



A Time to Celebrate, A Time to Love

Nacim Pak reminisces about the festival of *Nawruz* in Iran and paints a vivid picture of the coming of spring

Much has been said on *Nawruz*, its elements and rituals and the meanings they hold. *Nawruz* is the first day of spring and it marks the beginning of the year in Iran and in several other national calendars. In Iran, people lay the *Haft Seen* table, which includes seven items starting with the Farsi letter "Seen", each symbolising a significant element in life such as health, prosperity and rejuvenation. The Qur'an, a mirror, candles, goldfish, coloured eggs and a copy of Hafiz's *Divan* also adorn the table.

The origins and rituals of *Nawruz* vary in different sources. Here, I attempt neither to trace its origins nor to provide a history of this celebration and its "authentic" rituals; rather, I wish to share some of those elements that I associate with this time of the year.

Being an Iranian alone does not, of course, make me an authority on Iranian celebrations, but it does allow me to retell my experiences of them. People moving or migrating, as David Morley states, often "look to an idealised and fossilised image of their mother country." Similarly, things may have changed since the *Nawruz* of 1999, the last *Nawruz* I celebrated at home, and my account will inevitably be biased towards a nostalgic remembrance. Nevertheless, in reminiscing about *Nawruz*, I intend to paint images of a celebration that in its sheer scale, far exceeds any other in terms of the time and effort that families spend in commemorating it.

Nawruz is not just about the *Haft Seen* spread on the 21st of March. It is not just a day, it is a series of weeks of preparation. The house has to be cleaned inside-out from weeks before *Nawruz* so that when you step inside, it is the freshly cleaned scent of washed walls, curtains and tiles that beckons and welcomes you. *Nawruz* is grandmother's entire cupboard emptied out on the floor and the joy of finding something ancient in the pile. It is the heap of colourful beddings taken out of the wall-cupboards to air and little children constantly being told not to jump and climb on them.

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It is watering the *sabzeh* everyday, starting from two weeks before *Nawruz*, keenly watching their growth from little grains of wheat and lentils into beautiful bouquets of tiny green leaves. It is the scent outdoors, the budding of the trees, the

early blossoming of flowers, and the singing of the birds. *Nawruz* is the incoming tide of warmth seeping through the cold of winter, and the longer hours of sunlight.

Nawruz is the busy streets filled with shoppers buying new clothes and presents. It is the long opening hours of the furniture stores near our place. It is the women's salon that is still open after midnight. It is the high demand in banks for new currency and the smell of the crisp, unfolded money put inside the Qur'an to be given out as gifts. It is the streets adorned with pots of lily and hyacinth for sale, effloresced in vibrant colours. It is the red ribbons we buy to tie around the growing *sabzeh*. *Nawruz* is the excitement of finding the right goldfish, amongst thousands and thousands of others swimming in rows of aquariums lining the fronts of street shops. It is the wet Persian carpets proudly showing off their intricate patterns and exquisite detail as they dry out on rooftops across the city.

Nawruz is the commotion, the anticipation of making sure that everything is in place just before *saltahvil* (the change of the year). It is the thrill of sitting around the *Haft Seen* with the family and calling for the one person who is desperately trying to finish off some last-minute adjustments to the arrangements. *Nawruz* is the countdown on TV announcing every hour, minute and second left before *saltahvil*. It is the cannon-bang marking the turn of the new year, the kisses then exchanged around the *Haft Seen*, and the presents handed out, usually to the youngest first, and the bibliomancy from Hafiz's *Divan* to predict the fortunes of the year ahead. It is the telephone that starts ringing and the greetings that come from near and afar. It is the family immediately getting ready to pay a visit to its elders. It is the overindulgence of children, and sometimes adults, in the innumerable helpings of nuts and pastries during each of these visits. It is staying at home and receiving those whom you visited before. It is getting together on the *sizdeh be dar* (the 13th day of *Nawruz*) and spending the day in nature, out in fields, parks and the countryside, with rows of cars heading out of town with *sabzehs* that will be thrown into running water carried on car-tops and in car-boots.

These and many more are the memories I am left with from the *Nawruz* of years past. Even here, the scent of spring in the air, birds singing in the breeze, the shafts of sunlight through the trees, all evoke the excitement of *Nawruz*. They bring with it nature's message of rejuvenation. *Nawruz* is an opportunity to renew family ties and reinforce bonds of affection. It is ultimately about the celebration of life, and of love.