Language, Literature, and Interdisciplinary Studies (LLIDS)

ISSN: 2457-0044

The Last Days Of Café Leila by Donia Bijan

Reviewed by *Anubha Anushree*

THE LAST DAYS OF CAFÉ LEILA. By Donia Bijan. New York: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2017; pp. 289., $15.95, ISBN: 9781616205850.

Donia Bijan's *The last days of Café Leila* (*The Café,* 2017) is like a wafting aroma of your mother's sambhar or pulao, exciting just in the right balance of anticipation and contentment — anticipation of new intimacies through food and contentment of knowing what these intimacies bring. Nearly 300 pages long, this novel is the most recent offer from Bijan, familiar to most in San Fransisco for her famous restaurant, L'Amie Donia. Bijan, a graduate from Berkeley, has authored two works of fiction, the first being an autobiography entitled *Maman's Homesick Pie: A Persian Heart in an American Kitchen* (Alongquin, 2011). Although she identifies herself with the thriving Iranian diaspora of California, her life journey belongs to a generation of men and women who were forced to flee Iran during the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Termed as "the great joust under traditional emblems" by Foucault,[1] this Revolution is the epicenter of Bijan's early childhood in Tehran, her journey Westward to California, and her subsequent homecoming later in life. Like those great events whose very lack of spectacle confirms their momentousness, the Revolution remains deeply embedded in her works.

Bijan's work deals with several themes familiar to readers of émigré fiction from Iran — trauma, exile, and loss. But instead of succumbing to the often dark, quirky, and irresolvable fate of exile in the more famous diaspora novels of Marjan Satrape (*Persepolis,* 2000), Manoucher Parvin (*Dard-e-Del: Rumi, Hafez and Love in New York,* 2003) and, more recently, in Porochista

[1]Janet Afary and Kevin B. Anderson. *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism.* pp. 203-209. University of Chicago Press, 2005.

Khakpour's works (*The Last Illusion*, 2014), Bijan focuses on the process of return. She chooses to draw our attention to the evolving power of life to overcome and heal. In doing so, she joins the league of a now-growing generation of women writers from Iran who dwell on return as a condition and possibility of exile. For these writers, such as Bijan's more famous counterpart, Azar Nafisi (*Reading Lolita in Tehran*, 2004), return and exile are simultaneous and home and abroad are contingent and contiguous spaces, defined less by physical properties than mental ones. Just as exile is not merely an external phenomenon determined by physical boundaries, so is return not only a physical transition. The novel makes us see exile and return as a process and not an end even as it makes us aware that exiles often occur as much within intimate relationships as between international borders. Either way, exiles, whether private or public, coerced or chosen, could be equally painful.

If Bijan's novel presents exile as condition of life, she is also unequivocally committed to the idea of return — the proverbial homecoming — that shapes our exiles, mitigates its hardships, and keeps us human. The narrative focus on return and transition is in part a response to our increasingly globalized world, where, the more things change the more they remain the same and in part a gentle subversion of some of the verisimilitudes that has come to define contemporary politics. Iran and the US epitomize the bipolar and fractious world we inhabit, a world that has increasingly confined us into hollow stereotypes such as those of Muslim oppression and American liberty. *The Café* transcends these stereotypes and reveals to us a much more complex world, where liberty and oppression are not geographic and physical but moral and emotional phenomena. Return is, thus, important if only to allow one to breach the stereotypes and measure the breadth of one's moral journey. For it is in breach, that one learns to belong. For it is in return, that one comes to value going away.

The Café follows a simple story. Noor, the central character of the novel and the narrator, suddenly discovers her husband Nelson, a successful cardiac surgeon in California, to be cheating on her. This discovery leads her to decide to visit Tehran after a gap of nearly thirty years. Initially, the plan is to visit only for the summer, the duration of her thirteen-year old daughter Lily's vacation. But as she arrives in Tehran, she discovers her father dying with terminal cancer. Meanwhile, Zod, Noor's desolate baba (father) has survived a long history of political turbulence, losing his opera-singing wife, Pari, to the bigotry that followed the Iranian Revolution of 1979. After the death of his wife under mysterious circumstances, Zod overcomes his own grief and sends his children to the US to pursue higher studies. Noor's arrival in the café leads to a series of transitions in her family and the people inhabiting the café.

Unlike what is expected, Noor and Lily do not encounter chaos and turmoil in Tehran. In the gastronomical rhythms of Café Leila, they find respite and peace. Café Leila is a world undestroyed by the hatred and hostility that defined Iran in the immediate aftermath of the 1979 revolution. To say this is not to say that Café Leila was not impacted by the events of 1979. The fate of the café and its Russian-origin owner, Zod, are intricately tied to the country and its environment. The café never fully recovers from the loss of Zod's elder brother Davoud and then, later, his cosmopolitan wife Pari. At the same time, Zod's ability to offer comfort and food to everyone re-nourishes Noor and her daughter Lily even as Zod and his café slowly crumble. Zod and the café's citizens exemplify a world that does not follow the calculus of consequences. But even as this inconsequential world nourishes Noor and Lily, this is also a world that revives dark memories of hatred and anger, old wounds or just quaint nostalgia that is out of sync with

the world that has moved on. Zod's younger brother and Noor's uncle Morad, never returns, not even to bid adieu to his elder brother and the world he left behind. Nor does Noor's elder brother Mehrdad. His return is that of a tourist, calculated and provisional. So is Nelson's visit, which is instrumentally defined by his desire to see his daughter and alienated wife.

Behind the simple and straightforward exterior, however, Bijan is able to invert a number of stereotypes. It is not quite a coincidence that the only people who really return are women — Noor, Lily, and Morad's wife, Aunt Farah. Although each woman represents a different stage of return and, thus exile, it is Noor and Lily who find contentment and love, peace and power to continue the legacy of the café. The café offers little to men, especially those who chose to move on. But it is equally remarkable that it is Zod who, with his ability for unconditional love, holds on and offers a space unmoved by time's corrosive consequences. It is fitting then, that the novel opens with Zod and ends with a homage to his ability to "light the stove, cook our meals, and…never be short of company."[2] There is a serenity and patience in the character of Zod. He, like the other citizens of the café, is marked by a maternal persistence and interest in the seemingly endless chores of the home and the kitchen. Like mothers, his love for his children is so unconditional that he even forces them to leave for a better future in the US. It is this unconditional love that makes Zod stand out in a world where love has been continuously defined by limits and qualified by pragmatic goals. But he is not alone. Naneh Goli, his now-octogenarian nanny, his assistant Soli and his nephew Karim are equally marked by their ability to transcend human qualifications and offer selfless love.

Despite the socially variegated set of characters we encounter — the affluent cardiac surgeon Nelson and his Iranian wife, the protagonist, Noor and their daughter Lily to the poor orphan Karim and Soli in Tehran — Bijan's characters have one consistency, namely their ability to love. Love, however, is not easy. Love demands a price. Sometimes, giving up love is the price we pay to love. That is the price Noor and Zod pay. Karim, Naneh Goli, and Soli are, similarly, beyond the love based on reciprocity and exchange. They know a different love, a love not defined by modern constructions of conditions and measurements. If Zod reminds us of the exemplarity of love, it is Karim, the thirteen-year old orphan working at the café that makes us comprehend what unconditional love looks like. Karim is the force that rebukes us for despairing and compels us to believe in the valor (to borrow a term from Montaigne) and simplicity of love. But, unlike Montaigne's valor, Karim's valor is not born out of pride and neither does it beget pride. Karim's love for Lily is the love that does not demand reciprocity. Karim inherits from Zod his ability to love beyond consequences and measurements and like Zod, Karim is ready to put his life in danger to let Lily fly back to the US. It is, thus, Karim, who teaches Lily and Noor a thing or two about love and nurtures their broken relationship back to that of a mother and a daughter.

In one sense, the novel follows too-neat a binary between the Western and the non-Western notion of love. All the Western or Westernized characters such as Nelson and Lily, Morad and Mehrdad give into the lure of the material modernity and follow a familiar pattern of superficial financial success and its attendant vanity. Similarly, their Iranian counterparts, Zod and Pari, Naneh Goli, Soli, and Karim, the representatives of the non-West, are less guided by their desire to gain than to give. Thus, even when the novel seems to be arguing for expanding the modern assumptions of love, in placing its characters in such clear geographic compartments,

[2] 289.

it fails to complicate the universal qualities of love. Nevertheless, it is the women, Noor and Aunt Farah, who in their different ways are able to return. It is also significant to point out the change that Lily undergoes because of Karim. Lily is able to give up her Western conditioning and offer support to the acid-attack victim, Fereshteh. It is through this girl-victim that Noor, Lily, and Karim come closer and translate their loves into selfless belonging. Joined in their desire to take care of this hapless victim, the family, including Zod, are finally able to appreciate the similarity of values that binds them together.

Bijan's novel is an aphorism for home. Just as a home is populated by desires and dejections, love and hate, so is Café Leila both a narrative of loss and gain. Noor decides to leave the US, and implicitly her daughter and contrite husband. But, she also chooses to welcome Café Leila as her future and Fereshteh as her adopted daughter. Even as the dialectic of exile and return remains the key element of the novel, it is food and the cooking metaphors that characteristically pervade Bijan's narrative. Homes may differentiate between family members and provide sustenance selectively; Café Leila never refuses food to its customers. For those of us, compelled or chosen to leave our homes, Bijan's work solicits our cracked palettes, nourishing our hearts and stomachs with the memory of our homes, encouraging us to never outlive the love that brought us up. For, to outlive the love that nourished us into becoming who we are, Bijan delicately reminds us, is to outlive our sources of being and live with emptiness and fear.