

Love letter to Iran

The Cypress Tree

By Kamin Mohammadi

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Reading *The Cypress Tree* by Kamin Mohammadi is like riding waves of emotion on a rich and colourful surfboard of words, each letter weaving a pattern so intricate, with layers so deep, that you are swept into a journey of discovery through the heartland of Iran. It is a journey where history, revolution, war and exile are irrevocable signposts, traversed through the by-lanes of Mohammadi's sprawling family. *The Cypress Tree* might be Mohammadi's way of making peace with the country of her birth, with her identity, that saw exile to London at the age of nine, with her memory and that of her family's of this "lost paradise", but it is also a window for the reader to make peace with a country whose image has been irrevocably tarred by the Western media, and see the soul of "the longest continuously inhabited land by a single race".

The motif of the cypress tree, a symbol Mohammadi chooses to represent the Iranian soul, is almost like a character, one that however has been given only one line to memorise, first uttered by Mohammadi's maternal great-grandfather, Ali: "We Iranians are like the cypress tree. We may bend and bend on the wind but we will never break". While it is a strong image to describe the country's volatile history of conquests and authoritarian rule, you wish sometimes that it remained a little understated, a little inconspicuous, allowing the reader to delight in its chance discovery. So when Mohammadi ends her "love letter to Iran" with this same metaphor, quite predictably and with a hint of defiant sentimentality, there is an element of anti-climax.

But then, this is a love letter and love letters have their own set of rules, one of which is there are no rules, which Mohammadi sticks to. For one, the language. Mohammadi's narrative is generously peppered with metaphors and similes, giving this prose the evocative veneer of poetry. There is a depth here that only comes with longing, an unrequited longing, that Mohammadi feels for her country. When she returns for the first time after 18 years, it is this emotion that pours out like a broken dam. "That's when it hit me; the night air, autumnal, carrying a suggestion of reddened leaves, the rushing of mountain springs and snows to come. I had forgotten. I wasn't prepared for the smells of the town where I had grown up – Tehran. I burst into tears." At a deeper level, this is a love letter to her family, more than Iran, the two interconnected quite naturally in the powerful embrace of love that Mohammadi, and we, discover. "The love of my family anchored me and I realised that, for me, Iran will always be about the people whom I love."

Through her father's Kurdish roots and her mother's Persian, we explore the Iranian way of life in the first half of the book, simply titled 'Home', and it is the flavour of this home that Mohammadi gives us, one hand holding her family tree and the other Iran's. While parts of it might run the risk of sounding like a history textbook, Mohammadi's honest style and her obvious attempt to pack in as much in as little, keeps

the pace going. If her discernment is tightly and consciously held in descriptions of Iran's history, there is complete abandon in the descriptions of the many people who colour her lively family. It might be inevitable, especially when you are talking about people who make up your identity, and more so when you view them with the weight of having wilfully ignored them while growing up, but the use of too many adjectives and repetitions take away the lilt from the narrative. This quality is most apparent when she describes an incident with her maternal uncle, Shapour, who "could make the tail lights of his old 2CV blink like a beating heart". And in the subsequent paragraph, "...every time I saw the back of a 2CV disappearing down the road in Abadan from then on, I squinted to see if it was Daiey Shapour's heart blinking for me. Even in years to come and far away from Abadan, I could never break that habit of casting a lingering look at the tail lights of passing 2CVs to see if they were blinking their love for me."

Instances like these do make for tedious reading, but thankfully, there are the endearing and warm snippets of family life that Mohammadi gives us. My favourites are her father wooing her mother with a Mohammadi rose everyday; her mother and aunt tricking their sister-in-law into a porn store in Soho; her eldest aunt Parivash's fiancé Jahanzadeh being forced to take all the siblings on a date to the movies; the conversations between her Maman-joon (grandmother) and Mina (her favourite aunt); Maman-joon herself, with her charisma and presence, delighting you with her unique personality ("When I die, I expect you all to cry a lot. I don't want dry eyes or brave faces. I want rivers of tears, ghorbonetam, and don't think I won't be watching..."); the Abbassian family courtyard sessions and the Kurdish family dance; and the elaborate food — Mohammadi lets you smell and taste what living in Iran is all about. And she does this all with surprising perspicacity. With Persian words innocuously entering her narrative, you are transported to another life, though Mohammadi doesn't let you linger there too long, and you can sense here the fear of attachment that comes with an exiled, broken heart.

Even if you read this subtext throughout the book, you really see why in the second part of the book titled 'Exile', which chronicles Mohammadi's and her extended

family's life after the revolution, the Iran-Iraq war and the continued struggle for democracy that plagues Iran. As she navigates through this difficult phase, Mohammadi resists the temptation of giving her readers a voyeuristic glimpse of the atrocities that were a part of everyday life in Iran (and to a certain extent, probably still are), and instead gives us moments that are real. Ironically this is what brings the horror closer. So as the war nears Maman-joon's town, she refuses to be displaced, only to have her daughter risk the journey in her car to convince her mother. In the middle of their argument, a bomb explodes nearby and suddenly, as the two women clasp each other and break down, you can smell the fear. Or when Mohammadi's youngest aunt, Yassaman brings news of her fiancé managing to find a bus with petrol to move the entire clan away from the danger zone, she takes a few seconds to admire his resourcefulness. Or when another aunt, Shirin, is heavily pregnant and taking a walk in her private garden, one of the Islamic brothers walks in uninvited, asking her to "cover herself". Mohammadi does touch upon the transformations in their own lives, with her mother tenaciously holding on to Iranian culture even in far away London, her father, Bagher, who blossomed

with Iran's burgeoning oil industry, only to wither away in the grey skies of London, never reconciling to life away from Iran, and Kamin herself, eschewing her culture with the bewildering disdain of one victimised by events beyond her reckoning, till the call of Iran proves to be too strong for her newly acquired British persona. Surprisingly, Mohammadi shares nothing of her sister's life or the metamorphosis she would have gone through.

A love letter also brings with it the license to idealise, the need to justify and silence the little pricks in the conscience. So if Ayatollah Khomeini's ideologies were directly opposed to that of the Shah with respect to women's emancipation and supported by the majority, Mohammadi tells us that "They [Iranian men] know how incredible their women are and this mix of love, devotion and fear makes them determined to keep their women under their control, only for themselves".

In the midst of this journey of identities, both lost and regained, both for Iran and her people, this constant justification feels misplaced. While it doesn't take away from the importance of this book in world literature, giving readers a human face to Iran, which may be scarred but retains its beauty, it leaves you wondering about the quality of this truce that Mohammadi makes with her culture. It seems somewhat hazy, especially when her cousin, Parviz, says: "...we are not like other people. I realised this in Europe. There is a gulf because they simply cannot understand what we go through every single day of our lives in order to survive this regime".

Earlier in the book, Mohammadi fondly talks about her parents' love story and is wise enough to see beyond the "idealised and nostalgic" version of her mother's "fairy tale in which she [her mother] continues to believe". By the end of the book, you cannot help but feel that maybe this is Mohammadi's own version of a fairy tale of her family. And by extension, perhaps, of Iran itself. ■

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