“Cries of Women, Dance of Flames:” Farzad Kamangar’s Letter from Prison on International Women’s Day

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Translators' Preface

Farzad Kamangar, a Kurdish schoolteacher, poet, journalist, and activist, was born in the city of Kamyaran in the Kurdistan Province of western Iran. While imprisoned by the Islamic Republic of Iran for four years, and even after being sentenced to death, Kamangar continued to advocate for human rights, women's rights, and greater cultural and political self-determination for Iran's minority communities via highly poetic letters that he smuggled out of prison, sometimes in fragments. His letters display his dual commitment to beautiful literary expression and to unflinching documentation of human rights abuses in Iranian Kurdistan. After years of imprisonment and torture, Kamangar was executed, at age 35, along with four other political prisoners on May 9, 2010, in Iran's notorious Evin Prison on charges of *moharebeh* (waging war against God) and for undermining national security.

Prisons have proved to be extraordinarily fertile sources of literature across the history and geographies of the Middle East and Western Asia. At least a third of the Judeo-Christian Bible was penned in carceral contexts, most notably the Apostle Paul's four "Prison Epistles." In the Islamic world of the Middle Ages, Arabic verse composed in prison, *rūmīyāt*, gave rise to the genre of Persian poetry known as *habsīyāt*, which has significant repercussions in modern Kurdish literature. Even the Kurdish national anthem, "Ey Reqîb," was written in prison. Masterpieces of world literature more broadly, including *Don Quixote*, *The Travels of Marco Polo*, Nelson Mandela's autobiography, and Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail," had their genesis behind bars. The experience of imprisonment offers a context for the expression of heightened passions restrained, wherein the act of writing itself becomes a liberating outlet for repressed causes, lofty ideals, unbounded hope, and stark physicality cast in sharp relief. The physical restraints imposed on incarcerated authors (walls, gates, bars, razor wire) parallel and reinforce the limitations on written expression within that context (constraints on length, candor, choice of language, physical media). Such circumstances, along with the formal limits inherent in any literary discourse, can galvanize an intensely expressive, purposeful,

and meaningful text. Literature conceived in confinement has transcended carceral and geographical boundaries, achieving extraordinary depth and extramural resonance.

Within this tradition of "prison literature," Farzad Kamangar's letters from prison (more than a dozen extant letters) are especially poignant. The letter presented here, written on the occasion of International Women's Day 2008, merits special attention for how it connects the conditions of women in Iran (and globally) with the author's personal experience as a multiply marginalized Kurd in Iran. Although composed with reference to a particular occasion, the letter stretches beyond the particular to articulate a timeless, broadly encompassing vision. Writing his letter in Farsi, Kamangar, as a non-Shiʿa Kurd, negotiates the boundaries of his stateless identity, a minority by religious sect, ethnicity, and language. This letter poetically extends the consideration of the Kurdish plight to align with that of the letter's addressee. Kamangar addresses the letter "to the phoenixes of our land," a reference "to the high rate of self-immolation among the women of [his] city." While not presuming to understand Kurdish women's experience fully, Kamangar asserts an array of symmetries in his representation of their condition and his own, relegated to a lower tier of human rights and sociopolitical regard, actively targeted for not conforming fully to Iran's state-imposed cultural norms. The depiction of symmetries achieves not a conflation but an insightful, provocative comparison. The oppression of women is, the letter argues, not merely analogous to that of the Kurds in Iran but also an extension of it, rendering Kurdish women keenly vulnerable to persecution. Kamangar knew this all too well; a Kurdish woman, Shirin Alam Holi (1981–2010), was one of the four political prisoners later executed alongside him.

Although nearly two decades have passed since the letter's composition, it is timelier and more relevant than ever. Remarkably prescient, Kamangar's words portend the ongoing movement known as "Woman, Life, Freedom" (*Jin, Jîyan, Azadî*). Ignited by the death of a 22-year-old Kurdish Iranian woman, Jîna Mahsa Amini, who came from the same Kurdish province as Kamangar and died in police custody in 2022 after being detained by "morality police" for not properly covering her hair, this movement demonstrates peacefully

against Iran's "gender apartheid." At the time of translating this letter, Kurdish women Verisheh Moradi (Werîşe Mûradî) and Pakhshan Azizi remain on death row in the same prison where Kamangar was held, facing execution on charges of *moharebeh* under the same Revolutionary judges, as part of the state's repressive retaliations against the Woman, Life, Freedom movement.

This is as much a prose poem as a letter. Harnessing the potentials and tensions inherent in the epistolary form, Kamangar sets the collective addressee alongside invocations of an individual, imagined lover. The letter recognizes and articulates the commonalities across personal, individual experience and the shared conditions of Iran's minority communities. It suggests commonalities across time and place, at once intensely local or regional and also broadly global, bridging the past and the present. The technique invites readers to recognize universals in the particulars, collective patterns in the individual circumstances. To this end, Kamangar's letter includes references to specific poets and singers. He cites modern Persian and Kurdish poems and songs, by men and women, some renowned and others niche or lesser known: Forugh Farrokhzad, the most influential Persian woman poet of the 20th century; Hasan Golnaraghi, whose iconic renderings of classical and popular Persian songs evoke nostalgia; Abdullah Goran, who modernized Kurdish poetry and suffered imprisonment for his political and cultural activism; Hemin Mukriyani, the pen name of a "national poet" of the short-lived Republic of Kurdistan; and Qubadi Jali Zadeh, a contemporary poet from the Kurdish region of Iraq. Some of these references Kamangar explains in footnotes; others he leaves unexplained. However, it is not entirely necessary for a reader to recognize the references in order to appreciate the letter's intertextual depth and the overall effects it creates via these references. A common trait among all the authors the letter invokes is that their work represents resistance to state-imposed belief and state-sanctioned art. And a significant pattern emerges among the references: a geography of Kurdistan that encompasses Iraqi (Southern) Kurdistan and Iranian (Eastern) Kurdistan, creating an imagined, aspirational geography of the Kurdish homeland that transcends official, artificial nation-state borders. Yearning for the impossible beyond prison walls and political history,

Kamangar offers a kaleidoscopic impression of wide-ranging, multilingual breadth, liberating in its scope and variety across ethno-religious categories and time periods.

As part of a larger project that aims to translate into English all of Kamangar's letters from prison, we selected this letter to translate as an especially timely, representative specimen of that corpus. This particular letter, which has not been previously translated into English in full, gives voice to Kamangar's ethnolinguistic homeland while channeling the ironies of writing in a hegemonic language. His letter on International Women's Day offers a synthesis of solidarity with those who cannot yet exercise full, fundamental human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Our English translation seeks to preserve the letter's stylistic artistry and thematic interplay.

Farzad Kamangar with his students.

Kamangar's Letter from Prison on International Women's Day

To the phoenixes of our land,[1] March 2008:

Hello, my Darling! It is Women's Day, the day I always await for what seems like God's eternity.

On this day, instead of pressing my sprig of daffodils into your kind hands, I offer a gift to your imagination, which is more varied and capricious than your hair tossing free in the wind. Two years have passed since my hands have encountered the color of violets or the scent of jasmine. For two years, my eyes, restless, have sought a few tears of joy and happiness. You know as well as I, that I count the minutes every day of the year to this day, but today I ponder what gift for you is fitting for this day: the songs "Kiss Me"[2] or "Pasha's Garden,"[3] or a candle to kindle our memories? But, my Darling, you neither hear the sound of my song, nor can I light a candle for you. Here the warden of the walls also imprisons the candles, and as for poetry, I do not possess the finesse of that "wise lover who breathes the soul of love into the body of the wind so that it may caress your clothes."[4]

Nor can I compose for you a ghazal whose meter measures your thousand years of pain, whose rhyme mirrors the innocence of your gaze. Even if I could, you would not be able to sing in our native Kurdish; otherwise, like Hemin's lovelorn cry,[5] I would invite you to

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[1] A letter to an imaginary lover. [Except where indicated by square brackets, the footnotes are Kamangar's own.]
The letter's address refers to the high rate of self-immolation among women of my city, a heartbreaking pain that has burdened my mind since childhood.

[2] "Kiss Me" by Hasan Golnaraghi.

[3] "Baghche Pasha" is Abdullah Goran's poetic masterpiece, immortalized in Homer Dizayi's velvet voice. It is the story of a girl who longs for a flower, yellow and red. Her lover must enter the king's flower garden to find such a flower, and he brings her one, yellow and red, but the red is the color of the young man's blood, for he has been shot.

[4] A reference to the master Qubadi Jali Zadeh, the Sulaymani poet of delicate imagination, and one of his beautiful poems.

[5] [The original text has a superscript 5 here but lacks a corresponding footnote. The lovelorn cry, or *naleh*, by Hemin Mukriyani (1921–86) refers to a famous Kurdish poem that has been covered by many singers.]

be the guest of the moonlight every night. But I must, of necessity, write to you in the Persian of Forugh Farrokhzad so you will not say, "No one thinks of the flowers" or "My heart is heavy"; I write to say that I, too, "believe in the beginning of the year's 'Fifth Season.'"

But this is the secret of my restless pondering, which you know as clear as day: My budding Flower, I was born in a land whose women are like all the women of the world—not half of mankind, not half of this world, but half of the heavens. I cried the newborn's first cry in this land, in unison with the cries of women who, amid the dance of flames, taught the lesson of protest and not surrendering to fire.

The bud of a baby's first smile bloomed on my lips when the old oak trees envied the secret of the hardy resilience of the women of my land, and I set my life's first toddling steps on the same path that tulips had already cleansed with morning dew, where women of my land had set firm steps on the harshest, treacherous peaks of life and history.

Women still whisper the song of love and resistance in the ears of the walls. It is the lullaby of the children of my land, the same hymn that humans once whispered to Ashtoreth and Ishtar, the first gods of humanity.

So how can your day not be both Eid al-Adha, my Feast of Sacrifice, and Nowruz, my New Year's Day? Many like you have been waiting at the window for years for their loved ones to return, no matter when, perhaps with the first snow of winter, when they invite sparrows to a banquet of loneliness with a handful of wheat, or when they sweep the house for the sparrows' return, or perhaps when they invite God to their Iftar table. Wait for me, too, for such a day, with your dress the color of the sky and the softness of Osman's "Siya Chamane" songs[6] and wild silver sage[7] and a necklace of cloves, because cloves remind me of the scent of woman, the scent of my land, the scent of eternity—in a word, the scent of you. Until then, I entrust you to the Creator of dew and rain.

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[6] "Siya Chamane": a very beautiful genre of Kurdish song that features descriptions of nature and the beloved. Osman Hawrami is the undisputed, immortal master of this type of song.

[7] *barzarn*: a very fragrant, rare flower that grows on the heights of Mount Shaho.