

Festival of leaves and the dance of winds

Colors of autumn in the land of four seasons



Autumn's colorful parade in Fasham, 35 km north-east of Tehran

by Maryam Ala Amjadi

Fall is perhaps one of the most meaningful and eventful seasons in the Iranian calendar and culture. Autumn sunsets and the melancholy and the familiar sense of nostalgia associated with them are common themes in Persian poetry and fiction. In fact, some people do really feel blue when the sky turns crimson at the end of an autumn day. The gloomy atmosphere, the falling leaves, that vague and undefined desire to go somewhere, do something and to be someone makes one restless to the tune of the winds of change. Nature is impatient and going through the process of transformation and perhaps, we are in a way too.

It is perhaps for the best that schools and universities are opened at the brink of this season and that a great deal of young and curious or curiously young minds are hopefully engaged and directed in a different direction. There is something tense in the air, an ambiguous desire to not sit still and move as we try to instill peace to the inner self. Out of this poetic tension, comes an aesthetic confusion of colorful leaves and winds and a human conclusion of their death plus as much as hope for a renewal. In fact, autumn is known as the 'season of poets'. More poetry readings and sessions are held during this season and people generally develop a taste for writing poems and reciting them.

Classic Persian poets tackled the depiction of nature with their pen to a great extent as they em-



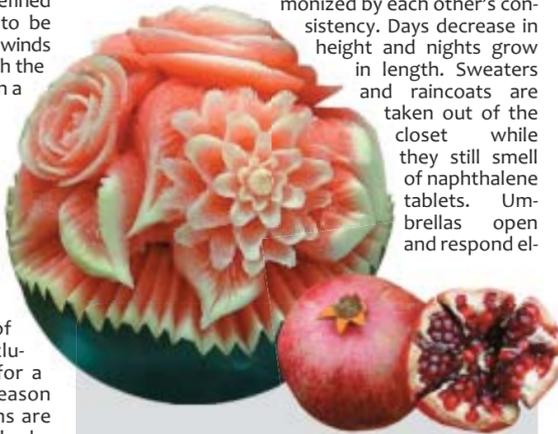
ployed metaphors of nature and its elements generously in their poetry. Persian poet Manoucherhi Damghani (11th century) almost paints the colors of autumn with the tip of his pen as his paintbrush in a poem with the same title. Persian Sufi and poet of the 13th century, Rumi writes out autumn as a metaphor for death from a mystical point of view. Fall symbolizes a temporary ending to the valley flowers but then there is a beacon of hope as there will be a resurrection after every dead spell. Also, contempo-



rary Iranian poet, Mehdi Akhavan Saales has deemed autumn as 'the king of all seasons' in a poem with the same title. Interestingly, this poem was written in spring. Some would read it the light of the repressive atmosphere of pre-revolution days, where the poet invokes the hidden fruits and potentials of the

motherland. Autumn has also been a recurrent setting in Persian fiction, particularly in love stories as it helps to tone the appropriate atmosphere for the characters and the possible tragic theme relevant to the story.

The three months of the fall, Mehr (first month of autumn meaning, love and kindness), Aban (second month: water) and Azar (third month: fire) display an equilibrium of natural elements as they are all harmonized by each other's consistency. Days decrease in height and nights grow in length. Sweaters and raincoats are taken out of the closet while they still smell of naphthalene tablets. Umbrellas open and respond el-



Yalda night, a starry Persian epilogue to autumn

The last eve of autumn and the beginning of winter is a ceremonious night for Iranians. Known as the longest and darkest night of the year, December 21st (30th of Azar) is celebrated in the memory of the victory of light over darkness. 'Yalda' (in Syriac, a dialect of old Aramaic language it means 'birth') marks the birth of winter and the triumph of the sun as the days grow longer and colder. The festival is also known as 'shab-e-chelleh' (the night of the chelleh, meaning forty) which refers to the forty days of winter that are supposedly the coldest and initially hardest to bear. Dated as old as 50 centuries ago, Yalda is one of the most important festivals of ancient Iran and it is still celebrated to this day. Although it is not an official holiday, the festival is widely celebrated across the country and television and radio have special programs for this night. Chelleh neshini (sitting for chelleh) is a social occasion when families and friends gather usually at the house of an elder (grandparents, aunts or uncles) to rejoice in warmth of one another's company as nane sarma (Cold Ma, a character in Persian folklore who brings in the cold of winter) begins to descend on earth. Ajil (a mixture of dry fruits, seeds and nuts) and fresh winter fruits are served to the guests. The dry fruits are somehow a reminiscence of the abundance of summer and the fresh fruits are an invocation for food during winter. Watermelon and pomegranates are the traditional fresh fruits of this night. The red color and the fleshy texture are also a symbol of sunrise and the birth of the first day of winter. People stay awake usually most of the night while they recite poetry, sing, play musical instruments or just chat in the coziness of their home and among their loved ones. They also make phone calls to friends and close ones or send text messages to congratulate them on this night. As the longest night of the year, Yalda is also deemed as a symbol of separation from the beloved, a period of anticipation and longing after which comes the dawn of hope. It is also believed that people's wishes are granted on this day.

egantly to quick showers that the sky weeps from time to time. And leaves, parading the hues of the dawn and the dusk fall to the refrain of the wind only to be trampled later and play their own songs of bygone memories as they go crunch crunch under the feet of each passerby.

Cleaners from the municipality are employed to sweep the streets off dry leaves. The stroke of their brooms is heard early in the morning by school children who are getting ready in the cold mist of an autumn day or as they wait for their school car or van. They keep their minds warm by reviewing the lessons for the day and their bodies cozy in the mittens, caps and boots. But the cold is not bitter, at least not yet. In fact, it is said the best time to visit Iran is either autumn or spring because the temperatures and climate changes do not fall in the extreme zone during these seasons. Of course, this depends on what area or region of Iran we are referring to because Iran is a vast country with a very diverse geography. Even at a specific period of time, there can be regions with different temperatures but generally autumn in Iran is a fairly short season that signals the advent of winter with a signature snow at its end.

Even autumn fruits in Iran are a blend of sameness and differences, the mellow and the pungent. There is abundance of citrus: grapefruits, oranges, tangerines, sweet oranges, Persian limes, bitter orange, blood oranges (oranges with red hued flesh) and mandarin oranges are available. Pomegranate, medlar, aronia, quince, figs and persimmon are also among the fruits generously



offered by nature in autumn. Although they turn ripe by summer end, grapes are also pretty much available in autumn but autumn grapes are believed to be not as great for health because they can lead to sore throat, perhaps due to their cold generic nature.

With its colorful contraries, framed melancholy and the promise of change, autumn in Iran is indeed a poem, each time written and read anew. The leaves of life dance to the will of the winds of

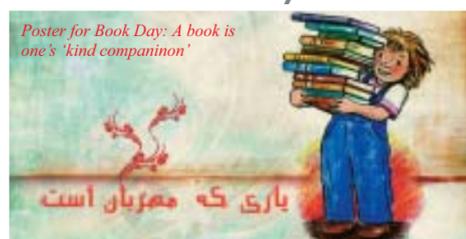


change. Nothing remains the same forever. So, let us read what the book of nature opens for us and watch its seasonal pages flutter and turn by the end of which we can welcome the tabula rasa of snow in the ever evolving and intelligent design of its flakes.

Leaves of nature, leaves of print

National book day in autumn

Persian poet and mystic of the 13th century Saadi of Shiraz once wrote his observation on the vicissitudes of nature and the imaginative power of the creator and the created as: To the wise and the wisely, each page from the book of green trees is but a treatise of the creator's wisdom. Perhaps what Saadi intended to say or rather what we can read from and into the leaves of his knowledge is that each and every element in the humane arms of nature is constantly going through change and studying the subtleties of this process, its intricacies which reveal a complex essence behind even the most simple things is perhaps a door to understanding the self and the creator of the self. Each minute feature can lead to the revelation of another and yet another for the one who is willing to see and to learn.



As the leaves of nature begin to fall, there is a desire to leaf through the pages of our being and find words that can express the dawn of new experiences. It is not perhaps without a rhyme and reason that November 15th (24th of Aban) is deemed as the

national book day and book reading day. With the opening of schools and universities, textbooks are placed on the desks, student journals are released and distributed and articles are searched and sought. But that is not even the beginning of the story book reading which pertains to the time spent in general reading and mainly though necessarily reading done outside the domain of one's profession.

In Iranian culture, book is deemed as one's 'best friend' and a 'kind companion' (yaar-e-mehraban). It is also considered a precious gift as it can ward off unwanted guests like boredom and languor. No matter who we are and what we are doing, reading is a priceless experience because literacy does not essentially promise education and education does not necessarily lead to enlightenment.

EVERY FALL

Not just a Carpet Washing Ceremony

Every second Friday of the month of Mehr (the first month of autumn), Mashad Ardehal village located 42 kilometers to the west of Kashan is a witness to the annual Ghalishouyan (or carpet washing) ceremony. The first Friday is also known as the jome'eh jar (Friday of the call) when people are called out and officially invited to next week's ceremony. The day marks the death anniversary of Sultan Ali, a descendant of Imam Mohammad Bagher (AS) of more than 12 centuries ago.



Participants raise sticks in the annual Ghalishouyan ceremony, Mashad Ardehal

On this day, after mourning songs and speeches by benefactors of Sultan Ali's shrine, a group of young men carry out the carpet in which he was allegedly wrapped and carried at the time of his death to the nearby stream while another group follows them with wooden sticks in their hands. They wave the wood in the air as they symbolically demand revenge from the murderer. The carpet is then laid down to be washed ritually by the stream as they figuratively wash away the blood of the martyr. After that, the carpet is ceremoniously taken back into the shrine as the groups of stick holders follow it with their sayings and chants. Before returning home, people have a feast at noontime. Only people of the Fin village can take part in the ritual and other people are strictly spectators as Sultan Ali resided mostly in Fin but had temporarily shifted to Ardehal a little before his death. In 2009, there were 200,000 pilgrims gathered in Mashhad-e Ardehal for the experience. This is perhaps the only Islamic event that is scheduled according to the Persian solar calendar. The ceremony has been listed as a national spiritual heritage event in the country.

FACTS

Meaningful and eventful

Autumn in Iran officially begins in the last week of September and comes to conclusion in December end. The three months of autumn according to the Iranian calendar are Mehr (Sept23-Oct22), Aban (Oct23-Nov21) and Azar (Nov22-Dec21)

The word for autumn in Persian is paaeez which has actually evolved from the word pariz. Pa is Persian for foot and riz means fall, meaning paaeez is the time when leaves fall at our feet. Another poetic word for autumn is khazaan.

Golden Autumn (Paaeez-e-talaaee) is the title of one of the best loved and popular solo piano albums by the contemporary Iranian composer and musician, Fariborz Lachini. A combo of Persian and European Romantic styles, the music conjures the atmosphere of the fall and the color of autumn leaves. The Golden Autumn series has attracted many fans worldwide.

November 4th (13th of Aban) and December 7th (16th of Azar) are deemed as Student Days for school students and students at universities respectively.

December 5th and 6th of this year (14th and 15th of Azar) are marked as the day of Tasoua and Ashura, two important dates in the Islamic calendar on which Muslims mourn and commemorate the martyrdom of Hussein ibn Ali and his family.

September 30th (8th of Mehr) marks the birth anniversary of Iran's great mystic and poet, Rumi more than 8 centuries ago. The date was officially added to Iranian calendar as Rumi commemoration day.

Yalda, the longest night of the year in the Persian Calendar was officially added to Iran's List of National Treasures in a special ceremony in 2008.

BIZARRE BUZZ!

A mini garden in a public bathroom!

One section of a park in Tehran will specially remain evergreen year-round and surprisingly that is no other than the restrooms of Azadegan Waterpark, west of Tehran. Barat Tarighati who is in charge of maintaining one of the park's toilets has unleashed his creativity by setting up a garden of natural and artificial flowers in the washrooms. So, if you happen to be strolling in that park, you would no longer have to fuss over the call of nature and finding a very clean public toilet. Interestingly, Tarighati has arranged many pairs of slippers at the entrance for the convenience of the visitors. Once you enter, you are met with many fresh flower pots at the door of each restroom. Moreover, there are colorful rugs and mats spread on the floor. The mirrors shine with crystal clarity while they are almost framed with thriving leaves and petals and there is a beautiful wooden hanger for your belongings. Tarighati is very adamant about keeping the restrooms clean and hygienic.

