

## Tales of Love and Despair: Men in Love in Revolutionary Iran

**Mahnaz Kousha**

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*These stories transcend culture to speak to wider human experiences.*

In *Tales of Love and Despair: Men in Love in Revolutionary Iran*, sociologist Mahnaz Kousha draws from extensive interviews to craft eight short stories that capture the spirit of an era. Set between the 1970s and 1990s, these clear accounts from seldom-heard voices explore relationships at different stages. From teenage devotion to courtship, from midlife resignation to the pain experienced by couples with conflicting ideals, marriages illuminate the strengths and flaws in every heart.

Distilled details reveal Tehran as a cosmopolitan city at a crossroads. The often-lonely routes desire can take lead to intriguing glimpses of freedoms that existed before the revolution. Women in particular—as viewed by their partners—command respect, reveal unknown talents, puzzle and frustrate, find solace in homemaking, or bristle under the constraints of societal rules. The varied depictions of women allow life behind the veil to unfold with natural variety. The men, too, expose tenderness and bullheadedness, dutiful natures and other complexities.

Among the strongest stories is “Where Are We? We Are Here.” Ali, the narrator, is jailed in a roundup of student protesters. He falls in love with Mariam, a fellow prisoner’s visitor. Decades later he revisits their struggles. The crisp narration skillfully details the breakdown of their relationship through a series of household changes. When Mariam is engrossed in leftist politics, tasks are left to Ali. When she begins to embrace extravagance, new purchases suggest a temporary, tentative peace. Objects begin to speak volumes. What’s left unspoken builds subtle tension.

Other stories expand the theme of intellectuals who find themselves troubled by the growing chasm between hope and reality. In “The Paris of the Middle East,” a new father has a shockingly abrasive response to the birth of his daughter. Fearing that fatherhood has derailed his plans for an untraditional life, he distances himself from his new family only to later discover his wrongs.

In “Piano Lessons,” an engineer is baffled by his ambitious wife’s need for a wider social circle. Brief exile in Canada and a return to Tehran effectively highlight the tension of the times, as well as the rapid changes couples endure. An especially well-written interlude features piano lessons, which provide the narrator with an emotional oasis.

Aside from stray proofreading errors, the work remains honed. Frequently uncomplicated plots emphasize the contrast between past and present. The range of the stories is narrow—perhaps in deference to the overall project, and out of a desire to neither embellish nor diminish facts drawn from real interviews—but the majority succeed as intimate accounts of a generation.

On occasion, faithfulness to the truth prevents the full leap into fiction. One such example is “Second Marriage,” which features a pivotal earthquake in the narrator’s life that soon becomes a passing, dramatic plot point; secondary characters are also loosely drawn. “Father,” the final story, depicts the power of filial bonds in a fleeting snowstorm, yet remains a grainy snapshot in a book of otherwise richer panoramas.

*Tales of Love and Despair* offers moving examples of personal struggles. With its multifaceted approach to love, the book transcends culture to speak to wider human experiences.

KAREN RIGBY (June 16, 2017)

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