



Silenced Whispers

Afarin Ordubadi Bellisario

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Iran's turn-of-the-century transformations spur a young couple to risk their lives in the gripping historical novel Silenced Whispers.

In Afarin Ordubadi Bellisario's intriguing historical novel *Silenced Whispers*, a teenager comes of age in Iran, joining political reformers and defying convention to find love.

In the early twentieth century, Gohar is a fourteen-year-old adoptee who knows little about her origins. She is caught exchanging letters with a boy from another faith. Obligated to preserve her family's reputation and secure her future, she accepts an arranged marriage to an older, widowed member of parliament.

Just as Gohar is catapulted into the responsibilities of womanhood, so, too, is her country caught up in a civil war that includes Russian and English occupation. Gohar sets out for Tehran, where she's captivated by Aslan, a blue-eyed Russian who sympathizes with Iranian nationalists. She is curious about politics, is familiar with newspapers, takes chaperoned music lessons, and yearns for more than a domestic existence.

The novel is episodic and often focuses on family scenes to emphasize Gohar's inner tension. Persian traditions wend into her everyday encounters, resulting in an immersive atmosphere. The choreographed social order is highlighted: Women's circles are segregated from men's, and women of Gohar's standing need to be escorted from place to place.

As a heroine, Gohar subverts expectations, though she exercises caution in doing so. She is exhilarated to take walks by herself but also aware that doing so could involve the police. She joins a women's society to aid the poor, serving as its courier while wearing a servant's chador. In conversations with others, she develops a sense of the volatile cultural changes she's living through: Some support the shah, and some oppose him; there are economic problems and community strife to deal with, too. Her outrage grows in time with her confidence as she witnesses injustices—and sometimes intervenes.

The prose is intimate and lively, with tension achieved via the fact that Gohar keeps her activities secret from her husband. Her entanglement with Aslan results in anticipation, too: She has to decide how far she'll venture to be his ally. When an invasion forces a choice between joining him and her sense of duty, the obstacles before her redouble. With so much to handle, the novel rushes through some periods in time, though, including through World War I; connections ebb and wane. Still, the story moves toward a rewarding, twisting conclusion that reinforces the idea that people aren't bound by their beginnings.

Iran's turn-of-the-century transformations spur a young couple to risk their lives in the gripping historical novel *Silenced Whispers*, about choosing love even amid uncertainty.

KAREN RIGBY (October 1, 2024)

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