

Pomegranate Hearts. Rouhi Shafii. 2006. London: Shiraz Press. 331pp. (Including glossary of Persian words). £9.99 (paperback)

Reviewed by Emily Regan Wills¹

Pomegranate Hearts is a multi-generational saga of women's lives in Iran from the early twentieth-century until today. The first parts center on Suri, who is born mute into a powerful family in the town of Karmanieh (now Kerman). Unwanted, the last daughter in a household without sons, unable to speak or communicate, she is married at the age of eleven to Javad, the Russian-educated radical son of a shopkeeper, who decides to play Pygmalion to his child bride. Suri learns to read and write, becomes a poet, and falls in love with Javad. They have two daughters, Sara and Shireen, and a son, Sasan. However, Javad leaves the family during World War II, to fight on behalf of the Soviet Union, and is never heard from again. Suri, broken-hearted, sends her children to boarding school in Tehran, where they become active in politics, grow up, and get married. Shireen becomes a lawyer, marries, and moves to London. Sara marries and makes a career for herself as a doctor. Sasan becomes active in leftwing revolutionary activity, and goes underground. The 1979 deposing of the Shah, which all of the siblings supported, and the Islamic Revolution, which they did not, serves as a political and personal breaking point. Shireen and her family return to Tehran after the revolution, but Shireen's husband, who becomes prominent in Islamist circles, becomes abusive and tyrannical, forcing her to flee back to London with her daughter. Sara's marriage dissolves, and she also settles in London. Sasan is imprisoned by the police for years, and emerges emotionally broken and a drug addict. Suri ceases writing, and still pines for her lost husband. The story follows the family through the turn of the millennium, and ends with Shireen traveling to Moscow to find some of Javad's old letters to Suri he was never allowed to send.

The story aspires to be an Isabel Allende-like mix of real political intrigue and fascinating character soap opera. It is told in a storyteller's voice, weaving elements of nature, myth, politics, and personal history into a whole. The first section, told in the first person by Suri, is reasonably compelling. Her voice is strong, and manages a convincing indictment of patriarchal oppression within traditional Iranian families in the early 20th century. The book shines at depicting the world of this period, including gender seclusion and the household politics of servants and householders. Karmanieh is brought alive through magical-realist descriptions of a conscious landscape, responding to the suffering of characters and to political developments.

Shireen and her siblings, on the other hand, are not as well developed as characters, and their voices never seem to click. Tehran and London never appears as alive as Karmanieh, and a bare narration of events takes over for the lush description of the earlier sections. Suri essentially disappears towards the end of the book, and her voice is missed. The central sections, narrated in the third person, fall fairly flat. The story picks up again when Shireen narrates the final sections, but her voice is never as engaging as Suri's.

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The swath of history that the novel covers is broad, and contains innumerable crisis moments: the Mossadegh government and the CIA-backed coup that deposed it, the broad-based opposition to the Shah, the Iranian Revolution, and the Islamic government that grew up after it. While there is some material given here about the political and social history of the time, the book simply does not provide enough of an overview for those who do not know anything about Iranian politics, nor does it provide depth for those with a basic outline. Although there is an attempt to humanize the political processes through the characters, it does not generally succeed. At best, by discussing the broad-based disapproval of the Shah, and showing that both left and right united to depose him, the novel helps create a new image of the Iranian Revolution. However, it fails to give any deeper sense of political texture, especially in its discussions of present-day Iran.

Issues of gender appear repeatedly throughout the text. Suri's mother is punished for never bearing a son; Suri herself is kept secluded and uneducated, and is given away as a child bride. Suri and Javad raising their children to buck society's gender roles, but both Shireen and Sara enter and eventually leave unhappy marriages. Shireen is abused by her husband, who eventually rises to a position of power in the Islamic government and uses his power over her to torment her further years after their separation. It is unclear precisely what sort of analysis Shafii, herself a secular feminist and active in secular feminist movements in the UK, wants us to draw from them. Does she want to implicate Iranian culture, Islam, or simply patriarchy for these continued oppressions? What differences does she see between the world of Suri's generation, the world of Shireen's, and the world experienced by today's young Iranian women? While Shafii clearly wants us to talk about the oppression of women in Iran, she provides us with few tools to guide our understanding of these issues. A reader who does not enter the book with some knowledge about gender issues in Iran might find it hard to develop an analysis based on the material presented here.

Pomegranate Hearts might have some limited use in the classroom. As a supplementary reading in a course dealing specifically with pre-1979 Iran, the book might be of interest, perhaps especially to students who have trouble engaging with the historical material. There are certainly elements of a good potboiler plot in the novel, which might be able to hold a reader's attention when more staid material might fail. It also might be a good choice for students who have developed a particular interest in the prerevolutionary and revolutionary period, especially leftwing movements in Iran. It does contain a useful, though not exhaustive, glossary of Farsi words used in the book, which helps make the book more accessible to the non-expert. However, it would not be a good selection to generally represent Iranian women's literature, nor does it provide enough detail about the post-revolutionary situation to work well in a class on that theme. Marjane Satrapi's *Persopolis* covers the post-revolutionary history much better than *Pomegranate Hearts*, and is also a more enjoyable read. For those interested in earlier periods, Shafii's first book, *Scent of Saffron*, a memoir and social history, was well received, and could be a good alternative to *Pomegranate Hearts* for classroom use.

Pomegranate Hearts is also limited by the fact that it was poorly copyedited and contains numerous typographical and grammatical errors. Perhaps if the book is picked up by a US publisher for distribution on this side of the Atlantic, it will be edited again,

which may help some of the bright spots within the novel to pop forward, and which would help make it the novel it could be.