

Mehregan in Sydney: An Epilogue

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In the Name of God of Soul and Wisdom

For my mother, my father,
for my daughter and son

For some one who has spent his life in the love of a place or a person or a thing or a concept, it is difficult to define this love in such a way as to feel that justice has been done to it. For me, that is what writing about the Persian culture is like. I will use here the Persian Culture to find some answer.

Whoever asks you of the Huries of Paradise,
Show your face and say, *like this*.
Whoever asks you, how the clouds split apart to show the moon,
open your robe, knot by knot, and say, *like this*.
If you are asked of Christ that, how did he resurrect the dead,
In front of him, place a kiss upon my lips, and say, *like this*.¹

Many times and on many occasions, I have, like many others, thought “What am I? Who am I? What am I doing here? Whence have I come? And what is the purpose of my life?” Although, later, I learned that even great thinkers of human history have not settled these questions for themselves, I have not delayed these continuous questions in my thoughts.

In the day, my thoughts;
At night, my words:
How come I am ignorant of my own heart-being.
From where have I come?
For what have I come?
To where am I going?
Won't you show me my abode?
I very much wonder;
For what have I been made?
Or what was the aim of making me like this?
Who is that One who hears my song?
Or who is that One who put words into my mouth?
I did not come here on my own,
So, I can't leave by my own choice.
The One who brought me here,
Will return me to my Abode.
I am the bird of that Angelic Garden;
Not of this soiled world.
A cage is built from my skeleton,
only for a few days.²

¹ Mowlana Jalal-Odin Mohamad Balkhi Rumi. *Divan of Shams* (B. Foruzanfar ed.), Tehran, 1367/1988 edn., using the translation by my son Omid Honari.

² *Ibid.*

Many times, I have stared into the kind eyes of a donkey, and compared them with the evil eyes of some individuals. I have many times listened to the choir of crickets in the palm grove of my birth place, Khur, and compared them with the frightening noise of missiles and artillery. Many times, I have watched the parade of ants to their nests, strongly holding on to their seeds, and compared them to the dreadful rows of hungry people marching before guns or escaping hunger. I have seen many people, unable to read or write, empty handed, regardless of their own interests, insistent on truth. I have, then, compared them with the lies and hypocrisy of some “educated” people with “academic degrees”. Just recently someone told me: “You have been fighting as long as I have known you.” My reply to him, who had a high academic status was: “As long as there is dishonesty, there must be people who fight it.” How could I possibly better express it than it is done in the Qor’an (62:5) as: “The likeness of a donkey carrying books”, and a proverb that, “It is easy to become literate, difficult to become a human.”

Then I have thought: “What should I do?” The question remains.

The world of my childhood was the village of Khur, where I came to this world. My world, Khur, was very large, very big. I was born in Khur, a small town in the middle of the Iranian central desert; an ancient town and a deeply cultured one. That world was large enough to accommodate all human beings who were born and were to be born there. This world was big enough for all humans, all birds, all trees, all peas and mints which flourished there. One of the foremost things that I learned in this world was respect for all that which existed, for all beings.

I soon learned that everything in the universe has a place, a niche. In creation, there is a place for everyone and everything.

Where is my niche, then?

Where is our niche?

I recall a Persian saying that: *God will not ask about your race or the colour of your skin. You will only be asked: “What have done with what has been given to you on Earth?”*

What are, in fact, our responsibilities? Ants and bees and poppies and streams work on instinct. What should I do; I, who sometimes does things by *free-will* and sometimes follows fate? What should we do while we are *here*. What can we do to live better? *What should we do that all can be better? Human beings like to challenge and to struggle and advance: to be better, happier, luckier, livelier, calmer, healthier; and more human and more human and more human.*

Human Beings and Other Creatures

Taking a step back, I want to start with this question that - why do you think we, human beings, the Noblest of Creation, are better or different from other animals, our closest relatives in nature?

People have various answers to this. Humans can talk. Humans can breed freely and regardless of seasons. Humans are tool-makers. Human walk on two feet. Humans can pass on their experiences. Humans understand beauty.

Further to this, I want to suggest the following:

Holistic Vision. Human beings are capable viewing things holistically. Human beings, these relatively small and fragile creatures, can sit in a corner, and “sense” things or conditions that they have not seen or heard or touched, or tasted or smelled before. The “holistic” aptitude of human beings allows us to comprehend the totality of a region, the height of a mountain, the depth of an ocean; all stars, all cosmos, and the entire universe. Human beings can crystallise existence into a drop; and then plant it inside themselves and re-shape it in any way they wish.

Saying 'No'. Another characteristic which distinguishes human beings from other animals, is the ability to say "no"; of course they have to tolerate its consequences, too. "If you eat rock melon, put up with shivering", goes a Persian proverb. It is like our forefather, Adam, who in his own way said a big "no", and sent us all to carry a greedy stomach, and to run for the rest of our lives after a full one.

Love. The other peculiarity that I know, is "love". Human beings love joy and beauty and friendship; love to love, and to be loved. It is said that when God created Adam, the Angels were ordered to bow before him. They all did, but Satan. He refused. Satan gave a list of what this new creature would do on the earth; all the "evil" things that humans would do. He said "human beings will shed blood, and the blood of its own species, cut trees, kill animals, pollute rivers, cast soil upon the winds." (Apparently he was listing our environmental problems and ecological crises that would be created and ignored by his followers).

God replied: "Yes, I know all that better than you do. But these two-footed creatures have one art, they have the ability to "love".

The answer to all the Satan-guided evils, including destruction of the environment and alienation of cultures, might be found in this aptitude. Human beings can love, they can love humans, love "beings", even love God.

Culture and Culture

I have heard the term *farhang*, since my early childhood. My family was a *farhangi* meaning "learned". This term in Persian has two parts: *farh* meaning dignity, honour or even "stronger"; and *hang* meaning group or association or mateship (how much I love this Australian word "mate"! so simple, so humane, like "aye").

Farhang means culture. When I started to read, I read about the various definitions of culture³ and various cultures. But I only felt the depth of the meaning of culture when I went to our provincial capital, Esfahan, to finish my of high school education.⁴ I was suddenly introduced to the differences between "Khuri" and "Esfahani" cultures.

The Esfahani accent is different from that of Khur. Women in Esfahan wore colourful flowery *chador*, Khuri women wore white three-cornered scarfs with a pin or gem fastening it under their chins. The 'national' food in Esfahan was *beryani* (cooked lamb's lung mashed and fried), Khuries live on *kashk* (whey made from boiled yoghurt). Esfahan is a world famous for its sweet *gaz* (a kind of nugah made originally from the gum of tamarisk), and our main sweet was *koo koo*, a simple short bread. In Esfahan, they ask "How are you?", and may or may not mean it to be taken literally; in Khur, if they ask "*tar damaqi?*" (meaning "Is your mind fresh?", they mean it). In those days every house in Esfahan had its own water-well, no deeper than two metres, which was always very cold. It was a saying with a bit of envy that "even dogs in Esfahan drink icy water." Water in Khur runs in under-ground tunnels, under the houses, and people must reach it by digging up to 20 metres of steps into the ground.

These differences were all beautiful, like discovering a garden with an even greater variety of flowers. The term culture *encompassed* all these specifications.

Thirty springs have passed. Now I live 'down-under'. The word culture has more meanings to me, and is more lively. Yet, after living a gipsy life in four countries, I am talking about my culture,

³ For an academic definition of culture see any handbook of anthropology or sociology, such as L.A. White, "The Concept of Culture", in White, *Theories in Anthropology*, London, 1968; and L. Mair, *An Introduction to Social Anthropology*, Oxford, 1970.

⁴ Khur's high school, "Honar High School" had students up until year 9 for many decades. When I passed year nine, through the hard work of father, years 10 and 11 were established. It was because of the pressure of my mother. She simply did not want to separate from me. She did not know that when I finished 21 years of studying, I would go to a faraway land, where I could not take her, even after the death of my father, as my duty as the oldest son.

in order to prove my existence among other cultures, in this beautiful land; to prove that I can contribute to this colourful garden of multi-cultural Australia.

Culture, as I see it, is a dynamic halo, that encompasses all the biological, environmental, social, behavioural, mental, activity and productivity. Culture is a pattern of being and behaving and believing of individuals in their own society.

Every human being is born into a cultural halo. There is only one thing that we do which is outside the halo of culture. And that is breathing. Nowadays, even breathing has become very cultural.

Different cultures have their own characteristics. Human culture is human heritage, which belongs to all human beings. Do not stamp human heritage with your own "copyright"; millions of people have lived and died to make it what it is today; it is not the property of "a" society, or "a" group.

The beauty of human culture, like a garden, is in its variations and colours. All cultures have contributed to the development and advancement of humankind. The Iranian people, and their land Iran, have been present in the history and cultural existence of human kind during the past few thousand years.⁵

The Iranian contribution to the culture of human kind covers a wide range of spectra including: science, literature, ethics, technology, architecture, arts, handicrafts, poetry, painting, writing, and human behaviour. These aspects and many others have been examined by many scholars.

Now, I would like to examine those characteristics that distinguish humankind from other animals in the Persian culture.

A Holistic World-View

There is a special type of world view and universality in Persian culture. Once I asked a dear friend to tell me the most beautiful ghazal of Hafez. The reply, without a pause, was: "Value of the output of world's workshop is not much: is nothing"⁶ Read the whole ghazal from the *Divan* of Hafez, and think. This man, Hafez, did not go out of Shiraz much, returned from his short trips to Esfahan and Yazd in a rush, broke off his sea journey as soon as entered a ship in the Persian Gulf. Yet he talked in such a manner that you think he had all the universe under his feet. Hafez, with reliance on an eternal love, loves everything and everyone. He says:

Do not look for shade beneath the tree of life or beneath the lotus,
For when you understand the high and low, it, O cypress, is nothing.

The Persian culture is a culture which has a tendency for a holistic vision which includes all existence in its totality. That is why there is no element of racism and exclusionism in it. Within this culture, any type of racism, in any colour or any shape, is in direct contrast with human nature; any kind of racism is an indication of no culture. In every racist expression, is an element of non-humanity. A racist is not a *human* by definition, being a human being has a definition which does not include *racism* or *superiority*.

Take the stone carved statues of Persepolis as an example. Remember that human figures have been carved on stone in many parts of the world throughout history. The people in power always wanted to make their achievements eternal and permanent. One of the *easiest* ways for them, and not for the carvers, was stone carvings. Most stone carvings show a victorious commander or king

⁵ See, e.g., W. Durant, *The Story of Civilization: our oriental heritage*, New York, 1954; and R.M. Ghirshman, *Iran*, Harmondsworth, 1954; R.N. Frye, *The Heritage of Persia*, New York, 1963; A.J. Arberry (ed.), *The Legacy of Persia*, Oxford, 1953; G. Straton, *Introduction to the History of Science*, Baltimore, 1927, and any other book about world-cultural, -scientific and -technological history.

⁶ I cannot resist suggesting that the best translation of Hafez into English is the magnificent translation by Australian poet, Paul Smith;

standing on the chest of the one who he has defeated, or whose stomach is torn or head cut off. One of the stone carving in Nineveh, for example, shows a king dragging out the eye balls of captives, and a rope is passed through their lips to keep their heads straight.

Now let us make a comparison with the stone carvings of Persepolis. There are many hundreds of statues of humans on walls of halls and corridors and stairs. They represent the different ethnic groups of the Persian Empire. They are all the same height and the same size. They are all walking. They are all very much alive. They are all happy. They hold hands. They are decisive.

Another example: I do not know how many languages have masculine and feminine words, and how many do not. But I know that it is very difficult for a Persian speaking person to get used to a language distinguishing “she” and “he” and “it”. There is no element of sexism in the Persian language. When Hafez, as an example, talks of the third person - *ou* (pron. *oo*) meaning ‘the one being referred to’ - no one knows if he is talking about a beautiful sweet-heart, or about a wise *master*, or about God.

Swear to the soul of the Master of the Ruin,
and to the right of *ou*'s companionship
That there is nothing in my head,
But the desire of being with *ou*.

In my view, cultures which split its own people to segments - by race, gender, superior groups, inferior communities, money and social status, contradict, in essence, human dignity. There is a basic element lacking in them; there is no substance in them. Those who impose their culture and values on other people, are in contrast to human dignity. They may rule the world for fifty or a hundred years with bloodshed, but in history this is much shorter than they may think.

Recently, when I read that the top officers of the Red Army were selling their blood to feed themselves, it reminded me of their chopping the breasts of Iranian women during their occupation of Iran in 1941. I still do not know what would be the compensation for Iraqi people under 300,000 air raids in a few nights. Even up till recently people believed the strange diseases they contracted were God's retaliation.

Saying “No”.

I said that human being can say “no”. This is a very hazardous word to say; the outcome may be the loss of a career, torture, exile and even execution. But the price of defending honour is always a high one.

We Persians are good on shaping our long historical experiences into principles, and then defend those principles and even sacrifice our lives for them.⁷ Possibly that is why we still survived as a nation; a multi-cultural nation, while many other nations, even with longer histories than ours transferred their cultural identities completely from their original one. Let us give less distant examples.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Iran was at its weakest period of history. Many attempts were made - especially by the British and Russian governments to - colonize Iran. Many agreements were signed: separate, competitive and joint declarations were announced; the latest being in 1907, 1915 and 1919. They simply failed. The Persian culture fought them back. The Persian culture fought British and Russian imperialism for 150 years continuously; and did not become a colony.

Iran did not become a colony.

Divan of Hafiz, Melbourne, 1983. Read about Paul Smith's story of translation in this book.

⁷ It is interesting to note that even in prehistory, human sacrifice was never practised in the Persian culture. One explanation is that we never have been afraid of evil forces. The evil forces were never believed to be worth any respect or worshipping. There is a

Iran was the first country which, in spite of announcing and being impartial in the Second World War, was occupied, without any provocation, by British and Russian armies.⁸ This occupation took place at the time when the Russian Red Army and the British Red-Blue Army were fighting against Hitler's fascism and theoretically they needed every soldier they could muster.

Iran was the first country which was crushed under the boots of the Communists. The occupation only lasted five painful years. Stalin's puppet governments in Azarbaijan and Kurdistan collapsed after a year. The Iranian people ejected the Red Army 45 years before Eastern and Central Europe. However and whoever achieved it, well done, and good on them.

The geographical placing of Persian culture has been the cross-roads of most historical events, contacts and conflicts. There have been many forces and powers who tried hard for centuries to impose their culture on Iran, in vain. Iran survived with its own cultural identity.

Iran did not become Arab. Iran did not become Turk. Iran did not become Communist. Iran did not become a British colony. Iran did not become a Russian colony. Iran did not become an American colony.

The World of Love

The Persian culture is abundant with love and friendship. Again, I have to extend my hands in need to Hafez Shirazi, who, even at the dark era of oppression and tyranny, screams:

Come to disperse flowers,
and pour wine in cups;
to crack the ceiling of skies,
and another plan,
afresh.

If sorrow organizes its troops,
to shed the blood of lover;
I and cup-bringer, then, join forces,
to uproot it off from its foundations.

Although it is believed that "The sea of love, is a sea, which has no coast".⁹ if you would be better convinced with statistics, I have a suggestion. Pick up any book on Persian literature and open it at random, and count the words: love and friendship. Then calculate its proportion to the total number of the words in the page. I mentioned books of "literature" for a reason. Formal history is politics, but literature is the history of minds and people. It is where the culture of people is crystallised.

It seems that the Persian culture, being a major player and witness of human history, and constantly taking risks, has found the way of friendship as the only means of continuity and advancement.

I have not seen a sound nicer than the sound of love;
a memory that will remain under this turning sky.

Mehregan in Sydney

Now-Ruz, or the Persian New Year day, is one of the most ancient and continuous ceremonies in human history, which has been celebrated without any religious attribution. *Now-Ruz* is at the first day of Farvardin (the first month on the Persian calender) at the time of vernal equinox.¹⁰

difference between sacrificing in defence of your beliefs and sacrificing to bribe evil forces.

⁸ There are not any comprehensive documentations about this immoral tyranny. The only book is R.A. Stewart, 1988, *Sun Rise at Abadan: the British and Soviet invasion of Iran, 1941*, New York, 1988.

⁹ Again, is from Hafez Shirazi, see Paul Smith's translation, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ See any book on Persian traditions and history, looking for the word *Now-Ruz*. My book *Ayen Hay-e Now Ruzi*, Tehran, 1974

The story of establishment of these ceremonies goes back to the dawn of history. Ancient Persians did not have “weeks” of seven days. They had 12 months of 30 days. There were an extra five days (or six days) which were at the end of the year which were not a part of any month. This was based on the division of a circle of 360 days or degrees which were the number of windows, built on the dome of the ancient observatory of Nim-Ruz, or the meridian, built in ancient Zabol (meaning again “midday”), according to mythology.

Each day had a name; twelve days had the same names as the name of the months. There were monthly celebrations, when the name of the “day” and the “month” corresponded. For example; the second day of each month was called *Bahman*. The name of the eleventh month was, and still is, *Bahman*. The second day of the eleventh month was celebrated as “Bahman Day”.

The sixteenth day of each month was called *Mehr*, meaning love, friendship, Sun, and Mithra. *Mehr* was and still is the sixth month of the year. The sixteenth day of the sixth month, was called *Mehregan*.

Now-Ruz is celebrated at the first of spring, symbolising growth, and creation. It is celebrated at the first day of spring in the northern hemisphere. *Mehregan*, which is the second to *Now-Ruz* in the Persian calendar, is celebrated as the festivity of Spring in Australia, the second *Now Ruz*.

It should be mentioned that *Now-Ruz* is being observed in Australia, like our people in Iran, Afganistan, Tajikistan, Kurdistan,¹¹ many parts of India, Pakistan, Azarbaijan, and where ever elements of Persian and Iranian culture has been an influenced. And we also celebrate *Mehregan* at the beginning of Australian spring.

Mehregan in its origin is the celebration of love, friendship, affection and mateship. We Persians offer love, friendship, affection and mateship to this new and great land, and to the natives of it, the Australian Aborigines and to the others, who like ourselves come from others lands, for making it a better place for people and nature. Through *Mehregan*, we are sending to all our compatriots the messages of love and friendship.

The term, *Mehr* and *Mehregan* has gone to other languages to represent happiness and celebration; such as Mithra in Latin languages and *Mehrejan* in Arabic. By celebrating *Mehregan*, we are celebrating joy and happiness

We are introducing ourselves to this multicultural society, and identifying ourselves as a distinguished element of human heritage, to say “we exist” as we have existed in the long human history and rich human culture. We, by celebrating *Mehregan*, are highlighting our cultural identity in Australia.

According to Persian legends, and as narrated in the *Shahnameh*, Zahak, the symbol of evil, was overthrown, captured and imprisoned by the people. The story says that Jamshid, the king-inventor, who created farming, crafts, the making of cloths and literacy, became too arrogant and forgot his people in the end. Zahak, the devil-king, who had Eblis (the devil, Satan) as his teacher, first killed his father. Then Eblis taught him to butcher animals and eat meat - before him people were vegetarian. Eblis became Zahak’s guide. When Zahak wanted to reward Eblis, he allowed him to kiss his shoulders as he requested. From the spots on Zahak’s shoulders, where Eblis had kissed, two snakes grew. Eblis reappeared this time as a doctor, prescribing human brain to be fed to the snakes. (Why human “brain” to remedy the evilness of “shoulders”? Any relation between the products of these two: brain and shoulder, thinking and power?) People, after a long patience and toleration, rose, captured Zahak and imprisoned him. They did not kill him, they imprisoned him in a cave (I don’t know why they did not killed him). Anyhow, it was an uprising of people for defence of brains on shoulders, or mind over arms or thinking over power.

Mehregan is the day of peoples’ victory over Zahak, and evil.

Mehregan, in Australia, is also the celebration of the end of winter; hoping that with winter the coldness and darkness of hearts goes away with the coming of *Mehregan*.

(Iranian Centre for Anthropology) and London, 1990 (Nashre Ketab) provides a detailed account on the traditions of *Now-Ruz* today.

¹¹ I saw a news-clip on the 21 March 1996, showing Kurdish people being beaten, and their children being shot at and tortured in the Kurdish part of Turkey, for celebrating *Now-Ruz*. *Now-Ruz* is the strongest endorsement of our identity.