

Review of Censoring an Iranian Love Story

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Following the 1979 Iranian revolution, an Islamic Republic was established and life significantly changed for the Iranian people. In his novel, *Censoring an Iranian Love Story*, Shahriar Mandanipour tells two intertwined stories, one of fiction and one of a medium between fiction and nonfiction, that exemplify the liberties lost to the regime in post-revolutionary Iran. One of his stories is that of his own, real-life journey as a writer in a country where censorship has come to rule the arts. He takes the reader along with him as he advances his love story and continuously works with the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance to ensure the publication of his novel. The second story is Mandanipour's fictitious love story about a young man and young woman, Dara and Sara, who fight against Iranian law to pursue a secret relationship. The love story is not a typical love story with a happy ending involving a prince and a chariot; this is a story of the struggle to follow one's heart in a forbidden situation. Through the combination of his love story and his own battle as a writer, Mandanipour gives the reader an inside look into the changed lives of the Iranian people.

From the start of the novel, it is clear that the political situation in Iran is as important as the characters themselves. Many Iranian readers are well versed on the politics of the Iranian revolution, but Mandanipour makes sure to give ample details for the inexperienced reader. The post-revolution atmosphere shapes both the stories and the characters involved. Mandanipour does not spend an extensive amount of time describing pre-revolutionary Iran, but writes enough to give the reader an impression of

how starkly different Iran was in the past. He describes the revolution as the end of “twenty-five hundred years of dictatorial rule by kings” (8). The Shah began his most recent rule following the American coup d’état that resulted in the arrest of Mossadeq and marked the beginning of a period of modernization (37). During this period of modernization, the Shah implemented more Westernized policies, particularly in terms of freedom of the arts and women’s rights (12). Toward the end of the Shah’s reign, anti-American sentiments were on the rise as Western influences were suspected of corrupting the Islamic peoples of Iran and these thoughts played a crucial role in the shaping of post-revolutionary Iran (66). The 1979 revolution created the present day Islamic Republic and the Islamic constitution and the anti-West sentiments became a part of daily life.

Mandanipour’s own story and his love story are both greatly affected by the new Islamic Republic. The new regime prevents Mandanipour from easily publishing his novel and also prevents the characters of the love story from pursuing their love. In the case of Mandanipour himself, it is the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance that poses a problem. He describes his dilemma as being his desire of printing his love story in his homeland (8). Though the new constitution does not advocate censorship, the growing anti-West sentiments and the increasing adherence to Islam has led to a required permit for books to leave the print shop and be distributed to the public from fear that it will corrupt the people (8). Mandanipour is forced to write and re-write his story with the expected censorship in mind and must constantly check with the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance to ensure his book does not “remain imprisoned in the

print shop's dark storage" (8). The love story of Sara and Dara is personally affected by another product of the Islamic regime, *The Campaign Against Social Corruption*.

Members of the campaign patrol the streets in search of people violating traditional, Islamic morals. One aim of the campaign is to ensure that there is a proper, Islamic relationship between unmarried men and women and this gives the patrols a right to arrest any unmarried man and woman seen together who are not immediate family. This forces Sara and Dara to have secret meetings, coded languages, and to live in constant fear of being caught. They discover ways of evading the rules, such as spending time in an emergency room rather than a public park, but the pressures of Islamic law are always present and impede their relationship (113).

A prominent, underlying theme in this novel appears to be the issue of women's rights. Though Mandanipour focuses on the censorship of his love story, he constantly refers to the portrayal of women in Iran, both prior to and following the revolution. He emotionally describes the plight of women in Iran through Sara's thoughts, "Damn all your political slogans. When you wanted to be modern, you beat us over the head for us to take off chadors, and when you found religion you beat us over the head for us to cover ourselves with chadors" (217). The Iranian women are forced to conform with the regime's demands and have been deprived of any liberties that women in the West take for granted. The physical appearance of women in media is also strictly censored. Photos of "women not wearing proper Islamic dress" are completely forbidden or significantly altered prior to publication (185, 186). Fashion magazines that use pencil-sketched women in lieu of real women even include a headscarf, because depicting a

woman without a head scarf, pencil-sketches or not, is against the idea of proper Islamic dress (186). It is clear that Mandanipour acknowledges and empathizes with the Iranian women, both in pre and post revolutionary times.

Censoring an Iranian Love Story should not be mistaken for a cliché, modern day love story. It is a story rooted in struggle - the struggle to love someone despite the law and the struggle to write in a country where censorship strips a writer of creative ability. For those that have experienced Iranian life first hand, Shahriar Mandanipour reiterates what they already know through witty rhetoric and a story telling style that keeps the reader turning the pages. For those who have not experienced life in Iran, Mandanipour takes the reader on his journey and exposes them to the history and politics of Iran in a manner that could interest even the most uninterested. Censoring an Iranian Story is a novel that takes the reader into the depths of post-revolutionary Iran, exposing them to different aspects of society affected by the Islamic constitution.

Source

Mandanipour, Shahriar. *Censoring an Iranian Love Story*. New York: Vintage Books, 2009.

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