Exile

by Safa Fathi

The language of the emigrant belongs to an era that is now completed. He comes from one of those countries currently undergoing a "national renaissance"; it is nonaligned, has a national liberation movement, is committed to the fight against imperialism, is ruled by a one-party state, and is only too familiar with chants for independence and calls for the nationalization of industry and the provision of free universal education. Millions of people have left these former colonies and moved to the former imperialist countries in the First World. For them exile has actually served as a kind of armor, protecting them from the various afflictions and confrontations of daily life in the Third World; they live in a no-man's-land between an early upbringing and education that has become, so to speak, innate, and a new "culture of adoption."

This kind of exile is also supposed to entail the sort of freedom where language itself is liberated from some of its ancient significations, where there is more room to move about, to identify oneself, to imitate and analyze the past freely; it is also supposed to comport only a partial belonging to one's society, indeed, even a nonbelonging; and, finally, it can mean a veritable rupture of old filial ties.

But this kind of exile also means always having to walk on a tightrope; always having to seek the proper measure or balance in order not to fall into betrayal or treason; always having to avoid

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Filmmaker, Egypt. Originally written in French.

falling either into a facile prestidigitation on the one hand, or, on the other hand, into a noncommunicating autism or things strongly resembling it (such as religion and language).

For Rushdie, the question of the hour is the question of betrayal: betrayal of both his forebearers and his fellow emigrants in the course of conducting his own inquiries into modern migratory movements, their cultural and religious roots, and the political and social reasons behind these simply massive contemporary displacements of the South to the North, and of the East to the West. To find the kind of mask persona, or identity one's country of adoption will accept often implies, as has been said more than once, a form of renunciation of, or treason toward, that which one has left behind. But it is a kind of treason where shame no longer haunts one; it even becomes itself a kind of craze or infatuation—a temptation one yields to because it may even seem required by one's new land of adoption: it can show up like an indelible mark, yet the person himself may meanwhile have actually lost his former points of anchorage or orientation, and may no longer even perceive the new way he is now being judged.

To betray means to put down permanent roots in a land belonging to others and give up on one's own land. In one's own land of origin, the exile that finally does lead to this is perceived as shame, a blemish that requires a justification, and that only such a justification can render legitimate. From the standpoint of exile, the past consists of deep wounds, the present is a continual irritation, and the future a very large question mark; one no longer even enjoys the luxury of being able to fall or fail. As Rushdie himself has said, exile transforms us—or, rather, we transform ourselves in order to become "transformed."

Are all those who have left their own countries traitors then? For the millions of Muslims who have never read *The Satanic Verses*, is Salman Rushdie a traitor? Many other exiles—notably, those who live in Bradford or Brick Lane—definitely see Rushdie as a traitor. His "treason" eclipses the voice that speaks their language and enunciates their own ambiguous situation. In an interview with

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an English journalist, Rushdie once remarked that he had greater sympathy for some of those who had burned his book than he did for certain of his defenders. Would this be an answer to the whole question?