

Poetic Connections in My Mother Tongue

By Tara Yazdan Panah

Dedicated to Tajmah Assefi-Shirazi,
Professor of Persian Language.
روحشان شاد
(May her spirit rest in peace and happiness)

If you're walking along the street in a major Iranian city, it won't be long before you come across a child selling slips of paper with poems written on them to car passers and pedestrians. During my summers in Iran, my family would buy these mysterious poems, which were often folded carefully in ornate envelopes, and read the contents aloud to one another. To us, these poems were more than just fleeting amusement. They were fortunes that all of us took to heart, as many other Persians do.

Poetry permeates almost every aspect of Persian life. This isn't surprising, considering that Persians owe the preservation of their culture and language to the achievements of their poets. Persians revere the legendary Ferdowsi, who in the late 10th century wrote the *Shahnameh* (*Book of Kings*), an epic poem over three times the length of Homer's *Iliad*.

At the time, the Persian language was in danger of extinction due to Arabophone infiltration. Yet, the *Shahnameh's* extraordinary legacy ensured that the Persian language would never fall out of use, as Ferdowsi worked meticulously to assure that his poems included few words of Arabic origin.¹ Other medieval Persian poets, such as Hafez, Rumi, and Sa'adi, have also had long-lasting influences on literature globally and are household names among Persian families. Modern poets like Iraj Mirza and Parvin Etesami are renowned figures in Persian culture as well.

Today, the influence of these great poets is obvious to anyone who steps into a Persian home. Almost every Persian household contains a copy of Hafez's *Divan*, and during traditional holidays like Shab-e Yalda (a Zoroastrian holiday on the winter solstice) and Norooz (Persian New Year), families gather and read poetry. My family has a tradition in which each of us take turns making a wish, opening Hafez's book to a random page, and inter-

preting the poem as a response to said wish. Persians do not see poetry merely as a form of literary tradition—to us, it is a spiritual guide. Though my family comes from a Muslim background, they are more likely to turn to Khayyam's words than to read from the Quran in times of distress. I have always been fascinated with my mother's recitation of long passages from poems she learned in grade school, and I wish that I too could recite meaningful, beautiful poems from memory.

One of my greatest joys during my time at Penn has been learning to read and write Persian (Farsi) as it allows me to better understand and interpret our literature. While I grew up speaking Farsi at home, I depended on my mother for translations of Persian texts. During my freshman year, I took "Persian for Heritage Speakers" with Professor Tajmah Assefi-Shirazi, who passed away last summer. I will always be grateful to Professor Assefi-Shirazi for teaching me how to read Persian texts and introducing me to an array of poems I will forever cherish, like Sa'adi's poem in *Bustan* about the 13th century famine in Damascus, which brought tears to my eyes the first time we read it in class.

Since engaging in a deeper study of these poems, I have felt closer to my culture despite being 8,000 miles away from most of my family. Even though I'm not the fastest reader and antiquated Persian terms often go over my head, every new poem I learn brings me one step closer to better understanding the history and culture of my people. As a child of diaspora, it is easy to lose touch with one's roots. Poetry is a way for me to feel connected to my homeland. Most importantly, it has taught me lessons to live by and recite when I am in search of answers. I will always remember Sa'adi's famous words from his poem "Bani Adam," inscribed on the walls of the United Nations in New York City:²



بنیادم اعضای یک پیکرنده که در آفرینش
یک گوهرند چو عضوی بهراگزور در آرد در دگر
عضوها را نمآند قرار تو کز محنت دیگران
بیغمینشاید که نامت نهند آدمی

Transliteration:

"Bani aadam aazaye yek digarand
ke dar aafarinesh ze yek gooharand
cho ozvi be dard aavarad roozegaar
degar ozvhaa raa namaanad gharaar
to kaz mehnate digaraan bi ghami
nashaayad ke naamat nahand aadami"

English Translation:

"All human beings are members of one frame,
Since all, at first, from the same essence came.
When time afflicts a limb with pain
The other limbs at rest cannot remain.
If thou feel not for other's misery
A human being is no name for thee."