



★ Tali Girls

Siamak Herawi

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Afghani young adults face hazardous, uncertain futures in Siamak Herawi's novel *Tali Girls*.

Kowsar was quite young when the government built a school in Tali, her village. Though she shows great academic promise, the Taliban ends her aspirations. They shut down the school; they compel local farmers to grow opium instead of their regular, less profitable crops.

As her peaceful village life crumbles, Kowsar struggles to change her fate. Meanwhile, Simin and Geesu, the girls she grew up with, fall prey to the treacherous forces closing in around them. In a rural society ruled by misogynistic extremists, their lives are marked by horrific violence of every kind.

Khodadad, a government official who's more interested in finding a child bride and pushing his restrictive version of Islam than in providing his students with an education, plays a key role in destroying the girls' lives. In a heartbreaking scene, the poor men of the village watch wealthy Khodadad take nine-year-old Simin away to abuse as he pleases. From there, emboldened, Khodadad's sins outgrow the possibility of retribution at an exponential rate.

Even after learning Simin's grisly fate, Kowsar clings to optimism for as long as she can, buoyed by her love for a kind boy and her dreams of higher education. Nevertheless, her love for Tali and its "rugged mountains" that "pity no one" sours with each new tragedy. The disappearances of her brother and best friend threaten to undo her completely.

Tali Girls is a harrowing novel about the brutal lives of women in a terrorist-controlled state. In the end, Kowsar's fate remains an open question. This is, perhaps, the kindest possible conclusion to her story of futile struggle, crushed hopes, and relentless oppression.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (November / December 2023)

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