

A litterateur, patron of culture

Martyred Leader's relationship with poetry, novels

INTERVIEW EXCLUSIVE

Rarely does it occur within the political arena that a figure occupying the most exalted religious station and leadership position shows such profound familiarity with poetry and literature that this acquaintance transforms him, in the estimation of cultural and literary circles, into an influential persona within a linguistic domain.

Mohammad-Kazem Kazemi, an Afghan immigrant poet and researcher, as well as a non-permanent member of the Academy of Persian Language and Literature, delineates, in the ensuing interview with Iran Newspaper, the preoccupations of the martyred Leader of Iran with poetry, fictional literature, and the Persian language. Kazemi, who over the past decades participated in certain sessions of poets' meetings with Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, recounts his mastery over classical and contemporary Persian poetry, his precise cognizance of Persian-speaking poets, and his magnanimous disposition when confronted with critical verse; a bibliophilic Leader who regarded Persian not merely as an instrument for the actualization of cultural diplomacy, but rather as a bridge for the transmission of Islamic precepts and Iranian culture.

Mohammad-Kazem Kazemi



IRAN: The denizens of poetry and literature annually witnessed the convocation of a poetic gathering with the presence of Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei. Given that over various periods you possessed the opportunity to participate in this literary assembly, please relate your experiences of reciting verse in the presence of the martyred Leader and his interaction with poets, particularly the younger cohort.

KAZEMI: The poetic gatherings and verse recitations in the presence of Ayatollah Khamenei were an unparalleled opportunity, not solely granted to the people of poetry, but rather apportioned to the culture and literature of Iran. It is a momentous occurrence that an individual in such a station should be so enamored of poetry and literature. This fondness was not confined exclusively to books and literature; regarding diverse facets of art, he likewise held contemplative opinions, though this subject, of course, lies beyond my specialization.

In comparison to other global leaders, he possessed, from a cultural standpoint, singular characteristics. He commanded simultaneous mastery over both ancient and contemporary literature, and he was also well-acquainted with world literature. Apart from comparisons among global leaders and prominent political figures, this degree of comprehensive knowledge even among literature professors constitutes a unique attribute. The majority of literature professors, on the basis of their research and personal interests, are familiar with the literature of merely one of these two temporal periods. The martyred Leader, however, just as he perused and recognized the poetry of ancient poets, also knew works in various poetic forms of contemporary literature and, relying upon his personal memory and according to the exigencies of the session, would recite couplets from poems of disparate periods. Naturally, his own poetic taste inclined more toward classical poetry, and he maintained greater affinity with ancient literature, yet he was also thoroughly acquainted with modern forms. I have articulated these points so that you might apprehend that regarding Ayatollah Khamenei, we were confronted with a literatus political and religious scholar, a portion of whose youth had been spent in continuous attendance at poetic gatherings and assemblies in the city of Mashhad, and who maintained contact not only with the poets of Mashhad and Khorasan Province, but also with poets from throughout the entire country.

On account of his participation in these very poetic assemblies, he was cognizant of the significance of establishing literary



Leader of Iran's Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei listens closely to a cultural figure who has approached him before one of his annual meetings with poets and writers on July 12, 2014.
● [khamenei.ir](#)

circles and their functions, and he would discourse upon the necessity of convening them. Annually, he would sponsor the organization of poetic assemblies and would consistently speak about the instruments for the growth and elevation of poetry, foremost among which were the importance of participating in associations and the significance of holding poetic evenings and literary circles. Such imperatives are comprehended only by one who has experienced them and whose youth was partially spent in literary assemblies. His connection with poetry and the people of letters was never severed, neither during his presidency nor subsequently when he assumed the leadership of the country. Perhaps the younger generation is unaware, but these poetic sessions were also held prior to the commencement of his leadership — a meeting that gradually became

mediatized and transformed from an intimate literary circle into a formal session in the middle of Ramadan.

From what time did you obtain the fortune of attending the poetic sessions conducted with the presence of Ayatollah Khamenei?

My initial experience dates back many years, to the era of his presidency. If my recollection does not err, it was the year 1988, when he had already occupied the office of the presidency and came to Mashhad on a simple Nowruz journey. On that trip, circumstances were arranged for his meeting with us, the poets of Mashhad; the session was held in one of the halls of the Holy Shrine of Imam Reza (PBUH). At that time, I was a young man of 21 years and, for the first time, recited a poem in the presence of Ayatollah Khamenei and his accompanying delegation.

What, in that first encounter and meeting, most captivated your attention?

The session, for which I harbored considerable anxiety, was convened in a manner more informal than one could possibly have

imagined. Ayatollah Khamenei listened to our poems with great amicability and critiqued each poem separately. His precise and professional observations regarding each poem astonished me. That meeting was not merely an ordinary poetic evening; it was also a specialized session for critique.

This criticism and these literary commentaries were not confined to that single session, but continued throughout all these years. The preponderance of what I and other poets have observed over the past decades in this connection was the martyred Leader's technical appraisals when confronted with the compositions of the poets. He abstained from conventional generalities and would offer recommendations for the improvement of the attendees' verses; for instance, that if the poem, from the standpoint of prosody, possessed such-

Yousef Ali Mir Shakak, a renowned Iranian poet, recites his poem for the Leader of Iran's Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei on April 5, 2023, at one of the few sessions of the poets with the Leader held during the COVID-19 pandemic.
● [IRNA](#)



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In Afghanistan, we have a poet named Gholam Ahmad Navid, of whom there is virtually no trace or mention in Iran. Even within Afghanistan itself, he is not a particularly prominent figure, and it is astonishing for me that in one of the sessions, Ayatollah Khamenei recited a couplet from the compositions of the late Navid. To be truthful, even I myself do not possess the divan of this poet, nor have I located a written copy of his works. To this day, I remain astonished as to how he came to know Navid!

and-such a feature, it would be improved, and so forth. His opinions transcended general discussions of poetry; Ayatollah Khamenei was also a consummate expert in matters such as prosody and rhyme. This is a matter that, from that very first meeting, captured my attention and that of other poets.

In addition to his exemplary command of poetic techniques and principles, his knowledge and memory were not restricted to famous poets. On the basis of the topics raised, he would sometimes recite verses by poets or make reference to the work of a poet that left all of us astounded. In Afghanistan, we have a poet named Gholam Ahmad Navid, of whom there is virtually no trace or mention in Iran. Even within Afghanistan itself, he is not a particularly prominent figure, and it is astonishing for me that in one of the sessions, Ayatollah Khamenei recited a couplet from the compositions of the late Navid. To be truthful, even I myself do not possess the divan of this poet, nor have I located a written copy of his works. To this day, I remain astonished as to how he came to know Navid! This degree of knowledge and, on the other hand, his exemplary memory concerning poetry and fictional literature was truly wonderful.

Tell us about the encounters of your fellow Afghan poets and writers with instances such as the martyred Leader's remarkable familiarity with poets of the Persian linguistic geography, including the late Navid.

The majority of my Afghan poet and writer friends with whom I maintain contact lament that they wish we too in Afghanistan had been beneficiaries of such a lettered and bibliophilic Leader. They would marvel that the Leader of Iran had not only read Iranian and globally prominent books, but also recognized Afghan men of letters in various domains of poetry and fictional literature. Although Afghanistan too is counted among the bases of the Persian linguistic geography, the majority of our statesmen were not only not people of letters, but in some cases even harbored antagonism toward it. We have witnessed this Persian-antagonism repeatedly in Afghanistan; for this reason, some of the litterateurs of my birthplace invoke Ayatollah Khamenei with praising words.

I recall that Najib Bavar (an Afghan poet and researcher) was present at one of the poetry recitation sessions in the presence of the martyred Leader. When his turn arrived, he addressed Ayatollah Khamenei as the Leader of the Persian-speaking peoples of the world. This is a significant occurrence. He did not even say the religious leader of Muslims! His emphasis was that he is the Leader of all Persian-speakers.