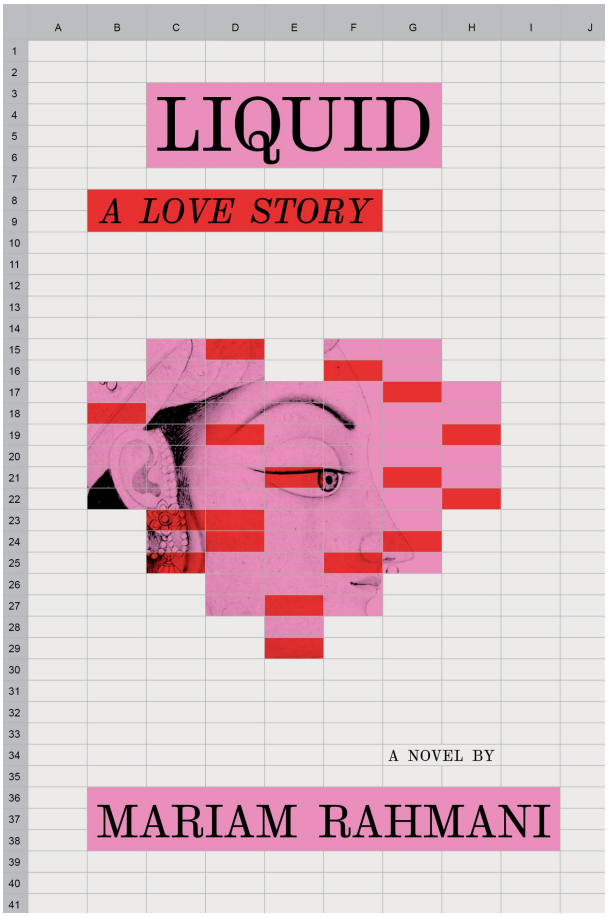
REVIEW

The Distance Between Intellect and Intimacy — A Review of Mariam Rahmani's "Liquid"

by Layla Sabourian



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In her ambitious debut novel *Liquid* (Algonquin Books, 2025), Mariam Rahmani explores the porous boundaries of identity, faith, and desire through the mind of a queer Iranian-American narrator whose emotional detachment often veers into discomfort. The novel, elliptical and cerebral, moves through post-9/11 America and contemporary Iran with a narrator who observes the world with cool precision but keeps even the reader at arm's length.

Rahmani herself brings an extraordinary pedigree to the work. With degrees from Princeton, Oxford, UCLA, and Columbia — including a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature and an M.F.A. in Fiction — she arrives with all the markers of intellectual authority that are visible on the page. Her prose is elegant and spiked with dry wit; there are moments that stop you to reflect, such as: "Race and class rely on each other; you can't have one without the other." She writes with a confidence that doesn't ask for your agreement. It assumes it.



"Liquid" by Mariam Rahmani

The novel opens with a juxtaposition that signals Rahmani's sharp instinct for aesthetic tension. The Quranic epigraph was translated (confirmed by Rahimi herself) from the Saheeh International version, with the Safarzadeh translation used only as a minor reference, as cited in the front matter. This is one example of how details in the novel don't always align with reality; in the text, the narrator presents the same translation as a version of Safarzadeh's — the confusion is understandable, but ultimately inaccurate. While that claim serves the narrative in the moment, reflecting her journey of reconciling various identities, the author in fact chose the Saheeh specifically because of its conservatism. It is known for its methodological and political rigidity, and Rahmani wanted to use that to her advantage — creating space for the narrator's messy, personal interpretation of Islam, and her assertion of Muslimness.

But as artful as the structure is, the protagonist is difficult to like. Raised in an elite academic household — her mother a university provost, her father an engineer — she struggles not with marginalisation so much as with a kind of existential ennui. She drifts through romantic encounters with a languid self-consciousness that feels performative.

The question of privilege haunts the novel, though often implicitly. Always ignoring her own privilege, the protagonist constantly criticizes others for having it. The narrator's parents, despite her claims of emotional neglect, appear as thoughtful, caring figures — her mother,

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in particular, emerges as a source of unwavering support, sending job leads, cheering her on even through illness and distance, and although separated from her father, her mother stops everything going on in her own life to come and take care of him. This support is rarely acknowledged. Instead, the narrator turns inward, spiralling into bitterness and self-sabotage, offering up lines so steeped in envy they border on satire:

> “Champagne just appeared on Julia’s doorsteps, and she wasn’t even paying for the doorsteps.”

In one scene, she dons the hijab not as an expression of faith, or even personal identity, but as a defiant response to American Islamophobia. “It was a fuck you to the government,” she claims, once again ignoring the very privilege that she has in making this choice when it comes to wearing the hijab. The action stirs strong emotions, challenging norms while raising difficult questions. We can't forget that Iranian women face violence and jail for rejecting the hijab today. Yet elsewhere, this same garment represents profound spiritual devotion and personal strength for many women. To wear it as political theatre — especially with the privilege of removing it at will — risks trivialising a garment others are punished for.

The novel gestures toward diasporic complexity, especially through the mother’s character, who is Indian but immersed almost entirely in Iranian culture. The text makes no real attempt to explore this cultural inheritance, and the reader is left in mystery as to the mother’s relationship with her own family and culture. The erasure may be intentional — an immigrant’s act of assimilation, a mother’s private grief — but it’s never interrogated. As a result, her character feels underdeveloped, especially in contrast to the narrator’s sharp-edged interiority. When the narrator returns to Iran, the emotional stakes rise. But even here, her behaviour is egocentric: She disappears on the young woman next door, who is there for her in every way, sexually and emotionally.

When she finally returns to the U.S. and gets her long-awaited happy ending with Adam — the man she’s chased for chapters — the real disappointment hits. She hints that now that his mother’s house is going to her young fiancé, “Adam has little to show, nothing but himself.” Really? This is the same Adam who, by her own admission, has $2 million in the bank, a respectable marketing job in L.A., is barely 30, and writes the kind of swoony poetry most

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women only dream about. And yet, the story frames her choice to be with him as some noble sacrifice. Instead of growth, we get self-congratulation disguised as humility — and a heroine still stuck in her class hangups.

Love wins, sure — but empathy, maturity, and perspective clearly don't.



Mariam Rahmani photographed by Hadi Salehi

And yet, *Liquid* is not without its rewards. It's a novel of ideas — restless, unapologetic, intellectually rigorous. I can only assume that Rahmani is not trying to make her protagonist likeable. She's not trying to make the reader comfortable. This is a book interested in rupture, in longing, in the asymmetry of desire. It doesn't resolve. It provokes.

Mariam Rahmani herself is someone I hope we hear much more from. She's an exceptional translator, a deft stylist, and, by all accounts, a generous literary citizen. If her next book gives us characters as richly human as her prose is accomplished, it may well be a knockout.

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