



Entangled Destinies: Existential and Mystical Perspectives on Fate and Freedom in Marjan Kamali's *The Stationery Shop*

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ABSTRACT

Imagine a young love blooming in the vibrant streets of 1950s Tehran, only to be shattered by the political turmoil – could fate and freedom ever reconcile such a tale? Marjan Kamali's "The Stationary Shop" fascinates with the story of Roya and Bahman, whose love story interrupted by the 1953 Iranian coup, a crucial event that completely changes their destinies. This paper examines how freedom and fate are intertwined by applying Jean-Paul Sartre's Existentialism and Rumi's Persian Mysticism to show how love survives in the midst of chaos. Sartre's theory of radical freedom says that "Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does" (Sartre, 1946), showing how Roya finds a new life in America despite constraints of the coup. In contrast Rumi's mysticism is views love as destined force: "If destiny come to help you, Love will come to meet you" (Rumi, 13th century) reflecting how the novel shows Roya and Bahman's love destined, yet challenged by history and circumstances. This tension is powerfully shown as Roya recalls his mother's advice, "Roya's mother had always said that our fate is written on our foreheads when we're born. It can't be seen, can't be read, but it's there in an invisible line" (Kamali, 2019). The coup itself acts as the historical backdrop of fate limiting personal freedom through political

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and social divides. A close reading of crucial scenes like the destroyed stationary shop, hidden letters and the reunion in 2013, reflects how love moves between freedom and choice. Drawing on Iranian-American literature, and in comparison with the writers like Khalid Hosseini, this paper argues that Kamali brings a new view of resilience in diaspora narratives. Ultimately, this study shows how history's shadow entangles destinies, yet love empowers the human spirit to reclaim freedom, making "The Stationary Shop", a timeless tale of love, freedom and devotion.

Introduction

Marjan Kamali an Iranian-American novelist born in Turkey in 1969 captures the narratives that reflect the emotional and cultural complexities of the Persian diaspora. Shaped by her life in Iran, Kenya, Germany, and the United States, Kamali writes with the global vision, blending lyrical prose with the sensory depth of Persian poetry and cuisine. Her writing style can be seen in "Together Tea (2013)" and "The lion women of Tehran (2024)". In these novels she tells the stories that reflects the emotional and cultural complexities of Persian diaspora. In her second novel, "The Stationary Shop (2019)" Kamali tells a moving story of love, interrupted by the 1953 coup. With poetic intimacy and historical depth, she explores the tension between fate and freedom.

Set in Tehran during the turmoil of 1953, "The Stationary Shop" tells the story of Roya Khanom and Bahman Aslan, two teenagers whose love begins in a book-filled shop but is shattered by the CIA- backed coup that overthrows the Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh. Kamali presents the era's chaos as: "The street was a river of people, shouting, pushing, some with fists raised, others with fear in their eyes (Kamali,2019, p.87)". because of the coup, family pressure, lost and exchanged letters, Roya and Bahman's love false apart and Roya leaves for America. The story which moves from 1953 to their reunion in 2013, shows how love lasts over the time. As Roya reflects: "Every day since then had been a gift and theft, a chance to live and reminder of what was lost". The stationary shop itself become a symbol of fleeting freedom. Letters also holds deep meaning as Bahman writes: "I send you these words across oceans, hoping they find you, hoping they defy what's been decided (Kamali, 2019, p.156)."

This paper studies how "The Stationary Shop" engages with the philosophical tension between fate and freedom through both Existential and Mystical perspectives. Jean-Paul Sartre's idea of radical freedom frames Roya's decisions- leaving Iran, building a new life, her marriage- can be seen as



ways she defines herself. As Sartre writes, “We are our choices (Sartre, 1946),” showing that meaning is created by the individuals even when external forces like the coup, and family pressure try to limit them. Jalaluddin Rumi’s Mysticism adds another perspective, which sees love as a divined as predestined force. Rumi writes, “Beyond the idea of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I’ll meet you there (Rumi, 13th century).” Presents the spirit of Roya and Bahman’s late reunion. His words, “Lover don’t finally meet somewhere”, They’re in each other all along” reflects the novel’s circular design and its vision of love enduring separation.

This paper examines how coup shaped the story, the role of symbols like shop, letters and circular structure of narrative. Historical and philosophical ideas support the view that how love helps people to stay strong even in the hard times. The study explores the coup’s influence on fate, applies Sartre’s idea to the act of freedom, interprets love through Rumi, analyses symbol, and sees the story’s circular pattern as a kind of mystical destiny, highlighting Kamali’s unique voice in stories of love and diaspora.

Objectives

- To examine how the CIA-backed Iranian coup, disrupts Roya and Bahman’s love story, framing fate as historical force.
- To investigate Roya’s choices like emigration and 2013 reunion as act of existential freedom, using Sartre’s philosophy to highlight resistance against restriction and control.
- To explore Roya and Bahman’s bond as a mystical force, drawing on Rumi’s view of love as divine and inevitable.
- To analyze the shop as a space of rebellion and also dreams, destroyed by the coup, to reveal tensions between freedom and fate.
- To investigate character’s letters as symbol of resistance against fate.
- To examine the novel’s 1953-2013 timeline as a reflection of Rumi’s cyclical view of time, revealing love’s power to surpass fate and time.

Hypotheses

- 1953 coup makes Roya and Bahman’s love an existential struggle, where their choices reflect Sartre’s idea of radical freedom.
- Rumi’s idea of love as divine force helps Roya and Bahman to rise above the coup’s limitations, maintaining their bond through the years and decades.



- In “The Stationary Shop” the letters balanced the Sartre’s idea of wisdom with Rumi’s vision of destiny keeping their love strong even when separated.

Research Questions?

- How does the 1953 Iranian coup, as a deterministic force, shapes Roya and Bahman’s separation and restrict their freedom in “The Stationary Shop”?
- How does Sartre’s concept of radical freedom shows Roya’s choices like emigration and reunion as an act of free choice against the historical limits?
- In what ways Rumi’s view of love as predestined explain the strength of Roya and Bahman’s bond during their reunion?
- How do letters in “The Stationary Shop” shows the characters’ ability to act freely, going against fate, as in Bahman’s lines: “I send you these words across oceans”?

The 1953 Iranian coup: Turning love into Existential struggle

1953 Iranian coup is turning point in “The Stationary Shop”. It changes Roya and Bahman’s love from a hopeful romance into a tough fight against fate. The coup planned by the CIA and British, removed prime minister Mohammad Mossadegh and put the Shahs in the power, which causes chaos in Tehran. Stephen Kinzer’s book “All the Shahs Men” explains that the coup was about controlling Iran’s oil, but it also broke the life of regular and common people like Roya and Bahman. It shows that how the coup makes their love an existential struggle, connecting to Jean-Paul Sartre’s idea of radical freedom. The coup feels Tehran fear and confusion, separated Roya and Bahman. Kamali describes the city during the coup: “Tanks rolled through the Sepah Square, it was hot, but a breeze blew her rose-coloured skirt against her thighs. More and more people poured into the square, and soon the sharp smell of sweat and anger was suffocating (Kamali, 2019, p.115-116).” This scene shows that how coup’s violence stops their plan to meet and marry. Bahman’s family, who supports the Shahs, push him to marry someone else, while Roya is left alone, her dreams crushed by the city’s unrest.

This moment feels like an existential crisis, where life seems to have no clear meaning. Sartre writes: “Life has no meaning a priori. It is up to you to give a meaning, and value is nothing but a meaning that you choose (Sartre, 1946).” For Roya, the coup takes away her control, but she chooses hold onto her love for Bahman even when it hurts. She later decides to move America, which shows her strength to start over despite the pain. The coup also brings family and social pressure that test their love. Bahman’s mother, a Shah supporter forces him to marry Shahla to keep him safe during this chaos. Roya feels this loss deeply



“And Bahman was nowhere to be found. Had she really gone to the square expecting to see him, with a rose in his hand, wearing his crisp white shirt, ready to whisk her away so they could get their marriage papers? It seemed vaguely amusing now to think she could have had those expectations (Kamali, 2019, p.121).”

Roya’s choice to write the letters to Bahman, even if they don’t reach him, is her way of choosing meaning, as Sartre suggests. She thinks that she loses all she has as she remembers Mr. Fakhri and her conversation, “We do not always get what we want Roya Khanom. Things do not always work out the way we planned. They think, wrongly, that somehow youth or desire or even love can outmatch the hand of fate. The truth is, my young lady, that the fate has written the script for your destiny on your forehead from the very beginning. We can’t see it. But it’s there. This world is without compassion (Kamali, 2019, p.126-127).”

This coup, turns Roya and Bahman’s love into a battle where they must choose to keep going despite the loss. The coup is a crucial twist of fate, as Roya once said: “The worst thing in the world was to fall in love with someone who was in love with politic (Kamali, 2019, p. 124).” But the Roya’s choices show her freedom as Sartre describes.

Sartre’s Radical freedom in Roya’s choices

Roya’s choices in “The Stationary Shop” show how she fights back against coup’s chaos. She decides to move to America and later meets Bahman again in 2013. These actions are example of Jean-Paul Sartre’s radical freedom, where people make their own meaning even when life is hard. Sartre’s idea that we are free to choose, no matter what happens around us. This shows how Roya’s decisions turn her love story into a story of strength and purpose. Roya’s move to America is her first big choice after the coup. She leaves Iran because the political turmoil makes her life there impossible. Sartre says, “Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for what he does (Sartre, 1946).” This means that Roya must takes charge of her life, and even when fate seems against her. Albert Camus says, “The only way to deal with an unfree world is to become absolutely free that your very existence is an act of rebellion (Camus,1942).” This fits Roya’s story, as she rebels against the coup’s pain by starting new life in America. As Roya reflects her condition: “The poor thing! They had been such the perfect couple! Now look at her. What a destiny! Did you know she pushed the stationer away from her at the last minute? He died! That poor stationer...(Kamali, 2019, p.158-159).” and then she suddenly said “Of course we will go. We’ll go together, Baba Jan.” This reflects that how Roya chooses to move forward, using her freedom to escape the coup’s trap.

Simon de Beauvoir writes, “Ones’s life has value so long as one attributes value to the life of others, by means of love, friendship, indignation, and compassion (de Beauvoir, 1948).” In the book



Roya's love for Bahman gives her life value even in America. She married someone else (Walter) and has a family but she never forgets Bahman. This choice keeps her love alive. The 2013 reunion is Roya's final act of freedom. She meets Bahman again after the 60 years, confronting the past, "When he said her name, it did no matter: the decades, the children, the cancer, the betrayal, the coup, the rewritten history. He said her name same the way he had always said her name. they were Roya and Bahman again, the couple dancing, talking breathlessly as they leaned against the book in the shop (Kamali, 2019, p.261)." This scene shows how Roya chooses to face the truth, finding meaning in their lost love. Also Roya's choice to marry Walter, having a child named Marigold, and her job all these are acts of radical freedom as Sartre describes. Roya's emigration and reunion turn her story into strength, proving that even fate can't stop human choices.

Rumi's Mystical love as rise above fate

Rumi sees love as a spiritual connection that goes beyond the time and trouble, joined people together no matter what happens. The coup separates Roya and Bahman, but their love stays strong, especially in their 2013 reunion. This shows how Rumi's mystical ideas help their love to rise above coup's pain, keeping them connected across the decades. Rumi's poetry says love is gift from God that can't be stopped by worldly problems. He writes, "Lovers don't meet finally somewhere. They are in each other all along (Rumi, 13th century)." In the novel their early romance in the stationary shop feels magical, like a bond that fate can't touch. As they first time meet each other Roya reads Rumi's poetry,

"Look at love how it tangles with the one fallen in love,

Look at spirit how it fuses with earth giving it life."

(Kamali, 2019, p.24). Annemarie Schimmel says, "For Rumi, love is the ladder to divine, where human hearts unites in timeless embrace (Schimmel,1985)." This fits Roya and Bahman's love story as their love last through the years of separation. Even when Bahman is forced to marry Shahla and Roya moves America, they carry each other in their heart, just as Rumi's poetry suggests.

2013 reunion is the biggest proof of their mystical love. When Roya meets Bahman after the 60 years, their connection feels like it never faded. When Roya meets Bahman last time, before his death, "In this bed, beneath the toothpaste sheets, Roya stroked his chest, search for his arms, the muscles she had known so well. She kissed his eyes, his cheekbones, his lips. Grateful that once, when she was young, she had experienced the love so strong that it did not go away, that decades and distance and miles and children and lies and letters could never make it disappear. She held him in her arms and said to him all she needed to say. For that fraction of time, he was entirely hers (Kamali, 2019, p.288)." This scene justifies how their love stays alive, like a divine force, connecting to Rumi's belief in love's timeless power.



The Stationary Shop as a symbol of freedom vs. fate

The Stationary Shop is a place where Roya and Bahman feel free to love and dream. First time they meet in this stationary shop. Sartre writes: “Freedom is what you do with what’s been done to you (Sartre, 1946).” In the stationary shop they both choose love despite family pressure and political chaos. Bahman comes to the stationary shop every Tuesday, “In the dusty, cool space of that shop filled with books and fountain pens and ink bottles, they continued to meet. The unwanted boys appeared at every street corner, but the one Roya actually felt charged by was only to be seen on Tuesday afternoons at the stationary shop (Kamali, 2019, p.31).”

Northrop Frye says, “A symbol is a unit of meaning that stands for something larger than itself, often a whole way of life (Frye, 1957).” The shop stands for Roya and Bahman’s dream of free life together, but it’s fragile against political turmoil. When the coup happens, the shop is ruined and also the owner of this shop Mr. Fakhri also shoot, which shows that the fate is stronger than their rebellion.

Letters as bridge between fate and freedom

In “The Stationary Shop” letters are more than messages. They are powerful acts as that hold Roya and Bahman’s love together. These letter carries both Jean-Paul Sartre’s idea of radical freedom and Rumi’s idea of love as destined and divine bond. By writing the letters Bahman reaches to Roya as he writes one letter,

“My dearest Roya,

I think of you all the time—every single day, every night. Truth is there are no times when you are not on my mind, and I wouldn’t want it any other way. One day we’ll look back on this separation and laugh. I can’t wait till it’s all behind us. Everywhere I see your beautiful face. If you are worried about me, please know I am safe, healthy, I only lack you, which means that I lack everything, of course, I am counting down the days, Roya Joon. Things are just little difficult now. And I know that you don’t like it when I speak too much about the politics. Well, then, let me tell you that I can’t wait to be married.

I dare to dream of our children.

I have it all planned out. I should be back in a few weeks.

In the hopes of seeing you again—the sooner the better.

You are my love,

Mubassira Shekh



Bahman”

(Kamali,2019, p.97). In the novel letter carries their hopes, especially in 2013 reunion, when they both discovered that their letters are exchanged by someone maybe Mr. Fakhri or maybe by Bahman’s mom. Mieke Bal says, “Letters are narrative acts that bridges the gap between people, carrying their agency and emotions across barriers (Bal, 1997).” So in this novel letters hold very strong position as they are bridge that hold Roya and Bahman’s love together. Sartre shows how they choose to write and Rumi shows how their love meant to be.

Conclusion

Marjan Kamali’s novel “The Stationary Shop (2019)” shows how love can fight against fate, blending Jean-Paul Sartre’s ideas of radical freedom with Rumi’s view of love as divine, destined force. The 1953 coup tries to separate Roya and Bahman, but their love survives through choices, memories, and letters. This paper explored how they answers the big questions about fate and freedom, using existential and mystical ideas to show love’s power. This paper examined how the 1953 Iranian coup separated Roya and Bahman and limits their choices. As Stephen Kinzer explains, the coup was about oil and power, but it crushed ordinary lives like Roya and Bahman’s, which forces them to face a world where their plans are ruined. The coup’s violence and family pressures, like Bahman’s mother pushing him to marry Shahla, took away their control. Yet, Roya’s decision to hold onto love and later move to America shows that even fate can’t fully stop them. Roya’s move to America and 2013 reunion with Bahman are the bold choices that shows her strength. She builds a new life and faces the past, which proves that her love for Bahman is a choice that gives her life meaning, even after the loss. Rumi sees love as ladder to the divine, which perfectly fits in Roya and Bahman’s story. Their early love story in the stationary shop, when Roya was just seventeen years old and later their 2013 reunion in America, after the exact 60 years, when Roya was seventy-seven years old which reflects that their love is timeless, divine and predestined. Also these research studied that how letters acts as resistance and the stationary shop acts as a symbol of freedom. This paper fills the gap by looking at the novel through these ideas, which proves that Roya and Bahman’s love is a powerful mix of human choices and spiritual connection and also provide a hope in the world which is shaped by fate.

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