

11. Diasporic Divides: Location and Orientations of “Home” in Pooneh Rohi’s *Araben*

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Sweden used to be a country where an ethnically inclusive policy was a matter of national pride.¹ Not so any more. This generous stance ended abruptly in 2015 when 160,000 refugees arrived from war-torn Syria, but also from North Africa, Afghanistan and Iraq. There were those who argued that the infrastructure of housing, health care and schooling built by the Swedish welfare system over decades would collapse with the many “newly arrived” (*nyanlända*). A change in attitude towards people with a “foreign” background became palpable. Yet to some Swedes, experiences of exclusion, even racism, were nothing new. As evident in fiction and journalism by a young generation of diaspora writers in Sweden, such experiences have been commonplace for a long time. With their location in Sweden, their orientation is at the same time to their, or their parents’, countries of origin, such as Iran. This orientation entails that the work of these writers can be identified as instances of literary cosmopolitanism from within. A case in point is the acclaimed debut novel *Araben* “The Arab” by

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Pooneh Rohi, first published in 2013.² Applying a literary anthropological approach, this chapter focusses on the ways in which home is a deeply divided location in this novel. This is literary anthropology that combines sociological ideas of diaspora with anthropological notions of culture and diversity in relation to a literary text. Methodologically, the chapter draws not only on textual analysis, but also on an in-depth interview with Pooneh Rohi.

Araben opens with the story about a man who, because of his physical looks, is assumed to be an Arab in Stockholm. But he is actually Persian, and from Iran, where he many years ago was working as a civil engineer, a background which is not acknowledged in the Swedish setting, where he only sometimes gets an odd job. The Arab leads a lonely life in the city of Stockholm, covered in snow and smelling of ice. He feels like “a margin of error that is included in the calculation, like cars that are put together in a faulty manner are included in the budget of a car factory, a necessity for profit or if you like the survival of humanity” (“en felmarginal som ingår i beräkningarna, som felmonterade bilar i budgeten på en bilfabrik, en nödvändighet för profiten eller om man så vill mänsklighetens fortlevnad”). In the morning, as he is watching the white landscape outside the window on the commuter train, he is thinking to himself that he is like “a waste product” (“en avfallsprodukt”): “He is a failure, something that never happened, a slip up or a divine mistake” (“Han är ett misslyckande, ett någonting som aldrig blev, en tabbe eller en gudomlig flopp”).³

The day before, he had received a battered letter with many stamps. It had come over the mountains all the way from Iran with the news that his friend who had stayed on there had died. This evokes the memory of past events that he at one point decided to put away at the back of his mind. Now they appear forcefully: “The memory of the other country. Of the last night in the country that once was his home”. (“Minnet av det andra landet. Av den sista natten i det land som en gång var hans hem”).⁴

² Pooneh Rohi, *Araben* (Stockholm: Ordfront, 2014).

³ Rohi, *Araben*, 7.

⁴ Rohi, *Araben*, 21.

As Sweden does not seem to be the Arab's home either, in a sense he remains homeless in his heart. Soon another protagonist also from Iran, a young woman, is introduced into the novel, and two parallel stories start to unfold. Contrary to the Arab's story, told in the third person, the one about the young woman is in the first person. With a Swedish boyfriend and successful in her university studies, she has learnt the codes and is integrated in Swedish life, so much so that she is taken to have been adopted as a child. Together with her boyfriend, she is planning to buy a flat with a wooden floor and high ceiling. She visits her mother who spends most time on her own, joyless, while keeping an Iranian way of life. But the young woman hardly remembers her childhood in Iran. It is just a distant memory from the past, at least in the beginning of the book. Eventually "her longing for that rain, that salty scent from the sea" ("längtan efter det där regnet, den där salta fuktiga luften från havet") grows, as well as significantly her longing for "that part of the room that is invisible in the mirror" ("den där delen av rummet som inte syns i spegeln").⁵ Yet she is more at home in Sweden than the Arab. Moving towards the end of the novel, the two parallel stories weave together with an encounter between the young woman and the Arab. It turns out that they have met at cafés for all of ten years and that they are related: they are father and daughter, although not on the best of terms. The novel ends with the young woman being offered a position as PhD student at the university, but she breaks up with her Swedish boyfriend because of cultural differences.

The notion of home tends to be associated with a cherished place, a shelter that provides comfort and belonging, a place to return to. This meaning of home is emphasised through exile and emigration. Here Ireland, with its endemic emigration, offers a useful comparative case in point. As Irish journalist Fintan O'Toole has noted about the predicament of the Irish diaspora "*home* itself comes into focus only when one is away from home", it is "usually made powerful by the act of leaving it" and "home is much more than a dwelling place. It is also a whole set

⁵ Rohi, *Araben*, 77.

of connections and affections, the web of mutual recognition that we spin around ourselves and that gives us a place in the world”.⁶ For the Arab in the novel, all this is brutally brought back when he receives the letter with news about the death of his friend. But also to him, home is a divided place. With increasing migration and other types of movement and travel across space follow the widespread experience of being at home, more or less and in different ways, in *two* places, perhaps more so in one of them during certain stages in life. This is what it was like for the young woman, who ended up feeling more Iranian and less Swedish, as the novel progressed, than she did in the beginning: importantly, the orientation towards one’s locations might change over the course of time.

Another writer who recently made a name in Sweden is the poet Athena Farrokhzad, also with roots in Iran. Her poetry collection *Vitsvit* (2013) (*White Blight*, 2015) has been an inspiration for Pooneh Rohi. This comes across in her short opinion piece in *Dagens Nyheter* one year after the publication of *Araben*.⁷ In the opinion piece she develops further the topic from the novel by discussing the idea of home and homelessness, also in relation to exclusion. The online piece was illustrated with a large picture of brown-eyed Rohi with her black curly hair gathered in a topknot, next to the title “And you call me stranger” (“Och ni kallar mig främling”).⁸ In the piece she refers to Athena Farrokhzad when she says that writing in Swedish is what puts bread on the table. It is also the language that is worth the price of betraying a mother, and that:

I am an involuntary Swede. I have no choice. This is my country, this is my language ... Without Sweden I am homeless ... And yet

⁶ Fintan O’Toole, “Perpetual Motion”, in *Arguing at the Crossroads: Essays on a Changing Ireland*, ed. Paul Brennan and Catherine de Saint Phalle (Dublin: New Island Books, 1997), 86.

⁷ Athena Farrokhzad, *Vitsvit* (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Förlag, 2013); Athena Farrokhzad, *White Blight* (Brooklyn, NY: Argos Books, 2015).

⁸ Pooneh Rohi, “Och ni kallar mig främling”, *Dagens Nyheter*, 10 April 2014.

you call me stranger every time you talk about those you actually should call by their real name: racists.⁹

(Jag är en ofrivillig svensk. Jag har inget val. Detta är mitt land, detta är mitt språk....Utan Sverige är jag hemlös... Och ändå kallar ni mig för främling varje gång ni talar om dem som ni i stället borde kalla vid deras rätta namn: rasister.)

Key in Rohi's opinion piece is thus the contradiction between how she is identified as "a stranger" ("en främling") because she "looks different" ("ser annorlunda ut"), yet has no other home than Sweden, whether she likes to or not. When I met Pooneh Rohi for an interview, she talked about this as a form of racialisation:

Racialisation concerns everyone who looks different. The first generation and those who were born here. There will absolutely be a movement. Many of us came about twenty years ago. It will be a very political movement of people who share this identification. Our parents were treated incredibly badly. We did not suffer so much. Now their children, us, who have the language, we have the codes, we are now in the social elite, we are educated.

(Rasifiering gäller alla som ser annorlunda ut. Den första generationen och de som föddes här. Det kommer absolut en rörelse. Många av oss kom för ungefär tjugo år sen. Det kommer bli en väldigt politisk rörelse med människor som delar den här identifikationen. Våra föräldrar behandlades oerhört illa. Vi råkade inte lika illa ut. Nu har deras barn, vi, vi har språket, vi har koderna. Vi är nu i den sociala eliten, vi är utbildade.)¹⁰

This is in line with the notion that a young middle-class generation of Iranian background now are "continuing" the careers their parents had to give up in Iran, as many of them only could get menial jobs in Sweden.

Just like the young woman in *Araben*, Pooneh Rohi came to Sweden from Iran as a child. She grew up in a middle-class home in Stockholm. Her father was a physicist and her mother taught literature in school. It was as an Erasmus exchange student in comparative literature at University of Sheffield that she discovered postcolonial

⁹ Rohi, "Och ni kallar mig främling".

¹⁰ Interview with Pooneh Rohi, 2 May 2014 in Stockholm.

literature, and suddenly her own feelings of dislocation made sense as a part of a larger scheme. She was not alone. In the interview with Rohi, I asked about the writing process, how and why she wrote *Araben*. She said that she had been writing short stories – very short stories – since she was a teenager. They could be just half a page long. That was how it started with *Araben*. It originated as a short story that she later combined with a number of other short stories. This topic was different than anything else she had written. With this topic, she was able to keep her focus rather than taking off in other directions like she used to do, as this topic engaged her more. She was totally consumed by it. It took seven years to write *Araben*, which had been useful for Rohi, she explained, as this long time span had made it possible for her to combine the young person she used to be with the one who is somewhat older. The novel features two sides of herself. Coming across Willy Kyrklund's montage novel *Tvåsam* (1949) ("Two Together") was a turning point for Rohi.¹¹ She found that novel excellent not least in its poetic style and went on to write her undergraduate essay in comparative literature about it. It is likely that the precise economical style of *Tvåsam* also made an impression on Rohi, who at the time of the interview, was working on a PhD dissertation in linguistics, and thus had a special interest in significant linguistic details. So *Araben* can be said to have been influenced both by the poetic precise prose and the montage format (which was regarded as falling outside standard literary genres) of *Tvåsam* that creates an allegorical level.¹² During the interview, Rohi mentioned Willy Kyrklund's Finnish-Swedish background. After having finished school, he moved to Sweden from Finland, an experience which was reflected in his literary work in terms of feelings of alienation and melancholia that incidentally appear in *The Arab* as well. It is likely that Rohi feels an affinity with Kyrklund also because of this: the fact that he, too, had moved to Sweden from another country. He incidentally also had an interest in Iran.

If Kyrklund was a "writer who had immigrated" ("invandrad författare"), Rohi is identified as an immigrant writer in

¹¹ Willy Kyrklund, *Tvåsam*, (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1949).

¹² See also Arne Florin, "Om Willy Kyrklunds genrer och genreblandningar" (diss., Stockholm University, 1992).

literary journalism such as reviews. As Iranian immigrants are also referred to as forming a diaspora, which is a term they tend to prefer, it is relevant to have a look at the terminology here. Both “immigrant” and “migrant” literature are standard notions, as is “diaspora” literature. Yet there is an awareness in comparative literature that the notion of “immigrant” or “migrant” literature might not actually correspond to the level of the authors’ integration or Swedishness, nor to their literary topics. Many authors in Sweden who were born in another country or whose parents were, identify as Swedish authors.¹³ When it comes to the designation “diaspora” literature, *Araben* does fit in here. In a wider perspective, diaspora literature draws attention to issues ranging from the nation-state to ideas of home and homeland.¹⁴ Yet as sociologist Rogers Brubaker has pointed out in an influential statement: “rather than speak of ‘a diaspora’ or ‘the diaspora’ as an entity, a bounded group, an ethnodemographic or ethnocultural fact, it may be more fruitful, and certainly more precise, to speak of diasporic stances, projects, claims, idioms, practices”.¹⁵

When Rohi had finished *Araben*, she sent it to about fifteen publishers – all she could find on the internet. All but two sent her standard rejection letters. These two liked her way of writing, but noted that the novel was just not ready yet. Ordfront in Stockholm was willing to publish the manuscript as it stood,

¹³ See Satu Gröndahl, “Identity Politics and the Construction of Minor Literatures: Multicultural Swedish Literature at the Turn of the Millennium”, *multiethnica* 30 (2007): 21–29; Magnus Nilsson, “Swedish ‘Immigrant Literature’ and the Construction of Ethnicity”, *Tijdschrift voor Skandinavistiek*, 31, no. 1 (2010): 199–218; and Lars Wendelius, *Den dubbla identiteten: Immigrant- och minoritetslitteratur på svenska 1970–2000* (Uppsala: Centrum för Multi-etnisk forskning, 2002) among others.

¹⁴ Considering the usage of the notion of diaspora in academia, anthropologists Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen (1999) have suggested four types: social form, consciousness, mode of cultural production and political orientation. Vertovec, Steven and Robin Cohen, “Introduction”, in *Migration, Diasporas and Transnationalism*, ed. Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen. xiii–xxviii (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar), 1999.

¹⁵ Rogers Brubaker, “The ‘diaspora’ diaspora”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28, no. 1 (2005): 13.

and eventually did publish the novel, but after she had followed the editor's advice to "fill it out".¹⁶ Rohi realised she could use many very short stories about exile that she already had and add two more chapters: one about the Arab and one about the young woman. The book was a success. It was reviewed very positively in major newspapers and literary journals, and Pooneh Rohi was interviewed in *Babel*, the literary program on Swedish Television. Eva Johansson wrote a review in *Svenska Dagbladet* where she praised Rohi's remarkable way of making her as a reader recognise herself in something that she has never experienced.¹⁷

To conclude, this analysis of home as a divided location in the novel *The Arab* has exemplified shifting orientations to the two locations Stockholm and Iran over time, especially at different events and stages in life for the two protagonists. It was the notion of diaspora that brought out the idea of home as a divided location, also in terms of a simultaneous sense of homelessness. Yet it may actually be the case that the two locations in the novel could be connected and understood as two sides of the same home, at least for the young woman. The interview with Pooneh Rohi and her opinion piece moreover made her political engagement in relation to racialisation obvious. She was concerned about the consequences of "looking different", which comes back in the novel. Writing *Araben* had been something of a revelation to her, a way to sort out her situation. She really was not sure that she would write another book. With *Araben* she had "ticked off" this topic that she had been absorbed by. There might not be another topic that she would get into this deeply for such a long time. In fact, writing fiction full-time is not the life she desires.¹⁸ This might change later on, of course, but for now it seems as if Pooneh Rohi is joining a quickly growing group of young writers in Sweden who publish one debut novel on experiences of exclusion that is very well received – and that is it. They do not become fiction writers, but pursue other careers. In 2016, Rohi did a reading of sections from *Araben* at an event

¹⁶ Interview with Rohi, 2014.

¹⁷ Eva Johansson, "Araben: Rohi fångar exilens sorg och smärta", *Svenska Dagbladet*, 28 January 2014.

¹⁸ Interview with Rohi, 2014.

about the relation between Jews and Muslims organised by the Association for Jewish Culture in Sweden at Berns in Stockholm.¹⁹ And incidentally, later that year, the feminist magazine *Bang* published a new short story by Rohi, characteristically succinct in its style, titled “The Bicycle Accident” (“Cykelolyckan”).²⁰ It was written in response to the recent influx of Syrian refugees to Sweden I mentioned in the opening of this chapter. It remains to be seen if this short story is the beginning of another book, after all.

On a final wider analytical note, in *An Accented Cinema* (2001) media scholar Hamid Naficy from Iran writes about the growing film genre that is about expatriation in the west by Third World filmmakers.²¹ He refers to these films as “accented”, combining cinematic and diasporic traditions, thereby revealing new perspectives to a mainstream public.

This is precisely what diaspora writings do in Sweden. And while the writers, such as Pooneh Rohi, discuss changing orientations of home as a divided location through fiction and journalism, they are cosmopolitanising Sweden from within. This also entails that vernacular features of Swedish society now include diasporic stances.

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¹⁹ This took place 8 February 2016 at Berns in Stockholm; see <http://urskola.se/Produkter/188177-UR-Samtiden-Judisk-var-relationen-mellan-judar-och-muslimer-Araben-av-Pooneh-Rohi>.

²⁰ Pooneh Rohi, “Cykelolyckan”, *Bang* 1 (2016), accessed 10 September 2017, <http://www.bang.se>.

²¹ Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

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