

Interview with Aileen Bahmanipour
Gizem Sözen and Sara Kermanian

Sara and I are doing our PhDs in Political Science. My home country is Turkey and Sara's is Iran. From the moment we saw Aileen Bahmanipour's work, we wanted to talk to her about beastly kings and sovereign snakes—kings that have hungry beasts growing out of their shoulders and snakes that feed upon human brains. With Aileen, we talked about Iran and Turkey. We talked about hunters and the hunted ones, the oppressor and the oppressed. Perhaps, more importantly we talked about the dirty guts of the sovereign state. And a bit about hope.

Gizem Sözen: In *Wonderland*, the beheaded body stands as one of King Zahak's victims. In the Persian myth, also told in Marina Roy's introduction in the exhibition catalogue¹, King Zahak has two snakes on his shoulders and these snakes need to be fed with human brains. The king sacrifices young people to feed the snakes their brains so they don't feed on the king's head instead. In other words, the sovereign body can only retain its sovereignty and power as long as some of its subjects are sacrificed for the wellbeing of the state. On your website, you wrote that: "Zahak's story seems so similar to contemporary Iranian society, in which the government suppresses new ideologies just because of its fear of losing central political-religious power."² A similar dynamic is currently taking place in my home country, Turkey. Since 2016, 5602 academics have been expelled from academia and 460 of them were signatories to the Academics For Peace petition.³ Although capital punishment has been abolished in Turkey in 2004, executions of the political activists and politicians used to be quite common, especially after military interventions in the country. Here, in *Wonderland*, what I see is an executed young man whose body is wrapped by a snake. Would you tell us about how this myth influenced your work? How is the ancient myth still relevant in the current political context of Iran?

Aileen Bahmanipour: I do lots of appropriations in my works, from literature to imagery sources. The form is taken from somewhere else and some other time to be represented now for some different aims, to speak about something else in addition to their original bodies. So, at the first step I do the cut and abortion to gather the materials. In *Wonderland* (2016), the body is taken from Andrian Van Der Spiegel's book (1626), and other images from magazines, newspapers, and other imagery sources. The general composition is a construction of assembled pieces, so there is lots of back and forth between construction and deconstruction, over and over. And I don't see this [as] far from what the Iranian nation has experienced through its long history—war after war, revolution after revolution, building on top of ruins over and over. I think that's the reason why I am interested to see the contemporary situation through mythology and wrench both sides to a surreal point in my works where everything is falling from a stable state. Having the experience of immigration now for three years, I'm still following that sense of lacking stability in our contemporary paradigm in a bigger global scale.

¹ Marina Roy: *Dissecting the Body Politic*. Vancouver: grunt gallery, 2017. Published in conjunction with the exhibition titled Technical Problem, shown at grunt gallery, Vancouver, BC.

² "Zahak-Nameh," Aileen Bahmanipour's website, accessed September 12, 2017.
<http://www.aileenbahmanipour.com/zahak-nameh>

³ The numbers are taken from a report prepared by DİSK (Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions of Turkey) and Academics for Peace's website, accessed September, 2017.
<http://disk.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/OHAL-ve-Çalışma-Hayatı-DISK-RAPOR-27-Temmuz-2017.pdf>
<https://barisicinakademisyenler.net/node/314>

Gizem Sözen: Out of curiosity, why do you think that the victims sacrificed by Zahak to the snakes needed to be youthful and why the emphasis on brains?

Aileen Bahmanipour: My personal interpretation of young brain is as a metaphor of the intellectual power of a country, the organ that you can think, question, and critique things with. Without the power of thinking, human falls into a dead state of life, being alive and dead at the same time. It's hard to be an intellectual in a system when you cannot ask any question, or if you ask you have to pay the expensive cost of it with your life.

Sara Kermanian: You have used a combination of human and animal bodies in your illustrations. Unlike your illustrations of the human bodies, in which the oppressed and the oppressor are distinguishable, your rather metaphoric or symbolic illustration of animals blurs and challenges dichotomies as such. For instance, *Snake and Ladder* seems to be an anecdote of the gradual metamorphosis of an innocent axolotl (if I am not mistaken) into a snake, giving the impression that under certain circumstances all of us can turn into snakes. *Medusa*, on the other hand, shows that the hunter and the hunted are of the same nature—both are fishes—but the circumstances have brought them to stand against one another and they are both condemned to breathe in the contaminated environment left by this nasty struggle of one against all. But does this indicate that the oppressor's responsibility is only relative in comparison to the ones who are oppressed? How do you define "political responsibility" in your paintings?

Aileen Bahmanipour: Maybe at the very beginning it was the hunting scenes on the margins of Persian miniatures, carpets, and etc. that inspired me to wonder why so many things and noises need to happen on the "margin" of the piece. And usually there is a cycle of huntings, for example a lion is hunting a deer while a phoenix is hunting the lion. So, this position of being hunter and bait at the same time has an interesting irony for me, which is not very far from the politics that usually happen during a revolution, when a system starts eating its organs; it also reminds me of Goya's *Saturn Devouring His Son*.

Sara Kermanian: What is the political responsibility of your own paintings in illustrating the relation of the victims and the oppressor?

Aileen Bahmanipour: My political responsibility starts first of all in what I am doing with the tradition—not preserving it, but penetrating in the tradition, deconstructing the form to construct a new concept. So instead of referring to miniature as national symbol, I see it as a form of cultural consciousness to critique a historical moment with scenes of falling and missing the stable ground. Also continuing in this skill in a country like Canada, in a city like Vancouver, and a university like University of British Columbia, penetrating into and using Persian culture in a way that does not either fetishize it nor make absurd orientalist scenes for the West, is another way that I see my political responsibility. There are so many expectations for adaptations in the art world that might be more dangerous for an artist like me, that could take much more of my freedom, more than what I had in my country, Iran.

Gizem Sözen: Both in the myth of Zahak and in your paintings, I recognize two patterns deployed by the sovereign body in order to maintain its power: firstly, through execution and persecution of the youthful (likely revolutionary) subjects; secondly, through absorption of some of the youthful intellectual elements by the body politic. In the second one, the sovereign aims to capture the subjects and their intellectual capacities that are essential for the formation of the hegemonic ideologies of the state. I would argue that both processes are crucial for the maintenance of state power and both are currently valid in the context of Iran and Turkey. So Zahak with its snakes is both trying to destroy bodies/minds in their youth but at the same time is also interested in digesting and absorbing them to the body politic. In

your work, the snakes resemble intestines. Especially, *Snake and Ladder* made me think about such capturing and absorbing power of the state. Is this a fair reading and could you speak more to it?

Aileen Bahmanipour: Fear! What Zahak did to the people was because of his fear. According to the legend, it was people of Iran who themselves wanted Zahak to rule over them. According to [Iranian poet] Ahmad Shamlou's interpretation of this mythical character, Zahak did some good things for the people as well, breaking down a little bit of the rigid social class hierarchies between people as an example, but the problem starts when Zahak sacrificed/absorbed the critical organ of the society. On the other hand such politics of fear can control people better than any army. It is like a disease, can affect other organs, and make the symptoms deeper and deeper and the affected parts bigger. It is like a homeopathy treatment that makes the organ sicker each time. I think that's one of the reasons I still like to work with the metaphor of snake, its body and renewing of its skin—the left over skin carries the residue of the same body/system again and again.

Sara Kermanian: To me, the snakes, which appear in the form of intestines and oviducts, are instruments of the sovereign's ideological hegemony. In their intestine function—in *Medusa*—they repress eccentric ideologies, digest and turn them into feces. In their oviduct function—in *Bringing Zahak to the Mosque*—they poison the fetus to prevent the very possibility of the birth of new ideas. But, in spite of the totalizing apparatus the snakes try to create, the element of hope is present in your works. We see this element, for instance, in the remedial blood of the horseshoe crab that tries to detoxify the poisoned eyes—consciousness—in *Bringing Zahak to the Mosque*. It is also possible to feel the element of hope in the living-beheaded body of the *Wonderland*, whose death has brought the labyrinth ladder of the history that has led him to his execution into attention. How do your paintings understand hope? How have you tried to show the antagonism of hope and despair in your works? And where is the origin of hope in your paintings?

Aileen Bahmanipour: Of course, there is a hope... but always in the state of falling and collapsing over and over. Seems we need to find a way out of that violent non-productive cycle, but even if it happens, we find ourselves in another similar cycle. Their skins and facets might be different but they function similarly... and again we are hopeful to find another way out of it. I don't know if there is an end for this game even if we don't want to think about a utopia. We have to and need to be hopeful because there is no other choice. It's my pessimistic hope that I have about a reformist party in Iran. It just takes voice every four years for the election time, only those days we can hear some words about freedom and democracy from the reformist tribunes and then they get silent for the next four years. I really cannot see a huge difference between reformist and conservative's approaches in Iran, except in a few cases that have saved some reputation for the reformist party. They both feed the system by their similar and mutual fear, which is safety of the minority at the cost of the precariousness of the majority. And of course what is left over for this majority, for the next four years, is hope!

Sara Kermanian: One of the main themes in your paintings seems to be the condition of victimhood and the ways through which the victim, intentionally or unintentionally, assists the oppressor's tyrannical actions. This is particularly visible in *Sucking my Tears* and *Field Trip*, where the victims' apathy or their indulgence in mourning—perhaps instead of resisting and struggling against the oppressor—strengthens the oppressor to further repress the victim and to keep the entire machine of oppression operating. In *Field Trip* in particular, the "guilt of the victims" seems to be a result of their inherent need for "socialization": the bees, that perhaps exemplify the human community, can only survive if they collaborate in a social process of production. This "socialization" seems to be accompanied by and perhaps has become possible through a "political" blindness: they do not see that they have built a home in a dead trunk. We are curious if it was your intention to distinguish the social from the political

in *Field Trip* and if that was the case, how does this distinction inform your work? Also what would you like to say on the question of the "guilt of the victims"?

Aileen Bahmanipour: For sure there is a cycle of violence between oppressor, victim-new oppressor, and old oppressor-new victim, and there is no end for this cycle until we switch our path from violence into identification of new ideologies and tolerance of critiques. It is inevitable to make stories and narrations about what is going on in my paintings. I don't see any reason to keep all the narratives in one specific line even if some might be very different from my initial idea. I think my works stand by themselves, aside from my reading. Hearing other's interpretations of the works, it just adds up to the meaning of the piece to a point that my initial intention goes among all those of other readings. It's not about "I am not saying that, but I am saying this," its more about making an opportunity for all these dialogues and interpretations to happen.

Sara Kermanian: Did the miniature-collage style of your paintings help you to better illustrate the complexity of the relation between the victim and the oppressor?

Aileen Bahmanipour: I think collage was a very intimate organic technique for me to deconstruct a regime (of image) and assemble anew. There are not any finishing points for an assemblage or collage, it's an unpredictable ongoing process which I stop at the moment that I think it's enough. It happened a lot that I've added something to the work or undone some parts of it after a while, or even torn up the work and used its pieces in another work. So, I mean even my works are not exceptional in the deconstruction process. This is part of my methodology, as part of my relation with the world I am living in. I do the same in my videos, paper making, writings, or installations, again back to the point of falling and collapsing without meeting a stable ground.

Sara Kermanian: In *Sucking my Tears* and in *Field Trip*, the female victim seems to be the main persona held accountable for the "guilt of the victims." In *Field Trip* the entire circle that ends up feeding the hunter is centred around the role of the queen bee, the worker-mother so to speak, who cares about nothing but the togetherness of her family. In *Sucking my Tears*, the mother, through her act of mourning, seems to nurture the snake that then forces her to feed new potential victims for the sovereign's machine of oppression. Why is the "mother" represented as a guilty victim, or perhaps as the main guilty victim? How did the dynamic of sexuality and gender roles of women in the political context of Iran inform your illustration of the persona of the female [guilty] victim?

Aileen Bahmanipour: The dynamic of sexuality plays a role in feeding the system created by its own organs while torturing itself. They are organs without a body that just feed and serve the system, sometimes from a female body and sometimes from a male. I guess I understand what you mean by "mother represented as a guilty victim," while in my words I can explain it as a production system/organ whose production doesn't remain out side of that system. It doesn't produce anything out of the system's expectation and need, which I think is both its crime and punishment at the same time.

I am thinking about the educational system I came from, in which I was unable to question as the sense of critique. I was an expected, typical, obedient student for the system until I finished my mathematics diploma in high school and decided to pursue art as my major in university. It was in art that I could find my subjective zero point to orient myself toward the world around me, to question and rethink things. Similarly, my older brother had experienced a more rigid religious educational system which literally brainwashed students to prepare the next generation of leaders and guarantors. So, thinking about "the persona of the female [guilty] victim," I also see the other side, the patriarchal supremacy, as a guilty victim of politics and ideology.

Gizem Sözen: One last question: In Persian miniature painting, the borders are usually considered as ornamental decorations. While you incorporate some elements from this traditional formal style, the borders in your paintings do not carry a merely ornamental function. What is occurring at the core narrative part of the painting is affecting the borders. The supposed boundaries are not able to contain the core. The core is spilling/exploding/melding towards its 'outside' while the outside is leaking/sneaking into the core. Nothing is stable. There is a constant commotion in your paintings. I would like to know more about this aspect of the works. How do you approach the question of borders, boundaries and the complexities of the inside/outside binary?

Aileen Bahmanipour: It started from observing miniatures long before I knew anything about Derrida and deconstructionism or any post-modernist theories. That breakage of the frame happens a lot in miniatures when the image makes space for the text and also the other way, when the text's layout breaks to fit the illustration in the page and also the aesthetic aspect of it. What I wanted to change was about having margins not only as a space around the main frame, but also as a layer beneath the main frame, in which part of the system is processing, can be feeding the system by blood, milk, brain, etc. That feeding, giving birth, extrusion or ejaculation part usually happens on the margins or that under-layer. The layers fall off on each other while feeding each other in a way. Following these ideas, I started folding my works on transparency to get to an illegible point of the noise by having multiple layers of images on top of each other. Through the folded pieces, images keep [being] misplaced over and over, breaking any sense of borders and boundaries, forcing the material to be inside out and now becoming the ground of the image which makes a new form of the image in its constant fall and mise en abyme. This is the project I am working on it for my MFA and I am excited to see where it takes me next.