



SYNGUÉ SABUR: PIERRE DE PATIENCE

SYNGUÉ SABUR: PIERRE DE PATIENCE (Paris, 2008; translated into English by Polly McLean as *The Patience Stone*, New York, 2009; [Figure 1](#)), a highly acclaimed novella in French by Atiq Rahimi (‘Atiq Raḥimi; b. Kabul, 1962), the Afghan writer and director. It was awarded the Prix de l’Academie de Goncourt, France’s prestigious literary prize in 2008. Previous recipients of the prize include such prominent authors as Marcel Proust, André Malraux, and Marguerite Duras. Rahimi’s primary competitor in the 2008 Goncourt was Michel le Bris, the prominent writer for his work, *The Beauty of the World*.

Atiq Rahimi was educated at the Franco-Afghan lycée in Kabul, and received a doctorate in audio-visual sciences from the Sorbonne. He has lived in Paris as a political refugee since 1985. *Kāk o kākestar* (translated into English by Erdağ M Göknaç as *Earth and Ashes*, New York, 2002), his first novel in Persian was published in Paris in 1996, and was one of three novels shortlisted for the Hušang Golširi Literary Award. The novella is set after the Soviet invasion of 1979, and traces an almost mythic cycle of vengeance among generations of men. It was later adapted as a film script, directed by Rahimi himself, and was screened in the ‘Un Certain Regard’ category at Cannes Film Festival in 2004. Rahimi has also published *Hezār kāna-ye k’āb o vaḥšat* (Paris, 2002, tr., into English by Sarah Maguire and Yama Yari as *A Thousand Rooms of Dream and Fear*, London, 2006; [Figure 2](#)). Rahimi’s second work in French, *Retour Imaginaire* (An imaginary return, Paris, 2005), is a collection of photographs



taken after the fall of the Taliban on his return to the neighborhood where he grew up in Kabul. The images are accompanied by poetic texts. His *Maudit soit Dostoyevsky* (A curse upon Dostoyevsky) was also published in Paris in 2011.

Syngué Sabur gets its title from a Persian popular folktale. The tale, in which a patient stone, the most empathetic of listeners, absorbs the sorrows and pains of the person who confides in it, was published by Sadeq Hedayat in 1941 in *Majalla-ye musiqi*, a journal of music and literature founded by Gholam-Hosayn Minbashian (see [MINBĀŠĪĀN](#), [Ġolām-Ḥosayn](#); For a modern retelling of the traditional Persian tale, and how the patient stone helps a mistreated young girl achieve her true destiny, see *The Patient Stone: a Persian Love Story*, by Margaret Wolfson, New York, 2004). It is said that when the stone can no longer contain the pain it harbors, it bursts into pieces. The Patient stone also appeared in 1966 as the title of a highly acclaimed novel by Šādeq Čubak (see [CHUBAK](#), [Sadeq](#), 1916-1982; see also [SANG-E ŠABUR](#)).

Syngué Sabur is narrated by a nameless young woman “a conduit, a living vessel for the grievances of millions of women like her,” (Hosseini, p. xii), and is set in an unnamed city in Afghanistan devastated by the war. Family feuds have reduced the woman’s city into a deserted ruin and for the past three weeks her husband has been in a coma, ever since he was shot with a bullet to the neck in a mundane skirmish. Stuck in the ill-defined topography between life and death, the only indication of his existence is the monotonous sound of his breath, a sound that also sets the rhythm for the story. Each day the woman, with a Qur’an in one hand and prayer beads in the other, repeats one of the ninety-nine names of God, ninety-nine times, counting off on the beads as instructed by the local clergy, and implores God with increasing angst for the return of her husband.

As the story progresses the recitation of the names of God gradually withers from the foreground. While rival factions clash in the streets, the woman trickles her story and her secrets into her husband’s ears just as surely as she trickles sugar water into his mouth, not knowing whether her words will resonate with him. He becomes the keeper of her pain, her patient stone. She shares with him her disappointments, anger, resentments, betrayals, and desires- the truths that she would never have dared tell him had he been cognizant. “Her unburdening grows into an outspoken riff on all that is wrong between the sexes, and the codes or prejudices that bar true intimacy. She has never understood “why, for you men, pride is so much linked to blood.””



(Jaggi, p. 11)

This one-sided conversation lies at the heart of the book. From the woman's recollections we are led to understand that in their private life the man had been both brutal and sterile. For fear that she would be abandoned for infertility the woman seeks the counsel of a man who writes prayers, and with his assistance, bears two daughters from the seeds of two anonymous men, and presents them to her husband as his children. If the fairy tale of the patient stone is true, and if the patient stone will sacrifice itself by bursting into pieces upon hearing that which otherwise would crush the one who bears the burden of an incommunicable sorrow, then the woman will be freed of her pains. But at the end of the story, in a twist of fate, the comatose husband, the patient stone, vengefully comes back to life, giving rise to a deathly fight in the story's closing scene.

Syngué Sabur is written lyrically, at times approaching poetic prose. The narrator is stationary for the entire story, immobile like a camera, observing that which takes place in the room and recording it in the narration; only hearing that which takes place outside. Through the woman's narration the story, that is set in a small, sparsely furnished room, grows into a large mirror reflecting the image of a country where young women are given to old and cruel men; where cannons, tanks, sermons and the call of the muezzin to prayer fill the air; and honor and manliness have always been intermingled with brutality and bloodthirstiness: an image not far removed from the cruel realities of killing and moral amnesia that have swept Afghanistan in recent decades.

The publication of the novel earned Rahimi immediate recognition. He was celebrated as a novelist with "a camera-pen," who captures minute details in his narrative (Armel) ; as a novelist who offers all martyred women from the shadows, a memory (Laval, <http://boutique.telerama.fr/>); as "an heir to Scheherazade," (Lorrain, p. 116), and as an author whose writings will reconcile the East with the West (Dufay, p. 4). Many critics commented on the novel's cinematic language and praised it as a "precious stone," (Quiriny, p. 25). On the other hand, some commentators asserted political and media-oriented motivations as the criteria used by the selecting committee of l'Academie de Goncourt, and harshly criticized the novel as a perfect example of the literature of colonialism, offering the western market a cocktail of cruelty, sex, women being sacrificed, and the hatred of Islam (Stanechy, "Atiq Rahimi: Colonial Literature and Literary



Prize,” <http://stanechy.over-blog.com/article-25237284-6.html>).

Syngué Sabur, in which a silent woman finds her unique voice, a voice buried for thousands of years, is dedicated by Atiq Rahimi to the memory of N.A. (Nadia Anjoman, 1980-2005), the poet who was silenced and killed by her husband at the age of twenty-five. The book has been translated into Spanish (*La Piedra De La Paciencia*, Elena García-Aranda, Madrid 2010), Italian (*Pietra Di Pazienza*, Rome, 2010), German (*Stein der Geduld*, Lis Künzli, Berlin, 2009), and also Persian (*Sang-e şabur*, Maryam Javān et al., Paris, 2009), as well as many other languages.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aliette Armel, “La Vie en Livre,” 1 December 2008, formerly available at Le nouvel Observateur (<http://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com>).

Şādeq Čubak, *Sang-e şabur*, Tehran, 1966, tr. M. R. Ghanoonparvar as *The Patient Stone*, Costa Mesa, 1989.

François Dufay, *L' Express*, no. 2993, 13 November 2008, Paris, p. 4.

François Guillaume Lorrain, *Le Point*, no. 1887, 13 November 2008, Paris, p. 116.

Khaled Hosseini, “Introduction,” *The Patient Stone*, tr. Polly McLean, New York, 2009, pp. ix-xii.

Maya Jaggi, “The Patient Stone by Atiq Rahimi,” *The Guardian: Review Section*, Saturday, 24 April 2008, p. 11.

Martine Laval, ““Syngué sabour, Pierre de patience,” a hymn to freedom and love of Atiq Rahimi,” <http://www.telerama.fr/livre/syngue-sabour-pierre-de-patience-un-hymne-a-la-liberte-et-a-l-amour-d-atiq-rahimi,32801.php>, 20 March 2009.

Bernard Quiriny, *Le Magazine Littéraire*, no. 48, December 2008, Paris, p. 25.



Atiq Rahimi, *Syngué Sabur: Pierre de Patience*, Paris, 2008.

Georges Stanechy, “Atiq Rahimi: Prix Littéraire et Littérature Coloniale”, A Contre Current, <http://stanechy.over-blog.com/article-25237284-6.html>, accessed 30 July 2011.