

If You Could Be Mine Study Guide

If You Could Be Mine by Sara Farizan

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Plot Summary

This study guide is based on the following version of this book: Farizan, Sara. *If You Could Be Mine*. New York: Workman Publishing, 2013.

Sahar and Nasrin have loved each other since they were little girls. As they got older, that love deepened into a sexual relationship as well. They are forbidden from being in a relationship in public, though. Homosexuality is punishable by death in Iran. So, they have to sneak in intimacy and private conversations whenever they can. Sahar, who is a bookish wallflower, wants to go to a university and become a doctor. Nasrin Mehdi, who flaunts her beauty, wants to become an entertainer in Bollywood.

Sahar and her father are invited to a party at the Mehdis, without realizing it is an engagement party. A young man named Reza has courted Nasrin over the last month or so, and has proposed. The Mehdis decide that his family has enough money that he would be able to provide a good future for their daughter, so they agreed to his proposal. Ever the actress, Nasrin is able to keep her family and Reza from realizing how upset she is. Sahar is not as good of an actress, and her anger and sadness shows. She is able to pass it off as being sad that she will not see her best friend as much any more.

The one person who sees through Sahar's charade is her cousin Ali. He is a few years older than her, and is well known in the area's gay community. He realizes that the two of them have a relationship. To get her out of her doldrums, he invites her to a party at his home. The party is wild, and Sahar is not comfortable there. She meets a transgender woman named Parveen, a big, burly police officer who acts as security, and a pimp/prostitute pair nicknamed Mother and Daughter. She leaves the party early, but forges a friendship with Parveen.

After the party, she asks Parveen how to go about having a gender reassignment surgery. She lies, saying that she feels uncomfortable in her own skin. The truth is that she does not want to be a woman because life would be a lot easier if she were a man. Ultimately, she would rather society change than her.

When walking with Nasrin, they are stopped by the police. Nasrin is wearing clothes that reveal her elbows. One of the officers throws the girls into the back of the police car. They could get imprisoned, beaten, and raped without anyone caring about their safety. Nasrin is terrified, but Sahar is a little more calm. She recognizes the officer as Farshad, the bouncer from Ali's party. Farshad lets them out in an alley, and tells them to go to Restaurant Javan. He will send Ali to meet them.

At the restaurant, Ali is semi-famous. Everyone seems to know who he is. Many people fawn all over him. This is a side of Ali that Sahar has not seen before. It is also a side of Sahar that Nasrin has not seen before. Granted, Sahar is new to this counterculture as well. Mother and Daughter drive them home.



Parveen takes Sahar to a support group for people in various stages of transitioning between genders. She does not fit in here, either. She is trying to figure out how to have the government pay for a gender reassignment surgery for her. That way, she figures, she can be with Nasrin.

The events leading up to the wedding continue, without Sahar getting anywhere closer to her plan. Excruciatingly painful and awkward things happen as she gets more desperate. She gets caught trying on her father's clothes. She has to go dress shopping with Nasrin. It is during this outing that Nasrin's mother, Mrs. Mehdi, warns Sahar that she should not feel jealous of Nasrin, and hints that best friends should stick together through even bad marriages. The girls also suffer through a Mehdi family party, where they try to get some incriminating information on Reza. They fail at this, too.

Sahar goes to a support group for people who have had a gender reassignment. People who have gone through it want to make sure this is something she really wants to do, because it can be pretty traumatic. Eventually, Parveen makes an appointment for her with the doctor who performed her surgery.

Several people try to dissuade Sahar from going through with the surgery. Ali says that it will not matter because Nasrin is not attracted to men. In the support group people say how disorienting and painful the surgery can be, and some doubt that she is doing it for the right reason. She does not discuss this with Nasrin, really. She talks generally about it, but has not said how committed she is to the idea.

At the surgery center, the doctor's intern is none other than Reza, Nasrin's fiancé. When he recognizes her, this finally ends her dream of having the surgery to save her relationship with Nasrin.

As Sahar weeps about the loss of her dream, Mother and Daughter bring Ali to the house. He has been badly beaten. Farshad, the police officer who doubles as Ali's doorman, beat him up. Farshad wanted Parveen, and Ali forbid it. After this, Ali's little empire crumbles down around him. He cannot be seen any more. He is not safe. He must leave the country. He invites Sahar to come with him. Instead, Sahar convinces him to take Daughter.

Sahar and Nasrin have their final "date," going on a sight-seeing trip. They are able to spend some time together in private, but they are saying goodbye.

On the day of the wedding, Mrs. Mehdi reveals that she knows that Sahar and Nasrin are a couple. She put this wedding together to protect her daughter. She needs someone to take care of her, she says. Also, if Mrs. Mehdi could see that she is a lesbian, maybe others could as well, and that would put her life in danger. So, she granted Reza her daughter's hand in marriage, knowing that her daughter would grow old in a loveless marriage, but at least she would grow old.

Six months later, Sahar is attending university classes. Reza, in a panic, tracks her down and says she needs to come to his house. Nasrin has locked herself in a room and is bawling. He can not reach her. Only Sahar can.



She goes, and Nasrin lets her into the room. She tells Sahar that she is pregnant. It is not that she does not want the baby. The problem is that she does not want the husband that goes with it. She wants to raise a child with Sahar. Sahar says that this can not be. They have to be friends now. She promises to always be in Nasrin's life, as her closest friend, and as an aunt to her daughter.



Section I: Chapters 1-3

Summary

Sahar narrates the story, which takes place in modern day Tehran, Iran. Sahar takes the reader on a quick summary of her life with Nasrin Mehdi. To everyone else, Nasrin is her best friend. As Sahar tells it, she fell in love with her when they were 6, and Nasrin pulled her hair. She wanted Sahar to play dolls with her instead of football with the boys. "Sahar, you will play with me because you belong to me. Only me" (1).

They first kissed when they were 17. There has been a lot more than kissing since then. Unfortunately, they have to keep it a secret. Homosexuality is punishable by death in Iran. An older cousin, Ali, showed her a video of two boys being hung for homosexuality in another town in Iran. Pictures of the Ayatollah are on display throughout the city. It is this kind of religious overseer that the rest of the populace follows, even though she does not.

Their families do not know about their relationship. Nasrin, who is 18 now, will talk about boys with the other girls in their social group, but Sahar never joins in. Sahar never mentions any other friends.

Sahar has other things on her mind as well. Her mother has passed away, and her father goes into long periods of depression. She is graduating soon and getting ready to take a test called the Concours. This test will determine who will be able to go to university and what they will study. Sahar wants to go to Tehran University and study medicine. Nasrin wants to go to Bollywood and be a star. She is a dancer.

The part of their future that weighs on them the most is their romantic future. Nasrin comes from money. She will have many suitors who will come to her house dressed in suits and explain to her parents how they will provide for her. Nasrin's parents will choose the family with the most money and that will be her future.

Sahar is not in the picture. "I don't know when I'm going to lose her, but it's going to happen, and I don't know if I will be able to handle it" (6).

Ali, Sahar's cousin, is gay as well. He has a string of lovers, and he goes through them pretty quickly. She is jealous of him for being so comfortable in his skin. She is also worried about his fate. Too many people know about his love life. That could get him killed.

Nasrin is described by Sahar as the most beautiful woman she has ever seen, with very long and perfect hair. She tends to push boundaries. This scares Sahar, but also intrigues her. Nasrin loves fashion, and even wears her headscarf in a loose and stylish way.



Sahar describes herself as an awkward girl with breasts too big. She does not think she is attractive, physically or emotionally.

In the first chapter, the two girls get together to study. However, they end up flirting and kissing. In the privacy of Sahar's bedroom, they are allowed to be themselves. The only time Nasrin actually looks at a book is when Sahar's father knocks on the door, making Nasrin jump up and pretend to be studying.

The Mehdis invite Sahar and her father over for dinner. Sahar is suspicious that there is some reason for this, but Nasrin will not say anything. Upon arriving, the two families make some pleasantries. Sahar has brought Mrs. Mehdi a gift of some alstroemeria, a flower representing friendship and devotion. Their families have always been close. There are a lot of Nasrin's relatives here that Sahar recognizes, but a lot of other people that she does not. Nasrin has not yet come to join them. Eventually, her father sends Sahar to the bathroom to get her to hurry up. When she does, Sahar turns on the hair dryer to cover their conversation. Nasrin apologizes at once. She urges Sahar to tell her that she will always love her, and she adds cryptically "I don't love him" (20). That is when Sahar sees the ring on Nasrin's finger. She has been betrothed to a man that has been chosen for her. Throughout this, Sahar complains that they were supposed to have more time before any of this happened. They were supposed to at least go to school. Nasrin is 18, and some girls get married younger than that. However, they thought they would have had more of a future before the world closed down around them.

The groom-to-be is Reza, a doctor in his early 30s. He is tall, slim, handsome, and wears an expensive watch and tailored suit. On paper, there is nothing wrong with him as a suitor, except that he is not Sahar. Nasrin, who is a good actress, takes center stage among the assembled family and friends alongside her future husband. Everyone heaps praise and blessings upon them. Sahar gets a vodka and soda from the servant and chokes it down. Nasrin introduces Sahar to Reza. She calls Sahar her best friend in the universe. Her smile is very fake, but only Sahar knows this. They have a friendly exchange. Beneath this, Sahar is burning with jealousy and anger, and Nasrin is worried about the future relationship between them. Reza is none the wiser.

When Chapter 3 begins, it has been a week since the engagement party. Sahar is still sulking from it. She and Nasrin go to two different schools, so she is glad she does not have to see Nasrin's high priced friends coo over her and talk about wedding dresses. Nasrin's family has money, so she goes to a school for the wealthy. The curriculum is easy enough for everyone to pass because the schools do not want to anger the parents who pay the tuition by challenging the spoiled children. Sahar goes to a school that she had to score high enough on a test to enroll in. It is a lot more difficult.

Sahar reveals that their mothers had been friends growing up. Both families were rich. However, her mother did not marry the man that her grandfather wanted. She married a man who had less money, so in retribution, her grandfather cut her off from all of the family money.



Sahar would continue to cry in bed if not for her cousin, Ali, coming over. He had heard that Nasrin was getting married off and came to see how Sahar was handling it. Ali is a homosexual, and does not do a good job hiding it. Sahar is envious of him, but also thinks he is being stupid for flaunting something that could get him killed. Sahar never came out to anyone but Nasrin. However, Ali says he could tell there was something more than friendship between the two girls by the way they looked at each other. Sahar is upset to think it was that obvious. If other people suspected, her life could be in danger. Ali assures her that the only reason he could tell is that he is gay, too. He lets Sahar have a good cry on him. Then, he invites her out to a party he is having. He already has a cover story and a chaperone in mind to allay any of her father's suspicions. She agrees to go.

Analysis

The character names in this book are important to note; Sahar means "just before dawn," or "awakening." This is a coming of age book, and Sahar is awakening to her life. Her future stands before her like a new day. Nasrin means "wild rose." It is a perfect name for an unpredictable beauty. The author, Sara Farizan, is the daughter of Iranian immigrants. With a western-sounding first name, she likely studied her heritage to choose the names and circumstances. An MFA graduate, she is likely familiar with the novel "The Awakening" by Kate Chopin. In this book, a female protagonist struggles with the overbearing rules of the patriarchal society. This parallels directly with the issues that Sahar and Nasrin have to face. Or, Sahar could just be a cover for the author's first name, Sara. Meanwhile, Reza means "contentment." This could be a joke on the part of the writer. Reza is content with his life. But the marriage will not bring contentment to anyone.

The first chapter is rife with foreshadowing. Sahar tells the reader about two homosexual boys who were hung in a nearby town. The threat is constantly hanging overhead. However, her greatest fear is that Nasrin will no longer love her. Even this quote holds some portent for the future: "No one knows the future," Baba says. "Anyone who thinks they do is mistaken. Remember that, my love" (16). When it is first mentioned, it could be assumed that the author is using some menacing form of foreshadowing. She could be hinting that anything could happen to the characters, particularly after she laid the groundwork for the two dead boys. However, the surprise actually comes in a later chapter, when Nasrin is revealed to be engaged.

The image of the Ayatollah is like 1984's Big Brother always looking down on the people of Tehran. Those eyes, Sahar narrates, are always judging her. This political and religious figure is not even a real person in her life, but more like a symbol of extremism and intolerance. The Ayatollah's influence is powerful, even though he has no direct control over her.

The idea that Nasrin will talk about boys with the other girls indicates that perhaps she feels more of an attraction to boys than Sahar does, and perhaps that might be an issue later. It could also just be that Nasrin is better at pretending to be "normal."



Sahar's bedroom is a safe zone. The author even includes Sahar saying "I wish we could stay in this room forever," (7).

Sahar's clothes in visiting the Mehdis represents a lot about her personality and her place in the world. The author carefully lets Sahar describe what she is wearing. She has on one of Nasrin's favorite dresses, but it is covered by a manteau, a thin garment that covers bare skin like her arms. It shows how on the outside, she is traditional. But underneath the costume, she is a young woman who wants to wear attractive pink dresses. The Mehdi home is also like this. There are columns out front, making it look stately and traditional. Inside, there is every modern convenience, and they serve alcohol, which is forbidden.

Sahar brings a gift of an alstroemeria, a flower representing friendship and devotion. She mentions that it is already starting to wilt. This is strange symbolism. She has so much more than friendship with Nasrin. However, she most likely chooses a "safe" flower. She chooses one that represents friendship because that is a socially acceptable relationship.

There are a few times in this book that the author underscores a quote to make sure the reader is paying attention. The first one is by Sahar's father in Chapter 1, when he tells her that no one knows the future. The author has him say "Remember that, my love" (16). It seems that the author does not want the reader to miss out on certain quotes, so they are highlighted pretty strongly. In this case, it is Baba asking Sahar (or the reader) to remember it. This sentence springs out of the text and calls for attention. As discussed previously, the author wants to drive this point home because everything is about to change for the main character. Another repeated quote is by Ali. He says: "I know this isn't much of a life we have here, but we still have to live it" (30). The quote strikes home so hard for Sahar, that she has to repeat part of it to herself. It also serves for the author to repeat it so that the readers catch it. Although it is too early to know this, the quote becomes a way for Sahar to live. By the end of the book, she has lost Nasrin and is therefore going on with as much of a life that she can.

While Sahar is heartbroken and blindsided by the engagement, it is actually Nasrin who has to go through with it. Nasrin could have easily been the main character. The author chose Sahar to be the main character because she shares her emotions more visibly. Nasrin is a cypher. Sahar never knows what she is thinking, or what she is feeling. That is what makes the engagement surprise so powerful. There's some part of Sahar that is not sure if Nasrin really wants to be married to a man. Part of this could be attributed to her low self esteem (in fact the author has Sahar comment several times how she cannot understand what Nasrin sees in her). Part of this is that Nasrin never opens up to Sahar. Similarly, by having the book be told in first person, the reader also never knows what Nasrin is thinking.

Still, Nasrin is not good for Sahar. This is one of the author's most prominent themes: the things people want are not good for them. Certainly, their love is good, and they need each other. However, if anyone found out about their love, they could be killed. Sahar comes to resent her love, since it is the source of all of her problems.



The author explores the use of surrogates several times throughout the book. This first section shows the reader the first few. Since Sahar's mother passed away, Sahar has become a surrogate mother to her own household. Even though there is only her and her father left, she takes on all the responsibilities of the matriarch of the family. Another surrogate is Nasrin. In the absence of a boyfriend, Nasrin fulfills that role. And, of course, Sahar fulfills the boyfriend role for Nasrin.

Discussion Question 1

What foreshadowing does the author use in this first section of the book? What do you think will happen based on the information provided here?

Discussion Question 2

How much of a role does Baba, Sahar's father, play in her life? Does he want the same things for her that she wants?

Discussion Question 3

Nasrin did not warn Sahar that she was getting engaged. Why did she keep this a secret?

Vocabulary

roosari, haraam, joon, azizam, levity, pilgrimage, manteau, tandem, hamjensbazi, eshkal nadare, morose



Section 2: Chapters 4-7

Summary

Ali's party, detailed in Chapter 4, is like another world to Sahar. A beautiful woman named Parveen escorts her there. The music is so loud that people down the hall from Ali's apartment would be able to hear. There is a big, burly doorman. Men wear make-up and untraditional hairstyles. There is a man in a dress there. There is heavy drinking and people smoking opium. Ali is cavalier about everything, but Sahar is terrified that he will get caught. He says the authorities rarely show up, and when they do, he pays them off. The doorman is actually a police officer. Parveen used to be a man, which astonishes Sahar. Ali explains that the government will pay for gender reassignment surgery. "Because they are trying to fix us" (50). This is another quote where the author repeats it to make sure the reader gets it.

Once Ali tells Sahar that Parveen used to be a man, that is all she can think about. Parveen has a crush on Ali, but now that she is a woman, Ali does not return the feelings. Parveen gives Sahar her phone number so they can get to know each other in a more quiet place.

Sahar does not feel comfortable at the party and asks to leave. Ali feels a little disappointed, but he calls for a ride. A woman in her 30s and a teenaged girl younger than Sahar arrive in a Mercedes. Ali pays them with a Britney Spears CD. Even though he does not need the money, he buys and sells contraband like this. On the ride home, the younger girl makes eager small talk with Sahar while they listen to the music. At a stop light, a man catches the driver's eye. She rolls down the window, and he throws a balled up piece of paper into it. They call the phone number written on it and talk to him. The driver is a pimp, and the young girl is a prostitute. She quotes the man a price, but the man turns them down. The man had also been interested in Sahar, but the pimp had to say that Sahar did not belong to her. Sahar does not get their names, but calls them Mother and Daughter.

In Chapter 5, Sahar goes to the Medhis house to visit Nasrin. Soraya, the servant, lets her in. The only one home is Dariush, Nasrin's brother. Prior to the events of this story, he was a suitor for a beautiful, rich girl. Her father turned him down and he became suicidal. Now, he works as a mechanic, and sits around playing Cat Stevens songs on guitar. In a measure of sour grapes, he disdains marriage and all of the customs associated with it.

Mrs. Mehdi arrives with shopping bags, and is thrilled to see Sahar and Dariush having tea. At one point in the past, Sahar and Dariush were thought to be paired up between the two families. Then, Nasrin comes in, wearing a strapless red dress, and Sahar has a hard time looking nonchalant. She fears that Mrs. Mehdi caught her looking.



The Mehdis realize that Sahar has not been around much and are curious about this. Nasrin accuses Sahar of being jealous of the marriage and then walks off to her room. Mrs. Mehdi says that Nasrin has been upset lately, and asks Sahar if she would talk to her daughter.

Sahar goes to Nasrin's room. She is blasting music inside, which is code for privacy. She always plays the music loud so they can talk as much as they want and be intimate. As soon as Sahar is inside, Nasrin throws her up against the door, kissing and touching her. Sahar loses herself to it for a bit, but then has to tell Nasrin to stop because, as a fiancée, she is technically cheating.

Nasrin collapses on the bed, crying profusely. She does not want this wedding. She sums it up well by saying "I need him, but I want you" (66).

This is not enough for Sahar. She does not want to be Nasrin's back-up. Reza will get her all the time, and Sahar will have the leftovers. That is not what the way she wants to live. Sahar wishes it could be different. Her mind hatches a plan. They have three months until the wedding. Sahar says she will fix this. Nasrin looks scared but agrees to try anything.

In Chapter 6, Sahar texts Parveen and asks if they can meet at a fast food restaurant. They do, and Sahar is very nervous about the conversation. Parveen is upset that Ali told Sahar her secret, about how she used to be a man. She also keeps her hands under the table most of the time, because her hands are manly and give her away.

Sahar mentions how the pimp and prostitute gave her a ride home. Parveen is angry at this, because those two are not very discreet and could have been caught, bringing Sahar down with them. Sahar narrates that she has been keeping a small book of poetry with her, to give to the younger girl, if she ever runs into them again.

Sahar bends the truth and tells Parveen that she does not feel comfortable in her own skin. She wants to know how to have a sex change operation. Parveen gives her information about a meeting in three days.

In Chapter 7, Sahar goes to meet Nasrin as she gets out of school. Nasrin is surrounded by a group of girls. Sahar narrates that they hang on her like she is royalty. They talk about wedding plans. The girls also know how important Sahar is to Nasrin, so Sahar gets some second hand popularity from this.

Nasrin is wearing fashionable clothes, which attracts a police officer. He asks her why she is wearing clothes that reveal her elbows. The girls make up a story about how her clothes shrank in the wash, but the officer is not believing it. Another officer is with him. This one is much bigger and stronger. He grabs the girls and throws them into the back of his police car. He says something to the first officer, and Sahar assumes he is telling him that he is going to rape them. This kind of punishment would not be unexpected. Some passersby look at them sympathetically, some just want to watch the spectacle.



Sahar knows this larger officer. When she first saw him outside of the police car, she recognized him as the bouncer from Ali's party. She does not let on, though. She does not want to blow his cover. In the car, Nasrin is crying hysterically, and pleading for release. The officer, Farshad, turns off into an alley where no one can see them. He tells the girls to go into a particular restaurant, tell them who they are, and that Ali will be along shortly to come get them.

The girls go to Restaurant Javan. Sahar nervously introduces herself to the owner as Ali's cousin. He fawns over her. She recognizes some of the patrons from the party. She thinks that this must be a meeting place for all types of people who are outsiders in Iran. She also figures that Ali makes this place his headquarters for whatever illicit activities he is involved in.

Ali arrives. Sahar says he is like "Iran's gay messiah" (95). He is like a minor celebrity here. Everyone knows him. The wait staff are extremely attentive, and do not charge him. He mentions how the pimp and prostitute will be coming to pick them up, and how they work for him. Sahar is aghast at how he became this person. Nasrin slowly picks up on what is going on. She sees a woman with an Adam's apple, two elderly women who do not touch but are obviously a couple.

Ali scolds Nasrin for endangering his cousin. Sahar scolds them both. Nasrin for being careless, Ali for being involved in all of this.

Nasrin says how she is not like the others in this restaurant. Sahar is disappointed in her. The lifestyle they wish is against the law. Ali threatens her: "In here is my law. Don't forget it" (96).

The pimp and prostitute arrive, and Sahar tells Nasrin to let her do all the talking. She gives Daughter the book of poems, and she is thrilled. Even Mother is happy for her happiness. Daughter tells Sahar that her friend, meaning Nasrin, is very beautiful. She asks if she works. Nasrin does not realize what they are talking about. Mother says that no, Nasrin is not one of them. Realization dawns on Nasrin and Sahar has to try her hardest not to laugh.

Analysis

Continuing with the meaning of her name, this section of the book is an awakening for Sahar. The party is an eye-opening experience for her. There is a world outside the closeted domain. Even within a controlled place like Iran, there are pockets of resistance. In Sahar and Nasrin's teenage years, the only safe places are their bedrooms. However, they are learning that there are relatively safe areas elsewhere, if one knows where to look. True, they are never truly safe, but there is a counterculture that would embrace and accept them.

While the first few chapters establish that Sahar is the active one and Nasrin is the quiet one, these next few chapters invert this balance. Here, Nasrin is full of light and life, as girls swarm around her. Sahar is the one with the questionable connections. Even the



girls realize how their roles are reversed. Sahar narrates “At last I’m the one who knows what’s going on” (84). Usually, she does not know what others are feeling and has to grope her way in the dark to learn everything. And, when she is dragging Nasrin to safety, Nasrin jokingly shouts “Since when are you so mysterious? I’m supposed to be the exciting one!” (85). It could be that these opposite personalities are part of the reason they are attracted to each other. Usually Nasrin is the cypher and Sahar’s thoughts are loud and clear. Here, Nasrin is talking a lot about her wedding to her friends, and Sahar is keeping her new acquaintances secret.

By having Sahar be the narrator, the author does not delve into Nasrin’s feelings. The reader, and Sahar, have to guess. They have to assume that Nasrin’s love is at least equal to Sahar’s. Even Sahar brings up the point that Nasrin is finally being open about her feelings. “It means so much just to hear her say what I never expected her to” (66).

The author shows how the girls’ have to live up to their families’ excruciating standards as well. Nasrin is too into fashion; her one brother had a bout with suicidal behavior; the other brother wants to inherit the family business but he is too stupid. Sahar plays the perfect little female, getting good grades, taking care of the house since her mother’s death. However, her big secret keeps her from ever being what her father wants.

One of the author’s themes, made so much easier when the book is narrated, is that things left unsaid are the truth. Sahar is working under the assumption that Nasrin is devoted to her, even given the fact that she is being married off. Once Nasrin admits that none of this is her plan, and she wants it to just be the two of them, Sahar can let her guard down. She is still angry at the situation. She does not necessarily need to hear Nasrin’s admission of love, because she felt it. Additionally, she never gets full, honest answers from Nasrin. It is nice to finally hear it, though.

Similarly, public personas are false, while the real person lies beneath. In the public face of Iran, people disdain sexual behavior and homosexuality as a disease. In reality, there is a thriving counterculture of people with nontraditional gender roles. A man can be a police officer by day, and a bouncer at a gay man’s party at night. Men drive around in cars conducting themselves professionally, and then proposition prostitutes in the next car. It is socially acceptable for police officers to rape teenaged girls, but not for them to have consensual sex with people of the same gender. Women have to cover up immodest clothing, but everyone has the same desires in private.

Similarly, Restaurant Javan is just another restaurant to the average passerby. Inside, however, the clientele are a lot more colorful. The surface world is prim and proper and follows the rules, while on the inside, there is more freedom.

In the first section of the book, it is established that the Iranian culture is stronger than the individual. In this section, Farizan shows that there are cracks in the armor. Individuality is starting to show through. There is not yet enough support for the overthrow of the oppressive ideas against homosexuality, but the culture is not seen as uniform either. The culture is a sham, and people of all walks of life flaunt it. In fact, the author shows that both sides are complicit in hiding this subculture. The people who



have nontraditional genders hide because their lives and families are at stake. The people who are more traditional hide it because they do not want to admit that it exists. In this way, a place like Restaurant Javan can hide in plain sight.

Farizan uses the party to show Sahar, and the reader, the rest of the counterculture world, but she also does it to show who Ali really is. He has created a role for himself as a central character among people who have been kicked to the sidelines of the world. Dealing contraband is a way to make himself feel important. He wants to know everybody and be involved in everything. In the restaurant, he is not charged and declares his own law.

Once again, the author repeats a sentence so that the reader remembers it. In this case, it is the description Ali gives about how the government will pay for gender reassignment surgery. "Because they are trying to fix us" (50). The reason Sahar has to repeat this to herself is that she does not consider herself broken, and in need of fixing. It also helps underscore the next part of Sahar's journey, trying to get surgery to become a man.

In continuing the surrogate theme, Parveen becomes somewhat of a surrogate mother to Sahar. She is slightly older than Sahar, and more knowledgeable about the world. She supports Sahar in ways her real family never could. Sahar has another surrogate mother in Mrs. Mehdi. Mrs. Mehdi was her mother's best friend, and the two families grew up together. Mrs. Mehdi has always been around. However, with Nasrin being married off, their relationship starts to suffer.

The definition of the name Parveen is associated with the Pleides, a cluster of stars.

Discussion Question 1

What is Ali's role in society? How does his opinion of himself differ from Sahar's opinion of him?

Discussion Question 2

The girls were not aware of the sexually liberated subculture that Ali introduces the to up until now. Were they too sheltered? Was society good at covering it up? What will be the effect on the girls after being exposed to this subculture?

Discussion Question 3

Sahar does not tell Nasrin about Ali's party, or her plan to have an operation. Why does Sahar keep these secrets from Nasrin?

Vocabulary

undulate, feigned, mullah, warbling, pretension, assessing, naive, allude, omission, pending, nuptials, harrumph, catatonic, exasperating, coiffed, mutter, clientele, hyperventilating, furtive, caressing, laminated



Section 3: Chapters 8-11

Summary

In Chapter 8, Parveen brings Sahar to a support group for people who are in some stage of transitioning between genders. It is run by a woman named Goli, but Parveen and another young man are the stars of the group. They seem to have adjusted the most successfully. They have two things going for them: they can both pass as their new genders, and they have supportive families. Sahar is asked if she feels like she is in the wrong body. She stretches the truth a bit. She says she feels she was born in the wrong body, but it is not exactly true. She still wants to be a woman. The difference is that she wants to be with a woman as well.

In Chapter 9, Sahar accompanies Nasrin and her mother to a dress fitting. While Nasrin is changing, Mrs. Mehdi opens up a bit to Sahar. Mrs. Mehdi and Sahar's mother were best friends. "I needed my best friend there that day," Mrs. Mehdi says sadly. "It's important, deciding to spend your life with someone even if you think he isn't the perfect choice" (111). This statement stuns Sahar, and strikes close to home even if she does not take it the same way Mrs. Mehdi means it. Mrs. Mehdi wants to make sure that jealousy does not drive these two best friends apart. She thinks Sahar is jealous of Nasrin, and that is why they have been more distant. Of course, she does not realize just how much Reza is not the perfect choice.

Mrs. Mehdi follows this up with another quote "Sometimes the best things for us aren't necessarily the things we want" (114). They are talking about which wedding dress Nasrin should choose, but they are really talking about life decisions. Sahar has been suspecting that Mrs. Mehdi knows Sahar's secret. She might not know that her own daughter is a homosexual, but she might suspect Sahar.

In Chapter 10, Sahar sneaks into her father's room to try on his clothes while he is at work. She wants to see what she will look like as a man. Even in a man's clothes, she has curves that can not be hidden. He comes home early, and catches her. She makes up a story about how she needs to dress like a man for one of Nasrin's video projects. She does not like lying to her father. He believes her.

He informs her of a party the Mehdis are throwing and offers her the chance to go dress shopping. Then, he starts cooking dinner, even though he has not cooked in five years, when his wife was still alive. He makes a mistake, and Sahar yells at him for it. A lot more criticisms run out of her mouth before she can stop it. "Maman left one child behind, not two! You're supposed to take care of me. Why won't you take care of me?" (124). She feels guilty, but also relieved to be letting that out after so many years. Her father just takes the scolding.

Chapter 11 takes place at the Mehdis party, yet another one celebrating the impending marriage. Ali and Sahar have a conversation with Reza and Nasrin. They are trying to



get incriminating information about Reza. They want something that Nasrin can use to call off the wedding. Unfortunately, Reza is flawless. He is not actually a doctor, the way he was introduced to them earlier. He is an internist. He is a friend of one of Nasrin's brothers. He had got to know her over time, and genuinely cares for her. He still feels that he has to make Nasrin his wife, instead of it being her choice. However, Sahar does not blame him for this. All men in Iran are like this.

Nasrin flees the conversation, and Sahar has to go find her. Despite all his strengths, Nasrin admits she feels nothing for him. "He's a wonderful man. But I don't feel anything for him the way I do for you. And that terrifies me" (138).

Analysis

The support group is another example of the theme of the real world hiding beneath the establishment. The average person in Iran does not talk about things like this. However, here is a group of people who are being encouraged to show their feelings and talk about what they are thinking. Unfortunately, the connotation to all this is that they had surgery because society considered them broken and in need of being fixed. The culture still does not respect them as human beings, and still puts them through the ringer in order to have some semblance at acceptance.

Even within the support group, the author shows winners and losers. Parveen and another young man are the success stories. Not everyone there is adjusting quite so well. They are outcasts among the outcasts. Sahar is in this camp as well, although she does not realize it. Even among this group, she is not like them. She does not really want to be like them. The author is showing that even if Sahar goes through with this, there is no guarantee that she will be as accepted or happy as Parveen. This is foreshadowing a bad situation if Sahar goes through with it. She might be too stubborn or too desperate to heed the author's warnings, though.

The support group is eye-opening for Sahar, but not in the same way as Ali's party. At Ali's party, there was debauchery everywhere. At the support group, it is a half dozen adults who are working toward making positive life changes. However, she is naive. She does not figure out that Nasrin is attracted to her as a woman. She might not be attracted to her as a man. What Sahar really wants is a change in the society. If society simply accepted their relationship, then she would not have to worry about any of this.

Sahar is starting to understand that Nasrin is getting married out of her own safety. In the bridal shop, Sahar narrates: "This marriage is her playing it safe. The only time she's decided to do that" (110). This statement was written by the author to show how far Sahar has come in this. In the beginning, she felt betrayed by Nasrin's engagement. Now, she is starting to realize that Nasrin has to follow the rules or else risk being exposed as a homosexual.

Farizan never describes men trying to woo Sahar. Throughout the book, the author has Sahar talk about how undesirable she is. Usually, this is in reference to wondering why



someone as beautiful as Nasrin would be attracted to her. But there is a complete absence of suitors in her life. Another possibility could be that Sahar's family does not have money like the Mehdis. This lack of suitors is never elaborated upon by the author.

Sahar continues to be the surrogate mother in this section. She laments her role after yelling at her father for his bad cooking. She resents having to look after her household in the wake of her mother's death. She resents that her father is dependent on her. She resents having to be a 17-year-old mother to a grown man.

Nasrin holds her words close to her heart. She shows her emotions through her actions, not her words. The truth between the two girls is what is left unsaid, a major theme of the book. Therefore, it means a lot when Nasrin does profess her love for Sahar. These moments are rare, and too far between. Especially now, when she is getting married, and Sahar questions her loyalty, Sahar needs to hear these admissions more. This is why it is so reassuring to Sahar to hear Nasrin say she doesn't feel "for him the way I do for you" (138).

Discussion Question 1

Why does Sahar yell at her father about his cooking?

Discussion Question 2

What does Mrs. Mehdi suspect is going on in Sahar's mind?

Discussion Question 3

Not everyone at the support group is supportive of Sahar. Why not?

Vocabulary

genial, bodice, frothing, fawn (as a verb), unfazed, naive, elitist, saccharine, charade, roguish



Section 4: Chapters 12-15

Summary

Chapter 12 has Sahar return to Goli's support group. She is impatient and wants to make a change as soon as possible. She rushes into her time to speak and demands to know how to go about it because time is running out. She does not say what her true motivation is, to become a suitor for a woman she loves. Her pleas are met with a mix of emotions. Some of them who have managed to adjust better to the change are welcoming, and offer to get her black market hormones. Those who are having a hard time of it challenge her and suspect that she is not making the change for herself. One of the younger ones in particular, Maryam, is the primary voice of dissension.

Regardless, they paint the picture of what making a change would be. She would have to take psychiatric evaluations. The goal of this would be to be diagnosed as having a sickness that needs to be cured. She would need to apply through the government in order to get the money to have that surgery, with the diagnosis in hand. The surgery and hormone treatments would be very serious, and can be painful and difficult for people. There are often complications. And, since she is a minor, her father would have to sign off on it all. It all but destroys her dream.

Throughout this, she admits to herself that she really does not want the surgery. She just sees it as a means to an end. "But I never feel like my body is a trap. If anything, I feel like my love is a trap" (143).

In Chapter 13, Sahar meets up with Katayoun at Restaurant Javan, the safe place for Ali and the company he keeps. Katayoun is from Goli's support group. She has been supportive of her thus far. Katayoun has brought a bag of hormones for Sahar. The support group members all chipped in money to buy these illegal hormone treatments for her. There are complications with them, though. She can only take one injection a month, which would not provide any measurable difference in the month before Nasrin's wedding.

Katayoun does not like the clientele at the restaurant. Sahar does not understand. She knows Katayoun is different, since she used to be a man. But Katayoun judges the other patrons very harshly. She legitimately believes what the culture tells her, that homosexuality is a sin and a crime. She believes that in undergoing the change that she averted the condemnation from her government and her god. The homosexuals who refuse to change are sinners.

Sahar does not take this lightly. She slaps Katayoun for her insults. Katayoun then wants the hormones back. The two girls fight over them until Ali arrives and breaks them up. At first, Sahar will not admit what it was about. Katayoun tells her side of it, though. Ali gets mad. He says he will have Sahar arrested for theft if she does not turn them



over. She does, feeling betrayed by her cousin. Katayoun leaves. Ali tells Sahar that changing into a man will not help her problem because Nasrin is not attracted to men.

In Chapter 14, Parveen comes to Sahar's home to talk about the incident at the restaurant. Ali had filled her in. She wants Sahar to admit that she does not really want a sex change. She wants Sahar to see that there are ramifications for making a change, and that she might not feel comfortable in her own skin after. She also urges her to talk it over with Nasrin.

Nasrin arrives when they are together. She is a little jealous of Parveen, seeing another attractive woman spending time with Sahar. Sahar likes her to be jealous. Parveen excuses herself and leaves the two of them alone. Sahar asks Nasrin if she would leave Reza and marry her if she were a man. Nasrin shrugs, then traces Sahar's cheek with her finger before saying "You wouldn't look so bad with a beard" (169). This is all Sahar needs to hear to confirm that she is doing the right thing.

Sahar goes to the Mirdamad Surgical Centre in Chapter 15. Parveen meets her there. Parveen has arranged for Sahar to have a meeting with the doctor that performed her own operation. Parveen does not want Sahar to go through with this, but understands the motivation.

Inside, they take a number and sit down. While waiting to see Dr. Hosseini, Sahar sees that the intern in the room with him is Reza, Nasrin's fiance. She starts to panic. Fortunately, she has a chador to cover her face. When the two go in to see the doctor, Reza does not recognize her. Parveen asks Dr. Hosseini if Reza could wait outside, making up a lie about how he is making her friend feel uncomfortable. Reza apologizes profusely and leaves.

Dr. Hosseini gives Sahar a speech that he has probably said many times. He wants to make sure that Sahar really wants to go through with this. He explains how the surgery is going to be done; options of whether to seal her vagina; options of how to build a penis out of her own skin; photos of post-op chests; and what the hormone and medicine regimen will be like. Somewhere along this speech, Sahar faints. When she awakens, her chador is off and Reza is in the room and recognizes her.

Analysis

Sahar's quote in Chapter 12, about how her love feels like a trap, is a telling examination of three themes: People are always getting caught in traps; the things people want can hurt them; and culture is at war with the individual.

One of the recurring themes is that people are constantly in traps, sometimes of their own making. In this case, this quote shows how Sahar does not think she has been born into the wrong body. She also does not really think her love is bad. She just feels that society's condemnation of that love is the problem.



That dovetails into the next theme, which is how the things people want can be hurtful. Sahar wants Nasrin, but that love is forbidden. She could literally die from it.

Finally, the quote also works with the theme of the culture overriding the person. Her culture is telling her that she is sick. She has to prove that she is sick in order to get what she wants. However, she does not feel sick. It is not her feelings that are wrong, she recognizes, but the culture that tells people they are wrong.

The scene in the restaurant with Katayoun is used to show that Sahar still has a lot to learn about this new world of hers. Previously, she saw a firm divide between people who upheld the establishment, and people who lived outside of it. Here, she sees that there are people like Katayoun, who is outside of the norm but does not realize it. She does not think she has anything in common with the customers in the restaurant. The customers are people who celebrate their differences. Katayoun sees those differences as things to be ashamed of. In this situation, the culture has won out over the individual, in that Katayoun has internalized all of the teaching that tell her that her thoughts and feelings are shameful.

When Nasrin comes to see Sahar after the incident at the restaurant with Katayoun, it is the first time Sahar and Nasrin have seriously talked about the gender reassignment surgery. However, they are not really talking about it. It is still in hypotheticals. There is no timeline or details filled in. It is just two girls talking, like two girls would talk about their future. In this case, Sahar is the one who is being coy and evasive. Usually this is Nasrin's role in the relationship. Instead, Sahar is hiding the truth from her girlfriend. The truth in this situation is what goes unsaid.

When Parveen meets Sahar in front of the clinic, her tenderness surprises Sahar. When she gives Sahar a tearful hug, it feels like her mother. This plays into the surrogate theme that occurs throughout the book. Parveen is a little older than Sahar, and is showing her this world. If not a mother, perhaps she is more like an older sister.

Discussion Question 1

Why are some of Goli's support group members more adjusted to their gender reassignments than others?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Katayoun judge the people at Ali's restaurant so harshly?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Sahar feel good about making Nasrin jealous when Nasrin sees her talking to Parveen?

Vocabulary

unshed, harrumph, rebuttal, donning, unscathed, coo



Section 5: Chapters 16-20

Summary

In Chapter 16, Sahar is inconsolable. She is crying on her bed when her father enters her room. Her school called to find out why she was not in school. The teacher also tells her father that her grades have been slipping. Her father does not know what to do. Seeing that he cannot cheer her up, he asks if he should call Nasrin. This makes her laugh. Her father is very clueless.

Sahar asks her father if he knows what Nasrin does to cheer her up. Her father says, innocently, that she listens to her. That strikes a cord with Sahar. She really does listen. Despite her vanity and being the center of attention, she does listen. It makes her start to feel better. Her father also asks if she could teach him to cook, since he will need that when she goes off to university next year. She thinks this is a great idea.

As they sit down to dinner, someone buzzes the door. It is Ali, Mother, and Daughter, whose name is revealed as Nastaran. Sahar buzzes them in, and sees that Ali has been badly beaten. His lifestyle has caught up to him. She does not learn all of the details. She can infer that he made an enemy, and that this enemy knows all his secrets. This means, he can not be safe in his world any more, and will likely need to flee.

They try to tend to Ali's wounds as much as they can, but he needs to be seen. He does not want to go to a hospital, because they would ask too many questions. Sahar calls Nasrin and asks her to send Reza. He comes and does what he can for his wounds. Sahar apologizes for getting him involved. Reza says it is none of his business. The subtext here is that the sex change surgery is also none of his business.

In Chapter 17, Sahar explains to the readers what had caused Ali's fight. The big police officer, Farshad, wanted Parveen. In Ali's world, Farshad would have to get Ali's blessing. Ali would not allow it. So, Farshad and some of his fellow officers arrested him for selling contraband. They forced him to stand for a few days straight, and then beat him.

Ali plans on running away to Turkey. He is not safe in Iran. He stays with Sahar for a few weeks while he recovers. He wants her to come with him. He makes it an enticing proposition: in Turkey, they can have a much freer life. But Sahar cannot leave Nasrin. Ali argues that Nasrin is leaving Sahar. She has lost interest in her playmate and is growing up and getting married. This makes Sahar so angry she strikes him multiple times. Part of the reason she is mad is because she has had the same thoughts.

Nasrin invites her out to a sightseeing trip, reminiscent of one they took as kids. In a ski lift-like device, they are out in public, and yet they have privacy. They can kiss 'out in the open.' It does not come without tears. Sahar blames Nasrin for not telling her where Reza worked. Nasrin says she never thought Sahar would take it that far. The basic



problem they are fighting over is that they cannot be together. Reza can give her everything she wants, except Sahar.

In Chapter 18, Sahar's father takes her out of school to visit her mother's grave. He tries to have a moment, where he talks to her, but Sahar says she can not hear him. He knows that Ali offered her a trip to Turkey. He pleads with her not to go. He knows he is being selfish. She does not want him to be like a walking ghost around the house any more. He promises to be more attentive and try to rekindle their relationship.

When they return from their trip, Parveen is crying over Ali's pending departure. He is leaving that night. Mother and Daughter take him away. He offers her a chance once more, and Sahar says her home is here. She whispers to Ali that if he needs a companion, because he fears being alone, that he should take Nastaran with her. After he leaves, he texts her to look under her bed. She does and finds a bag full of money.

Chapter 19 takes place on the day of the wedding. Sahar accompanies Nasrin and Mrs. Mehdi to the bridal boutique. Hours of arguing between mother and daughter make it difficult for Sahar and two of Nasrin's friends from school. Sahar and Nasrin go into a booth together to get their dresses on. It is the last bit of intimacy they can share. There is little more than a kiss of regret, since they do not want to mess up Nasrin's make-up before the wedding.

Reza arrives in a rented car to bring Nasrin to the ceremony. Then, the rest of the guests, friends and family make their way there. Mrs. Mehdi takes Sahar by the hand and insists, a little forcefully, that they ride together. Nasrin's brother is driving, and the two of them share the back seat. They speak about the wedding, but do not come out and say what they are thinking. Sahar is beginning to realize that her suspicions were true – Mrs. Mehdi suspects.

Finally, after they arrive, and Mrs. Mehdi sends her son into the building, the two of them are alone. Sahar asks how long she has known. Mrs. Mehdi says she has known for a long time. "But she looks at you the way the way I wish someone had looked at me. Just once" (229).

Mrs. Mehdi admits that she and Mr. Mehdi have never been in love, but they have shared a life together and have wonderful children that they love. After a while, the longing for love just goes away. It gets easier. Mrs. Mehdi, who was best friends with Sahar's mother, laments how her best friend threw away her inheritance to marry for love. Life was a lot harder for her than it could have been because of this. She also notes that Nasrin is not as smart as Sahar, who wants to be a doctor. This is the only way to find a way to support her.

And finally, Mrs. Mehdi said that if she was able to figure out that there is something romantic between the two girls, then maybe someone else would see it, too. And that could lead to their deaths. While Sahar is still angry with Mrs. Mehdi for arranging this wedding, she at least realizes that the woman had reasons.



The final chapter, Chapter 20, moves forward six months until Sahar is studying at the university. She has a group of friends. One of them is Taraneh, a girl from her study group. She asks Sahar out, but Sahar hints that she is still heartbroken.

Ali and Nastaran are living together in Istanbul. He is a nightclub promoter and she keeps house for him. Parveen is still a close friend. She has a crush on someone from Goli's support group. Ali's money was used to invest in Sahar's father's business, and it is growing.

Reza drives to the campus and recruits Sahar. Nasrin has locked herself in the bedroom, crying for days. He cannot reach her. He needs Sahar to bring her out of her sadness.

Sahar goes with him to their huge home that was a wedding gift. Reza knocks on the bedroom door, but Nasrin does not reply. Sahar speaks and Nasrin opens immediately. They go inside. Nasrin curls up on her bed. She is sad and terrified because she is pregnant. She wants to spend her life with Sahar, and she cannot. She wants to have a family with Sahar, and she cannot. She wants to be an entertainer, and she cannot. All she can do is be with Reza, and be a wife and mother. Sahar promises that, while they can never go back to what they were, they will be in each other's lives forever.

Analysis

The novel's ending is both happy and sad. While the two young women in the story will not wind up together romantically, they do continue as close friends. Since the first chapter, this is probably the best realistic scenario. Considering the worst case scenario would be their public execution, the ending is perhaps happier than it seems.

The story answers, to a degree, the author's question of what is more powerful: society or the self. The answer is that there is a balance. Farizan shows that the societal structure forces these unusual people into roles. However, they never really stay in those roles. On the surface, Nasrin and Sahar can no longer be lovers. Inside, they will always be sexually attracted to other women. So, there is a balance between the society and the self. Ali can no longer be who he is in Iran, so he moves to Turkey. In Iran, Daughter Nastaran would be a child prostitute, in Turkey, she is Ali's little helper. The man is supposed to be independent and the head of the house in Iran, however Sahar's father is bumbling and ineffectual. He is sensitive instead of the hard man he is supposed to be. In all of these cases, the society and the self continue regardless of the other. Sahar and Nasrin did not break society by being in love. Ali did not change the world by being himself. The societal rules continue with or without these characters. These characters, instead, learn ways to cope and hide in plain sight.

The age of the two star-crossed lovers enters into the storyline as well. If these two were much older women, such as the ones that Sahar sees in Restaurant Javan, then their love would have a different meaning. They would either have had a long, healthy relationship, or be old enough and mature enough to handle relationships differently. By



making them in their late teens, almost adults but not quite, their relationship is almost mature but not quite. They are in love, but they have never loved another before, so they have nothing to compare it to. The author provides another suitor for Sahar at college to show the reader that there are other fish in the sea. At least for Sahar, there are other chances at love. Their love dies, but they do not. There is more to Sahar than her love for Nasrin. Therefore, her self is not destroyed, just this relationship. She can continue living her life and try other relationships.

Marriage is the anti-love in this book. While Sahar is free to find love elsewhere, and Ali can have any number of loveless sexual adventures, Nasrin is the only one who finds commitment, and it is confining. In fact, it is a trap. She is confined within the walls of a beautiful home, with a man who by all accounts is a pretty good catch, and she is going to have a child soon. Really, that is the dream for a lot of people. However, there is one thing missing: love. That makes it a nightmare for her. It is a trap, but it is a comfortable trap.

The reader is urged to believe that Nasrin will eventually settle in and enjoy her new role as mother and wife. Sahar believes this, anyway, and the reader knows only what Sahar knows. Therefore, the reader is under the impression that Nasrin will grow to be a supportive wife, if not in love. She has always wanted children, so Sahar (and therefore the reader) knows that she will be a devoted mother. Throughout the book, Sahar shares a bit of snark about Nasrin's devotion to fashion and expensive tastes. It is likely, then, that she will enjoy being a pampered wife to her doctor husband.

Money means different things to different people in the book. The author shows that some people rely on money, like Mrs. Mehdi. By extension, her daughter Nasrin also relies on money. Sahar and her family do not. Sahar's mother married for love and was cut off from the family wealth. As a result, things were harder for them growing up. However, a windfall in the last act means two different things for the two women. For Sahar, Ali leaves her a gift of a big bag of money. She uses it to help her father invest in his business and become more self-sufficient. Nasrin, marrying an intern and being gifted a house means that she never has to work a day in her life. However, she becomes trapped by that comfort of money. The author shows two different sides of money: It liberates Sahar so she can go to college and pursue a career and not need to take care of her father, and it traps Nasrin, closing all future doors.

Even in the end, Sahar knows that Nasrin is dangerous. Or, rather, their love. She says at one point: "We need to disconnect or she will be the death of me" (205). There is a real physical danger to loving someone of the same gender in Iran. It is more than a toxic relationship. It is literally against the law. Throughout the book, quotes like these are used for two purposes. One is to show that Sahar feels ambivalent about her relationship. She loves Nasrin, but she also knows that it can never be. The second purpose is to offer foreshadowing to the reader. The author lets the reader down easy, knowing from virtually the beginning of the book that this relationship will not last long.

Again it is the things left unsaid that are more honest. For example, consider this sample of Sahar talking to Nasrin: "Fine. It's fine." It isn't, but I don't see an alternative



(225). Sahar tells Nasrin that everything is fine, but it is not. They both know it. Nasrin is the one person who can read between the lines and hear what remains unsaid.

The wedding is the book's most emotional chapter, but not in ways that the readers would expect. Ever since the wedding is announced, Sahar dreads it. She sees it as an immovable object slowly approaching and she is going to crash right into it and lose everything. The author lets the reader feel Sahar's sense of dread as she panics and tries to get a gender reassignment surgery just to find any way to be together. When the wedding finally does happen, the description of it is distant and cold. The author, through Sahar, describes the ceremony in detail. This is most likely because the author knows that the average American reader (the author lives near Boston) might not be familiar with Islamic weddings. In between each step, Sahar narrates the pain that she is feeling. She keeps it all inside. The truth is inside, while the rest of the world looks on. Despite all her obsession over the wedding leading up to this, her final goodbye to Nasrin is short and simple. These two short paragraphs take place right after the mullah asks Nasrin if she accepts Reza as her husband: "Say something. End this. It's a lie. Everything about this is a lie. I nod, and let her go. She looks at the ground, and gives her answer (232)." What is going on inside is still hidden from the outside world. And it will always be. Sahar is finally giving up on the relationship. It is a very simple and quiet choice on the part of the author to do it this way. Indeed, it fits with the theme of the secret world being the real world. Sahar, with this passage, takes their relationship and puts it in the past instead of in the present.

The real shock, however, came just before, as Mrs. Mehdi and Sahar have the most honest heart-to-heart in the book. It begins a bit coy, as they are both trying to figure out the other. Very quickly, all the cards are on the table, and they have both said everything that they have been thinking and feeling. It is like a parlor scene in a mystery, where the villain finally reveals her motive. It is shocking that their motive is the same: love for Nasrin. Everything Mrs. Mehdi had done in railroading her daughter into marriage is to protect her from society.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Ali have to leave Iran?

Discussion Question 2

Why did Mrs. Mehdi manipulate her daughter's life and steer her into marriage?

Discussion Question 3

Is Sahar happy at the end of the book? Using context from the book, will she be a successful young adult?



Vocabulary

atrocious, usurp, ether, fawn, catatonic, rescinded, maudlin, despondent, cryptic, connoisseur, autobahn, perverse, commiserating



Characters

Sahar

Sahar is the narrator of the book. She is a 17-year-old lesbian living in Tehran, where her emotions could get her killed. She is deeply in love with her best friend, Nasrin. Sahar tries to be the practical one in the relationship. Even when she is plotting a far-fetched scheme (gender reassignment surgery) to stay together, she is the only one in the relationship who is at least trying to come up with a plan. Her practicality extends from other aspects in her life as well. She is a very good student who attends a school for gifted children. She wants to be a doctor. She also takes care of most of the day-to-day operations of her household. She describes herself as homely, and does not understand what Nasrin sees in her.

Nasrin

Nasrin is Sahar's best friend and lover. She is beautiful, in Sahar's eyes and in the eyes of men passing her on the street. Her vivacious energy complements Sahar's thoughtful quiet. She wants to become a Bollywood star, and is working on her skills by dancing and making videos. She is up on the latest fashion trends, which conflict with a lot of the dress codes for women in Iran. Although she is more talkative than Sahar, she does not talk about her feelings. She is more likely to act out her love for Sahar, by throwing her against the wall and kissing her passionately, than by telling Sahar that she loves her. In this way, people never know exactly what Nasrin is thinking. This might be a defense mechanism, since showing her love could get her executed.

Reza

Reza is Nasrin's groom-to-be. He is a friend of her brother. After coming around the house several times, he decided to ask her parents for her hand in marriage. They agreed. He is an internist at a local surgery center. While the girls try their best to find cracks in his armor, they find that he is the best possible scenario for her to marry: he is kind, intelligent, handsome, rich, and a man.

Farshad

Farshad is a police officer in town, but he is also part of Ali's inner circle. He plays both sides of the situation, since he is both an authority figure, and a member of the counterculture. By the end, he beats up Ali because Ali would not allow him to be with Parveen.



Parveen

Parveen functions as Sahar's big sister, guiding her by the hand through the underground world of people who are different. She has had gender reassignment surgery, and used to be a man. She is now a very attractive woman, who has a lot of support from her family. She is a success story, and Sahar looks up to her.

Ali

Ali is Sahar's cousin. When they were kids, she remembers him as a nerdy kid with glasses, dancing to Backstreet Boys in his room. She thought he was so cool back then. Now, he has re-invented himself as a center of the gay community in Tehran. He is a sort of black market master, who gets things for people who need it. He is revered in the counterculture, and wields a fair amount of power. To Sahar, though, he is still the goofy kid she grew up with, and she has trouble distancing her perception from what he has become.

Mrs. Mehdi

Mrs. Mehdi is Nasrin's mother. She is domineering and tries to steer Nasrin toward the life of which she would approve. It is revealed slowly that she knows more about her daughter's secrets than she lets on, and is in fact making these marriage arrangements in order to protect her. She is a realist, while Nasrin and Sahar are idealists.

Mother

Mother is the nickname given to a pimp that Ali knows. Ali trusts her to escort Sahar to a few spots during the course of the book. She is grim, and is not very personable. She is all business.

Daughter Nastaran

Daughter is the nickname that the teenage prostitute is given before Sahar learns that her name is Nastaran. She is a bubbly girl, younger than Sahar, who wants very much to have a normal life. She seeks conversation with Sahar, who is close enough in age to be a peer, and she loves American pop music.

Baba

Baba is Sahar's father. Since the death of his wife, he has been in a profound depression. Sahar looks at him with sympathy since he is detached from his world. He is fairly incompetent around the house, and needs her help with everything. He makes

furniture, but his work started to suffer when he became a widower. He means well in everything he does, but he does not know what is really going on in Sahar's life.



Symbols and Symbolism

The picture of the Ayatollah

The picture of the Ayatollah symbolizes the ever-watching eye of the government. Like in 1984, the government is always watching. Sahar imagines that the Ayatollah is watching her and Nasrin while they kiss. His eyes are silently judging her.

The Wedding Dress

Nasrin and Mrs. Mehdi argue about which wedding dress to buy just like most mother-daughter pairs. In this book, the wedding dress takes on a deeper significance. They are not just arguing about a dress; they are arguing about Nasrin's way of life. Mrs. Mehdi does not approve and Nasrin does not care.

Pulling on Hair

When Nasrin pulls on Sahar's hair, it symbolizes ownership. Nasrin lovingly pulls on Sahar's hair from time to time. There is not any real pain involved. The first time was when they were both 6 years old. That, Sahar tells the reader, is when she fell in love with Nasrin. It becomes an endearing move. It is like Nasrin is pulling on her heartstring, or her leash. It shows that Sahar belongs to Nasrin.

The Gift of Flowers

Sahar brings a gift of flowers to the Mehdis' house in the second chapter. The flower she chooses is alstroemeria, which represents friendship and devotion. Sahar notes in her narration that they are already starting to wilt. Their friendship is suffering.

Restaurant Javan

Restaurant Javan represents a safe place for people on the fringe of Iranian culture. There are no questions asked, and everyone is welcome. This is probably not the only place like this in the country, but Javan has come to represent all safe spaces.

Pop culture

Pop culture represents American influences on the younger people in the book. Whether it is the Britney Spears CD Ali gives Nastaran, or Nasrin's brother's Cat Stevens songs he plays on guitar, western influences have found their way to the under-30 crowd. George Michael, Backstreet Boys, and a few other American performers



make their way into the book. The young people crave these outside influences, while the adults disdain them.

The Mehdi's house

The Mehdi's house symbolizes Iranian families on the brink of two cultures. It has stately columns on the outside, the way houses have been for generations. Inside, it has a swimming pool and every modern convenience. It also represents how so many people in Iran appear traditional on the outside, but are more open-minded on the inside.

Nasrin's marital home

The house that Nasrin and Reza move into after marriage is a gift from the Mehdis', and it represents complacency. It is a large, unmoving structure. It will be there for decades. Nasrin will be stuck in that domestic setting for the rest of her life. When Sahar's mother did not marry the man that Sahar's grandparents had chosen for her, she found herself cut off from her family's money. Nasrin goes along with the Mehdis' plan to marry Reza, so she is gifted with a beautiful house to live in, and the financial security that comes with it.

Farshad

Farshad represents authority. As a police officer, and as a bouncer, he lays down the law that other people tell him to do. However, as the reader learns, he makes his own laws. It is his choice to ignore his job and save Nasrin and Sahar. It is his choice to ignore Ali's laws and fight him. Essentially, authority does not need to follow any rules. People in authority do whatever they want to do and take whatever they want to take.

Marriage

Marriage symbolizes being together forever, but it does not symbolize love. Marriage is a choice, and the people getting married do not necessarily make that choice. The author provides no doubt in the reader that Sahar and Nasrin would marry each other if they were able. However, in the absence of that choice, they each have to find the best case scenario. Sahar's mother married for love, and it cost her money and the love of her family. Mrs. Mehdi guided Nasrin's wedding to protect her daughter.



Settings

Iran

Iran is a nation steeped in religion and culture, and those things guide its politics and laws. The book is spent in the middle and upper class of Tehran, for the most part. People live comfortably but there is always the threat of danger if someone does not follow the rules. In the very beginning of the book, Farizan has a scene in which Sahar watches a video of two gay men being publicly executed. All the expensive parties and western pop culture can not erase that image from her mind.

Sahar's and Nasrin's bedrooms

The bedrooms, both Sahar's and Nasrin's, are the only places that the girls can be themselves. They are safe places. With the music turned up, they can say what they want to say and be as intimate as they wish.

Restaurant Javan

There is no decoration that sets Restaurant Javan apart as different from any other restaurant, and yet it is patronized by the outsiders. Inside, anyone can see that the place caters to different people. It is consistent with the theme that the surface world hides a secret world inside.

Ali's party

Ali's party in his home is the opening of a new world for Sahar. She has only seen Ali and Nasrin. These are the only homosexuals she knows. As far as she can tell, everyone else in Iran follows the rules. Yet, here there are transvestites and drug users. It is eye-opening for her, and it overwhelms her.

Goli's support group

Goli's support group has a roundtable of people who have tried gender reassignment surgery. Some have been successful. Some have not. It is an important place for Sahar to see all sides of the issue.



Themes and Motifs

The Things People Want Are Sometimes Bad For Them

People are punished for wanting things and not adhering to the status quo. The author shows throughout the book that it is dangerous to want things. However, the author is not cautioning the reader against wanting things. Nor is she punishing her characters. She is simply showing the truth, or at least what the truth is for two young lesbians in Iran.

Nasrin is created in the mold of the dark lady icon. This is a woman who is beautiful and mysterious, and the mystery only makes her more alluring. She could be like a detective's femme fatale in a noir movie. Either because the book is told from Sahar's point of view, or because she naturally withholds her emotions, the reader rarely knows what she is thinking, which makes her (at least potentially) dangerous. Sahar feels she is emotionally dangerous because Nasrin hardly ever expresses her love. She is physically dangerous as well, since it's this love that can get them both killed.

The girls want to be together, but that would cause unknown horrors. They could be killed. Their families dishonored, stripped of their wealth, or kicked out of the country. By demonstrating what happens to homosexuals in this country, Farizan shows that what the girls want is dangerous. There is an ever-present threat of them getting found out.

"Sometimes the best things for us aren't necessarily the things we want" (114). Mrs. Mehdi says this in the dress shop. She knows this truth more than anything. Since she holds her words close to her chest, like her daughter, Sahar is never sure how much she knows. She could have been talking about her own marriage and Sahar's mother's marriage. Sahar's mother married for love, and lost the family money and support because of it. Mrs. Mehdi followed tradition and married who her parents required her to. She knows it was a sacrifice, but that is simply what women are supposed to do. Once Sahar realizes that Mrs. Mehdi knows the truth about Sahar and Nasrin, that line takes on deeper meaning. Mrs. Mehdi is marrying Nasrin off so that she will not be tempted by Sahar. Mrs. Mehdi sees this as saving her daughter's life. By revealing what Mrs. Mehdi knows late in the book, the author has the reader feeling the same doubt that Sahar feels throughout the book. With the realization toward the end - Sahar, and by extension, the reader - learn that Mrs. Mehdi knows a lot about the sacrifices that have to be made in order to stay alive and well.

There is a Hidden World, Which is the True World

While Farizan shows the dominant society and its mores, she also shows the counterculture, existing right beneath the nose of the normal society. Even though these



two worlds would not be expected to co-exist, Farizan demonstrates that they do. Additionally, the counterculture is the true world, not the surface world.

Using female's clothing as a metaphor, Farizan shows how women can be punished for being immodest. However, clothing is just covering, a metaphor for the surface world. The real world underneath is what people really care about. When Nasrin gets picked up by police for immodest clothing, one officer hints that he is going to rape her. The other officer is fine with that. In fact, it is expected. Punishing a woman for displaying her sexuality by raping her is more than just a double standard, it is proof that the rules only apply to some people. The rules belong to the surface world, and people of power move in the hidden world. The fact that this officer turns out to be Farshad explains this even further. He lets Nasrin and Sahar go and calls Ali to help them. Farshad plays in both worlds. On the surface world, he is a police officer, whose job it is to enforce the rules; in the hidden world, he is a bouncer for a party held by a gay man, and he lusts after a transgendered woman. In both situations, he can use his personal power, his strength, to assert his own rules.

While homosexuality is looked down upon, and can even get one killed in the novel, there are no shortage of homosexual characters in this story. Some of them really do believe they are sick. People like Katayoun believe that homosexuality is a sickness, and should be cured. Some of them believe it is natural, such as Sahar and Nasrin. In fact, the only thing they think is wrong is society.

Iranian society looks down on sexuality in general. However, while Sahar is being driven home by Mother and Daughter the first time, a man propositions them at a traffic light. There are rules, both legal and moral, against prostitution and using prostitutes, but it is a thriving business nonetheless.

Looking even deeper, the words unsaid are sometimes truer than the words that are spoken. Nasrin and Sahar share several scenes together. Their dialogue reveals some depth, but not all the time. Nasrin does not wear her heart on her sleeve. It is difficult to read her sometimes. Even Sahar has to guess at what she is truly feeling because she does not come out and say it. Sometimes, the author reveals the deepest feelings in Sahar's narration. These are things she does not say for various reasons. However, these words that she keeps inside are truer and closer to herself than anything that comes out of her mouth.

Surrogates Fill Holes in the Characters' Lives

Families function in different ways, and when they are not working, people have to seek out replacements to make their families feel whole. There are holes in the characters' lives, and they seek out people to fill those holes, or those roles, in their lives.

Sahar and Nasrin are surrogate boyfriends for each other. According to society, the girls should have male suitors. Instead, they find that role fulfilled by each other. They do not



want boyfriends or husbands. They want each other instead. Any emotional companionship that is needed can be found there instead.

Sahar has taken on a matriarchal role in her home since the death of her mother. By cooking, cleaning, and prodding her father to do what he needs to do, she steps in to the parenting role that is missing in that house. She is already a good student and, up until the events in this book, keeps out of trouble. She did not need a mother to be responsible for her.

Sahar does need a mother for compassion, however. This is something she tries to get from Mrs. Mehdi. As her best friend's (girlfriend's) mother, who was her own mother's best friend, she is a perfect choice to be a surrogate mother. However, the connection, she learns, is just not there. She is not going to get comfort and compassion from the woman. She does get honest answers by the end of the book, as a mother might give to an adult child.

Sahar is an only child, but Ali and Parveen serve as big brother and big sister to her. Especially as guides to this new world of counterculture, they are surrogates for siblings who would look out for her and show her the path that they took.

Nastaran's situation, as a teenaged prostitute, is upsetting. She clings to anyone who will be nice to her. In those examples, Sahar and Ali are like big brother and sister to her, as well. Sahar is a little older, and wants to look out for her in ways that Mother the pimp does not. Ali takes her off Mother's hands and uses her as an assistant when he flees Iran.

There Are Many Traps in our Lives, and Some of Them We Create Ourselves

Anyone reading the summary on the book's jacket will be able to tell that Sahar and Nasrin are trapped in their own culture, but the theme of being trapped pervades every character's lives in unexpected ways. Clearly, Sahar and Nasrin feel threatened by their culture, their laws, and their religion. They can not be who they really are without risks. There are more subtle traps as well.

Sahar's mother died years before the events in this book. In the interim, Sahar has had to become the mother in the household. She is trapped in that surrogate role, which she resents. It is like she is married at 17.

Marriage is a trap in traditional Iranian culture. Throughout the book, the girls dread the concept of marriage as an end to all they know. They see it as a death sentence for their relationship. It will end everything they know, and to a teenager, they feel it is the death of themselves, or at least their true selves. In actuality, Nasrin does become trapped. She does marry Reza and becomes pregnant, thus sealing her fate. However, the author could have made Reza a horrible man. Instead, she makes him a wealthy,



handsome, friendly man who cares about Nasrin, their families, and Sahar. He is just about the best option she could have in a rigidly patriarchal society.

The stories of the two mothers reveal how money is a trap. Sahar's mother marries for love, and is cut off from her family's money. Mrs. Mehdi follows her family's orders and marries who they want her to and lives comfortably. She chose her trap, and it has led to a comfortable, if slightly cold, life. And it is that reason that she chose a comfortable trap for her daughter.

Sahar believes her love is a trap. If only they could only be best friends, and not romantically and sexually involved. However, she is not like people in the transgender support group. They, along with the government, thinks that they are trapped in the wrong bodies. The government will even give people money to have an operation to change. It takes a while for Sahar to admit that she is not like them, and only sees this as a means to an end. Like she says in Chapter 12: "But I never feel like my body is a trap. If anything, I feel like my love is a trap" (143).

Is Culture More Powerful Than the self?

The author constructs a story where a homosexual person is a victim, which is a western idea. From an outside perspective, the culture in Iran is very restrictive; and indeed Farizan is an outsider. As a resident of Boston, of Iranian descent, she likely feels she has a kindred spirit in Sahar. As an American outsider, she would be more likely to be sympathetic to Sahar. If this story was written from the other point of view, then Sahar would be nothing but a criminal.

Thus, there are two forces at work: a lattice of government and religions rules, and a young woman being held down by those rules. This is the main struggle throughout the book.

Sometimes, the culture wins. The girls are afraid of being discovered. Nasrin's wedding forever alters their relationship. Nasrin becoming a young, pregnant bride kills her dream of being a Bollywood actress. Although Sahar is the main character, and the reader sees her suffer, it appears that Nasrin really loses more. Both of them lost their love. Nasrin also lost her freedom. Sahar's mother being dead, and her father being distant, is in a better situation, because she does not have anyone telling her what to do. Sahar goes on to university and gets asked out by another woman. She still has options.

However, there are small ways in which the self wins. Although there is a threat of death held over their heads the entire book, no one suffers this fate. It is a sad fact that just surviving as a homosexual in Iran is a success story. Ali gets attacked not because of his homosexuality, but because of an interpersonal situation. He winds up fleeing and appears to be living an interesting life in another country (although, Ali tends not to be very truthful so it is hard to tell what his true status is.) Ali takes Nastaran with him, rescuing her from a trapped life.



While Nasrin's marriage ended the romantic relationship with Sahar, the author indicates that they will remain close friends. This is an important win. Throughout the book, Sahar is upset that the wedding will drive them apart, because they will not be able to hide her feelings around each other, and the temptation to have sex would be too great. If discovered, it would be devastating. Despite all these fears, it seems that Sahar is able to transition their relationship to a different kind of intimacy. She is still not ready to date when she gets to college, but the fact that the author includes a scene of her being asked out opens up the door to that happening soon.

In the end, the culture wins, because Sahar and Nasrin can no longer be together. Farizan is saying that the culture won the battle, but the individual will win the war. She writes this book to inspire people to continue the fight against the oppression.

Styles

Point of View

The book is told in first person narration. Everything is told from Sahar's point of view. This is important because of how much of the book has to do with secrets. Sahar only knows what she can see or hear. She does not even know what her girlfriend is thinking. She does not know that Nasrin is getting married until she sees the ring on her finger, for instance. Also, Sahar is careful with the information that she shares with others. The author could have told the book from Nasrin's point of view but chose not to. Nasrin could make a compelling narrator since her life changes far more during the course of the book than Sahar's. Nasrin begins with relative freedom, and ends in a loveless marriage and a baby on the way. Sahar begins with relative freedom, and ends with relative freedom. Farizan instead makes Sahar the narrator because she actually tries to make a change. It is Sahar's choice to try for the operation. It is Sahar who explores the counterculture world of people in Ali's circle. A protagonist has to try to fight for something, even if she fails. Sahar makes attempts even though she fails.

Language and Meaning

The vocabulary that Farizan uses is typical of a teenager who is hoping to go to medical school. Sahar, narrating the book, speaks very properly until she gets flustered with emotion. Then, the sentence structure stops being perfect. She begins speaking in fragments and using occasional vulgarity or insults. The language is also peppered with Arabic words for items. There is always a word or phrase near the Arabic words to explain their meaning to non-Arabic readers. For example, when Sahar talks about her chador, she uses language that explains how it is a head scarf. These language choices help place readers into the story better, allowing them glimpses of daily life in Iran.

Structure

The structure of the book is straightforward and chronological. Often, a chapter takes place within a day, or even within hours, of the previous chapter. If the time spent between chapters is relevant, the author makes a note early in the chapter to let the reader know how much time has gone by, and if anything significant happened during that time. The only main jump in chronology is at the end, when the author checks in on Sahar after she has started college. She does this to offer the reader a glimpse of the future: Sahar is getting on with her life without being romantically entangled with Nasrin, although the wounds from the relationship are still raw. Nasrin has now become pregnant. They will carry on as friends, even though they cannot be lovers.



Quotes

I wanted to stop loving Nasrin, but how do you stop doing something you know you are supposed to do?"

-- Sahar, in narration (chapter 1)

Importance: The word choice is interesting in this quote. In Tehran, Sahar is not supposed to love another girl. However, she feels that loving Nasrin is something she is supposed to do. It feels natural to her.

I know this isn't much of a life we have here, but we still have to live it.

-- Ali (chapter 3)

Importance: Ali can see how depressed Sahar is about losing Nasrin to an arranged marriage. Ali is homosexual, and can tell that his cousin is, too. So, he is trying to cheer up Sahar. It seems that he has been through the same situation as her, and had to make this own decision. He probably had to teach this lesson to himself, and now he is teaching it to her so she does not have to go through the pain of learning it herself.

I need him, but I want you.

-- Nasrin (chapter 5)

Importance: Nasrin says this to Sahar two weeks after her engagement party. She sees her engagement as a necessary evil. A job, almost. Something to do to survive. And her relationship with Sahar will continue, in her mind.

What I really mean and can't say is that when our mouths are crashing together, I feel like Allah is looking down on a cheating sinner who is in way over her head.

-- Sahar (chapter 7)

Importance: Sahar still feels guilt. She does not feel guilt over her feelings for Nasrin. She feels guilt because the engagement makes her a mistress.

In here is my law. Don't forget it.

-- Ali (chapter 7)

Importance: Ali says this to the girls in Restaurant Javan. This is his sanctuary, where all of his people are welcome. This quote shows just how powerful Sahar's cousin has become. With her, he is fun-loving, goofy Ali. But here, she sees just how revered and respected and perhaps feared he is.

Do I feel like I was born in the wrong body? I know how I feel when Nasrin walks in a room. I feel strong and weak. I feel proud and ashamed. I feel love for her and hate for myself. I want to be clean of my feelings for her because they are wrong. Everyone knows that.

-- Sahar in narration (chapter 8)



Importance: Sahar narrates this quote during a support group meeting for people who are transitioning from one gender to another. There is a difference between transgender and homosexual. She is intentionally blurring the lines in hopes to get what she wants, which is a married life with Nasrin.

This marriage is her playing it safe. The only time she's decided to do that.
-- Sahar in narration (chapter 9)

Importance: This is Sahar narrating while in the shop looking at dresses with Nasrin. It is important to note that Sahar is saying this. When the engagement first happened, she felt crushed and blindsided and betrayed. Now, she understands that Nasrin is just doing what she needs to do to survive. This quote shows just how far she has come toward acceptance.

I needed my best friend there that day," Mrs. Mehdi says sadly. "It's important, deciding to spend your life with someone even if you think he isn't the perfect choice."
-- Mrs. Mehdi (chapter 9)

Importance: Mrs. Mehdi drops a few bombshells during the course of this book. This is one of them. She admits that her husband is not the love of her life, and never was. She does not say that there was ever someone else, however. When she says that she needed her best friend, it shows just how painful her marriage was for her. She is modeling what is acceptable behavior for a woman in Iran. She is supposed to be the dutiful wife, who marries for status and security. Romantic love is a fantasy. She is to hide her true feelings.

Sometimes the best things for us aren't necessarily the things we want."
-- Mrs. Mehdi (chapter 9)

Importance: Throughout the scene in the bridal shop, Sahar has been suspecting that Mrs. Mehdi has discovered her secret. Sentences like this, which she knows are loaded with things unsaid, seem to confirm Sahar's worries. On the surface, the quote is about a dress. The connotation is that it is about choosing your life partner.

But I never feel like my body is a trap. If anything, I feel like my love is a trap.
-- Sahar in narration (chapter 12)

Importance: Sahar's master plan is to have gender reassignment surgery. To do this, she has to convince doctors and herself that her body is the problem. Really, she is comfortable. She wants to be a woman who loves another woman. The problem is society.

I suppose the heart always betrays us one way or another.
-- Sahar in narration (chapter 15)

Importance: This quote is about Sahar's mother's death, when her heart gave out. She



segues this into commentary about how her heart yearns for Nasrin even though it is getting her into trouble.

For all of her self-centered activities and vanity, when I speak Nasrin listens. She lets me talk when society and the rest of the world won't. She's heard my inner voice, and she still loves me.

-- Sahar in narration (chapter 16)

Importance: This is said after Sahar's father blunderingly wants Sahar to go to her best friend to cheer her up, not knowing that seeing her is painful right now. But, his statement has a ring of truth to it that he did not realize. The thing that keeps Sahar and Nasrin together, despite their differences, is that they listen to each other.