated and terrified in an alien culture without comfort from their immediate family with their experiences in exile often being marginalized because they are generally inarticulate in the public domain, reflecting the history, culture and traditions of the female voice and its disempowerment in the male dominated society. Women writers are still fearful of *Crossing the Border*. Many of the writers have proclaimed with emotion: Our voice is not heard, our voice is silenced, we haven't got a voice.

A Somali poet, Anab Sheikh Abdi, told me that she dreamed of one day returning to the fertile Juba River Valley and meanwhile found it hard to function in Britain. Feelings of disjointedness, of feeling neither here nor there, are expressed in a range of work. However, the angst of exile is for some a powerful contributory factor which inspires them to write. A Bosnian poet, Amna Dumpor, told me that her anguish on fleeing Bosnia and becoming a refugee, had caused her to write prolifically, to pour out her emotions 'like a volcano erupting.' Aydin Mehmet Ali through her work with Turkish speaking women found that many wrote to keep sane. She states in *Breaking the Silence of the Soul* (2001) 'they write to remember, to reshape, to redefine, to make sense of their past.' (Mehmet Ali, 2001, p.33)

### **Exile as a safe space?**

Is exile a safe space in which to describe horrific experiences of being a victim of violence in conflict? Generally the silence of the women in this area is significant. There are clear gender differences here in terms of the silence of the women compared to work by male exiled writers. Whereas the male writers in my first book, *The Bend in the Road* (1998), describe the detail of torture and suffering, the women avoid this kind of detail as the experiences may be too painful or unacceptable to articulate such as gender specific persecution including rape. A Kosovan writer, Valbona Ismaili Luta has said 'Where we come from, it is better to die than to be raped.' Denial may also be a way of dealing with atrocities too terrible to confront. Haifa Zangana, the Iraqi writer, is unusual in that she writes almost openly about her time in prison where she was ill treated by males. She has stated a reason for writing:

Is it my charm for curing the leprosy that permeated my body on the day it was touched by whatever I hate; my charm for warding off forgiveness that comes with passing of time, for repelling widespread failing memory, repelling the return to a country where they still practice insulting rituals, repelling the conscious emptying of memory or its rage, repelling oblivion, oblivion, oblivion? (Zangana, 1991, back cover)

Generally, women who write about gender specific persecution, usually do so once they are in exile and even then, would not generally write in detail about the atrocity because of the community in exile's link with the home country and the honour and shame ethos. Therefore, Asiye Guzel is highly unusual in terms of her

book, focusing on her experience of being tortured and gang-raped by the security police in Istanbul, being published in Turkey, her country of origin. (Guzel, 1999 English translation, 2003). A journalist and activist whose best-selling book was one of the first detailed accounts of state-based violence to emerge, she says 'It had a big response, especially from women, because rape and sexual harassment are very widespread there and women would keep their experiences hidden.' She also states that however enlightened some women may be, because Turkey is feudal, women inevitably take on the feudal view in terms of adopting a different perspective to women who have been raped. (*Guardian*, 18.11.03). A fictitious character may be deployed as in the case of the novelette 'Une Femme en Exil' by the Congolese writer, Amba Bongo (2000), in which she describes her prison cell and the nakedness enforced on the main character Anna by the male perpetrators.

The soldiers forced her to remain naked for several days with the guards frequently making derogatory remarks about her body. The periods of enforced nakedness were for her, the worst of all tortures. It was prolonged violation, the deepest violation of her person and over a long period, she felt stripped down to the depths of her soul (Bongo, 2002, p. 72)

The victimisation of women by men is also described by Shahnush Parsipur in her short story 'The Executions': Shahnush Parsipur was imprisoned four times by the Iranian government for her writing. She has been exiled from Iran, where all her works are banned, and now lives in the United States as a political refugee.

On the last day of her life, Shahin had told her friend that she thought she was going to be executed. She knew this because the interrogator had fondled her breasts and that was a sure sign of doom. There was a rumour that virgins condemned to die were married to the Revolutionary Guards before their execution. According to tradition, if a virgin girl is buried, she will take a man with her. (Parsipur, 1981)

Few writers have written about the mass rape in Bosnia, although there were tens of thousands of rape victims with rape being used as a war strategy to terrorise and eliminate a population. However, one writer, Dr Vahida Demirovic, in her book *Visages from the Wasteland* (1998), has directly described this. Her purpose was to record the inhuman behaviour and to hope that the book would be a warning to humanity. She states that it was unbearable for her to write although she herself was not a victim.

## **Memory**

It may be many years before female refugee writers externalise the events of persecution. Perhaps it is more difficult for women writers because of the honour and shame ethos prevalent in most of the communities. To deal with the trauma takes a considerable period and in consequence the experiences are probably mediated because of the passing of time and so the reconstruction of events and feelings takes place through memory. Self-censorship of memory takes place through a sifting and purifying process. Dina Wardi, an Israeli psychotherapist and academic, has identified two types of memory in relation to persecution – common memory where the victim remembers the details of names, dates etc and deep memory which equates to traumatic sensations from which it is impossible to escape (Change of Address:

Second Generation Conference, London, 2003). The deep memory remains disconnected from the conscious self and may not necessarily be transmitted by words and in addition, words such as 'hunger' and 'cold' may have different resonances for the persecuted victim. Only many years after the experience of being occupied by the Russians did Afghan writer, Farooka Gauhari describe the search for her missing husband in her book *Searching for Saleem* (1996) and there will no doubt be a time-lapse before the experience of victimisation under the Taliban is addressed openly.

Many refugee writers of today reconstruct their origins through memory. For the exiled writer, memory is retrieved from the past and reconstituted in the present as a means of survival in the new space. If it is preserved intact, it can become life itself. The literature on loss and memories is sad and moving and is a site of mourning. The memory of loss is the writer's history and a deep longing and an awareness of loss pervades much of the work. Refugee writers remember places, images, experiences, objects and people. Amna Dumpor (2002), a Bosnian poet, writes about leaving behind a person she loved, Farhija Hodzic (2002), also a Bosnian poet, describes the ear-rings she always wears that have been in her family for generations and symbolise the link with her lost family. Rouhi Shafii (1997), from Iran, describes childhood memories, of her beautiful family house and sleeping on the roof in the hot south. Women relatives rather than male are evoked in the male-female polarised societies from which the writers originate – a grandmother, a mother, an aunt are described and some of the texts explore relationships, conflicts and bonds between women. In women's writing, they often evoke the private and/or internal life--childhood memories of sleeping on the roof in the hot south or the interior life of the hamam.

Events and feelings relating to a group's collective memory are also evoked. For example Choman Hardi from Kurdistan, dedicates her poem 'The Penelopes of my Homeland' (Hardi, 2002, p.222) to the widows of Anfal, Southern Kurdistan, 1988. (Special operations of genocide against the Kurds of northern Iraq included the razing of thousands of frontier villages and the internal deportation and disappearance of large numbers of Kurdish men). Many women, who were, in reality, widows perpetually waited in vain for the return of their husbands. In the poem, the analogy of Penelope, the wife of Odysseus, is used, with Penelope waiting for the return of her husband from the Siege of Troy and from his long wanderings.

Years and years of silent labour  
The Penelopes of my homeland  
Wove their own and their children's shrouds  
Without a sign of Odysseus returning

### **Patriarchal systems transferred?**

When I first embarked on this work, I had certain expectation about the themes that would be pre-occupying refugee women writers, namely the experience of having been persecuted in a war situation and of displacement. However, given that the power structures, oppression and conflict connect in quite a frightening way in so many of the countries, I should not have been as shocked and horrified as I was, to find that so many of the writers were focusing on being victims of the patriarchal society, within the family, society and state. In a story within a story by Aydin Mehmet Ali (2002), a young Turkish mother who has been in London just a short time, is raped by her father-in-law. However, this fact is never revealed to the Turkish speaking audience of women in the story but only to the British reader as it is deemed too shocking and painful within the community. A number of the women writers in

particular deploy literature polemically and didactically to expose the iniquities of their patriarchal societies and the connections with state policy. Samia Dahnaan (2002), originally from Algeria, in her short story 'The Journey' describes the victimisation of herself and a friend in Algeria by male 'fundamentalists' who finally shoot her friend because she refuses to cover her hair. Nazand Begikhani (2002), from Kurdistan, has written a poem 'Man the Sinful God' in which she describes the ingrained attitudes of men towards women:

Oh Man!  
You are for me  
Father  
Brother  
Lover  
Son  
But I am for you only shame  
(Begikhani, 2002, p.205).

The similarity of experience is surprising and shocking and the anger expressed by the women writers is palpable. So much of the literature illustrates the depths of the women's pain and despair. This is therefore politicised literature, which tries to change the status quo and would certainly be banned or censored in many of the writers' countries and put the writer's life at risk in the home country. I sense a fear by the writers because of the enormous pressure on them to conform to the norms of society; to deviate from these norms is to place themselves in danger. In spite of this, many of the women writers are very courageous in that they are writing about being victims in the patriarchal society within the family, society and state, inextricably linked with state policy and religion.

However, many women writers in exile continue to have difficulty in writing openly partly because of fear of retribution in exile. The fear is caused by the repercussions their writing could have on their families still living in their countries and by spies in the UK. This manifests itself in caution when writing about politics and the deployment of allegory in the use of a pen-name. One writer is known to me only as Sheherazade. She told me that in order to retrieve her short stories from her country, whilst a refugee in the UK, she had bribed her sister, who still lived in her country, with presents. Her sister had then embedded the writer's stories in letters – a process that had taken three years. An Algerian writer, who had spoken out at a UK conference addressing the Algerian situation, had since received mysterious phone calls and death threats. A young Iranian poet, Ziba Karbassi, who was an advocate of women's rights through her poetry and had written a powerful poem entitled 'Death by Stoning' was receiving police protection. The courage of the writers is admirable with some at risk for speaking out, even in exile.

### **Contradictions**

However, there are contradictions. Censorship is one of the serious threats to the freedom of the writer and in many cases, in order for a writer to remain in his or her country, there was a compulsion to operate a system of self-censorship or to veil one's ideas in allegory and imagery. The power of the pen was respected and often the only means of opposition and therefore extremely dangerous for the writer. In Iran, poetry was known as the 'symbolic language of political dissidence'. Many writers in exile continue to have difficulty in writing openly partly because of this. Nahid

Husseini, an exiled Iranian journalist, told me that she believes that it is difficult for Iranian writers to write openly and directly in exile given that they have long been accustomed to censorship and that the style of writing openly is not customary in Iranian culture. Also in Iranian culture there is a concept called 'sharm' which applies to women. According to Rouhi Shafii in *Scent of Saffron* (1997), it involves both an internal state and an external behaviour. It accompanies feelings of embarrassment, shyness or self-restraint and a women's public self-erasure. At a conference about Arab women held at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, an opinion was expressed that all Arab women had a second layer of complexity and that in a non-democratic society various devices such as deviousness, madness and exorcism ('zar') were deployed by women to gain their freedom. It seems that in the literature these devices do not appear to be transferred to exile. One Iranian writer has described the issue of having to adjust to freedom given that in Iran there was the tension of having lived democratically inside the home but having to adopt different covert behaviour outside the home because of the secret police. Similarly in the case of Iraqi writers in exile, Haifa Zangana told me that in exile it was difficult for them to liberate themselves from ideological slavery so that writers in exile were struggling with political independence and found it hard to express themselves freely. It was once explained to me by Fawzie Kerim, an Iraqi writer, that in his opinion, no Iraqi writer was a free thinker and they were all instilled with ideological beliefs e.g. nationalism, communism or Islam although a large number of writers were allied to the Communist party. Inside Iraq, writers had three choices – to openly follow the accepted ideology, to choose silence or to continue writing through allegory and mystification of history. Valbona Luta, a Kosovan writer, has explained that because of the censorship operated by the Serbs, she still finds it difficult to write openly after years of self-censorship.

### **Relationship to British exilic space**

Do the exiled writers as reflected in their literary work through the characters, relate to their exilic British physical space and interact with British people and society? What is striking in the literature is that there is very little sense of the place and space the refugee women currently inhabit and there is hardly any work in which the characters interact with British people. Where settings are British, usually London settings, the writer deploys characters that are outsiders. Rouhi Sharifian (2002) in her story *The Traveller* expresses the pain of not belonging and of dual identities through her image of a transvestite who is shunned by other passengers on a coach journey to Nottingham. Dursaliye Bedir, a Turkish writer, interestingly observes an identifiable minority through curious yet sympathetic eyes – Orthodox Jewish women in Stamford Hill, London. Through their novels and short stories two Iraqi writers in exile in London, Haifa Zangana and Samira Al-Mana, describe the perspective of characters in exile with British spaces re-interpreted in terms of the ethos and culture of the exile community. In her novel translated from the Arabic, *Only in London*, Hanan al-Shaykh (2001) makes telling observations about dispossession, both physical and linguistic.

### **Traditional female oral traditions in exile**

What is the situation in exile in the case where women functioned as strong collective groupings in their countries and created and developed their own oral literature through these collective groupings? I will explore this through Somali

women's voices. In exile, Somali women have to function as individuals whereas they are accustomed to being part of a group – the tribe being the passport to identity. This is a crucial issue as the groupings cannot be properly reproduced in exile and in addition, women's poetry was traditionally sung in women's groups.

The oral heritage was of great importance and poets in traditional Somali society were highly esteemed and their poetry was an unusually powerful medium of communication between people. Somalia's poetic tradition is closely associated with its history and national identity. Margaret Laurence, writing in 1952 while living in Somalia, stated that there was a good deal of women's poetry in Somali literature i.e. poetry written by women for women. Women also passed on a huge store of folktales, sayings and chants as well as the songs associated with everyday tasks.

Traditionally in Somalia and in Somali culture, there were and are accepted female structures of poetry called 'buraanbur' to be performed in the female space. It would not be acceptable for a women poet to use the male forms or to perform in the male or mixed space. Now a more flexible verse/song form is being used. There were three types of women's poetry. Women's work poetry was segregated and covered personal issues such as family, home and husband or gender issues such as the sex of a baby. It was passed down through the generations and had no authorship. Women sang these songs while they were working in small groups. However, they were not usually seen and this work poetry was not taken seriously by the community as performing poetry was considered the function of the man. Ritual and religious poetry was also segregated with older women chanting or singing the poetry to younger women in late pregnancy or where the family, children and childbearing were concerned. Sometimes they prayed to Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet. A third type of poetry was classical poetry by women. However, this was not presented in a public forum because of the constraints and barriers in society for women. It has now become better known because of radio broadcasting.

Now because of the experience of exile in urban centres as opposed to the traditional pastoral society, different versions are being performed. However, there are grave concerns by the older generation that traditional Somali poetry is dying out. Nevertheless, poetry and song performed at events such as weddings are crucial in unifying clans and are a symbol of memories of being one people. Even today, the spoken word remains supreme with cassettes of old and new poems taped, copied and recopied by Somalis living in their own country or abroad.

Recently, Exiled Writers Ink! ([www.exiledwriters.co.uk](http://www.exiledwriters.co.uk)) created a performance piece 'Breaking the Silence' collaboratively with a Somali women's group, Horn of Africa Women's Association, which incorporated a range of genres - narrative, poetry and traditional and new songs. The performers represented the generations from grandmothers to granddaughters with the older women being the repositories of the traditional songs. Generally the verses are sung by one woman with the group singing the choruses. One of the traditional songs is:

If I don't make ready his tea  
He will kill me –  
Just joking!  
If I don't make ready his tea  
He will not talk to me  
Even in my sleep.  
Let me make it  
Because he is acting like a king



And if I don't make it ready  
He will kill me!

New group songs have been created which express the pain of exile and the strong axial links with Somalia:

My land, my land  
My land is dead now.  
One day will it be alive?  
One day it will be alive.

My land.  
It seems like a dark night.  
It seems very dark.  
It seems that the sun set.

The songs must surely play an important part in maintaining the identity and morale of the Somali women in exile with the women reproducing the familiar formats collectively.

### **Conclusions**

It appears from the work of exiled women writers that women have adapted to their new Western diasporic space to a limited extent. Writers have complex feelings about their interaction with the indigenous society and the extent of the adaptation to the new diasporic space is affected by a large range of factors, which are to some extent deeply internalised. The length of time the women writers are in exile affects their perspective in that the writer may feel her identity is evolving and changing from feeling wholly alienated from the mainstream culture to absorbing mainstream influences and being involved in a process of dialogue. Simone Weil said that 'to be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognised need of the human soul' and in my opinion, through the act of writing, exiled women are confirming their roots as well as battling to explore and deploy the new space in which they find themselves. Exiled women writers are engaging in the creative process in the borders between the self and the other, thus producing literature with novel and different insights and perspectives so that the border becomes wavy and fluid. As a result, existing borders are questioned and shift. Crossing Borders is a meeting point of the exiled writer and the new reader/listener in the exiled land.

### **References**

- Afkhami, Mahnaz (1994) *Women in Exile*, Virginia: University Press of Virginia  
Al Shaykh, Hanan (2001) *Only in London*, London: Bloomsbury  
Mehmet Ali, Aydin (2002), *Daughter-in-Law* from Crossing the Border, Nottingham: Five Leaves  
Mehmet Ali, Aydin (2001) *Breaking the Silence of the Soul* in *Mothertongues*, edited Watts, Stephen, London: Modern Poetry in Translation  
Begikhani, Nazand (2002), *Man The Sinful God* from Crossing the Border, Nottingham: Five Leaves  
Bongo, Amba (2000) *Une Femme en Exil*, Paris: L'Harmattan & (2002) *A Woman in Exile* in Crossing the Border, Nottingham: Five Leaves

Brookes, Libby (18.11.2003), *The Survivor*, London, The Guardian newspaper  
Dahnaan, Samia (2002), *The Journey* from Crossing the Border, Nottingham: Five Leaves  
Demirovic, Vahida (1998) *Visages from the Wasteland*, London: Genie Quest  
Dumpor, Amna (1998) *My Love is a Simple Truth* from Tears from the Heart, Mostar: self-published  
Exiled Writers Ink! and Horn of Africa Women's Association, *Breaking the Silence*, performed at the Hampstead and Soho Theatres, June 2003, London  
Gauhari, Farooki (1996) *Searching for Saleem*, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press  
Guzel, Asiye (2003) *Asiye's Story*, London: Al Saqi Books  
Hardi, Choman (2002) *Crossing the Border*, Nottingham: Five Leaves  
Hodzic, Fahrija (2002), *Earrings Old* from Crossing the Border: Nottingham: Five Leaves  
Langer, Jennifer (1998) *The Bend in the Road*, Nottingham: Five Leaves  
Langer, Jennifer (2002) *Crossing the Border*, Nottingham: Five Leaves  
Laurence, Margaret (1993) *A Tree for Poverty*, Bloomington & Indianapolis: McMaster University Library Press & ECW Press  
Parsipur, Sharnush (1981) *The Executions*, from an unpublished memoir translated by Abbas Milani (source: PEN International)  
Shafii, Rouhi (1997) *Scent of Saffron*, London: Scarlet Press  
Sharifian, Rouhangiz (2002) *The Traveller* in Crossing the Border, Nottingham: Five Leaves  
Zangana, Haifa (1991) *Through the Vast Halls of Memory*, Paris: Hourglass

---

<sup>i</sup> Jennifer Langer is Director of Exiled Writers Ink! and can be contacted at [jennifer@exiledwriters.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:jennifer@exiledwriters.fsnet.co.uk)