

Customs: Poet Solmaz Sharif examines imperialism and exile

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More than three million people have fled Ukraine since the Russian invasion began. These refugees face an uncertain future, an indefinite period of estrangement from their homes, their former lives and their culture. Although the proximate cause of this crisis is the reactionary Russian incursion, its deeper sources are to be found in the decades-long eruption of US and NATO imperialist violence, which is reaching new and ever more dangerous levels.

How does the world look to the exile, who feels like an outsider in his or her adoptive country? What relationship does a person born in exile have to the cultural heritage of his or her parents? *Customs* (2022), Solmaz Sharif’s highly anticipated new book of poetry, plumbs these and related questions.

Sharif’s own history has oriented her toward questions of nationality and exile. She was born in Istanbul to Iranian parents who were in the process of emigrating to the US. Her first language was English, not the Farsi of her parents. When she was in sixth grade, her family moved to Los Angeles, which has the largest expatriate Iranian population in the world. But, as she told the *Paris Review*, Sharif felt ostracized by the mostly well-to-do LA Iranians, who were more interested in assimilation into American society than she was.

Sharif’s first collection *Look* (2016) borrowed from the *US Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* to highlight the state’s use of jargon and euphemism to “sanitize” war, hide its true character and forestall public opposition to it. The following lines have been quoted widely: “Daily I sit / with the language / they’ve made / of our language / to NEUTRALIZE / the CAPABILITY OF LOW DOLLAR VALUE ITEMS / like you.” *Look* earned many favorable reviews, including from the *New York*

Times and *Washington Post*, and was a finalist for the 2016 National Book Award for Poetry.

Customs, her new volume, also includes images of military violence. But more often, the state appears in the person of the policeman or the customs agent, who makes decisions according to “blood sugar” or “relative level of disdain for vermin.” Wealth (and, implicitly, inequality) is another recurring theme. Images of secluded estates and servants’ bells contrast with those of laborers and street peddlers. In its references to arrival gates and global corporations, the book also provides a sense of the international integration of economic and social relations. When Sharif writes of her own experience, she does not neglect to place it in this larger context, which also includes an understanding of history. In short, these poems take a commendably expansive view of the world.

The poem “Now What” is emblematic of Sharif’s approach. When she looks into a tub of garlic butter (which actually is made of soybean oil), she sees “a relief of workers, of sickles, / fields of soy.” She immediately connects these workers to what may be her own family’s history:

*We were tanners
pushed to the edge of the
city*

*once, by the stench, the bubble of vats
of flesh and loosening skin,
back when the city pulled,
leather*

*bucket by leather bucket, its own
water from wells. Then we worked
the cafeterias*

at the

*petroleum offices of the
British. Then, revolution.*

Simple.

This series of concrete, telling images contains a glimpse of the industrial and political development of a whole nation. The historical scope of these lines, juxtaposed with their economy of expression, is impressive. In an implicit challenge to the reader, the poem's title poses the question of how this history will develop.

The dense and concentrated "The Master's House" touches on practically every one of the book's major themes and shows their interconnections. Questions of national and social borders are posed concretely in the image of a strip search by a customs officer and in a father's comment that people in "red states" are nice to you "long as you don't move in next door." Next, not coincidentally, come images of the rich, who dine on bone china and "hide their rot" with "lavender sachets and cedar lining." The poet expresses her deep, though humorously ineffectual, opposition to this social layer: "To pour diuretic in his coffee and think this erosive to the state." Related to these questions is that of the poet's estrangement from her parents' language, "English being your first defeat."

Here and there, notes of doubt and discouragement sound during the poem. Near the beginning, the poet is unsure of how to proceed, "with nary a voice, a muse, a model." By the end, she no longer remembers the purpose that she is enduring hardships to achieve. These notes are echoed in other poems, too, such as one in which Sharif rejects the idea of translating the well-known Iranian poet Forough Farrokhzad into English. But one senses overall that Sharif's pleasure in the material and social world, and her smoldering opposition to injustice, provide her with ample motivation to keep going.

One weak moment is "Learning Persian," a series of politically charged words written phonetically ("deek-tah-tor / behn-zeen," "ahm-pee-ree-ah-lizm"). The poem fails to provide significant insight, and its humor rings a bit hollow.

Most of the poems in *Customs* are comparatively brief, but two longer poems give Sharif space for more

sustained consideration of her themes. The poems' length detracts, naturally, from their sense of immediacy, but provides ample room for Sharif's broad perspective. The longer poems also include more personal reflections than the others do, which heightens the lasting impressions they make.

In "Without Which," Sharif describes how life has accustomed her to letting go, leaving behind even a sense of loss. Yet, though she feels herself an alien during her visits to Iran, she nevertheless wonders what her life would have been had she lived there. She contemplates a door that she would have answered, had she stayed. "Would you have knocked for me? / I ask the neighbor." The poem is almost wistful, yet also clear-eyed.

"An Otherwise" finds the poet's mother removing politically inconvenient books from the shelves of a school library in preparation for the Shah's visit. We glimpse the opposition that this repression engenders as the students imagine pointing rifles at the Shah. "You were reminded all // was property of the West," Sharif writes. Yet Iran is also a land of ancient poems set to melodies that her parents sing. It is "a pool / lined // with evergreens, / needles falling // into water." Drawing on political and personal factors, the poem ends with an implicit threat of rebellion.

Customs continues the political engagement of Sharif's first collection and reminds us that political poetry need not be didactic or stilted. Sharif's healthy opposition to imperialism is palpable throughout. Moreover, her placement of personal themes within a broader social and historical context enriches the insights that the poems offer. These poems occasionally flash their teeth, but also remind us of life's pleasures. *Customs* is an intelligent and encouraging response to the current moment that deserves a wide readership.



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