

Tremors: New Fiction by Iranian American Writers

Anita Amirrezvani and Persis Karim, eds.

Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2013. 338 pages.

This collection of short stories and novel excerpts is the first of its kind to appear in English. Its twenty-seven stories are intended for the general public interested in exploring new horizons in fiction, although the fact that the book is published by a university press might limit public access.

Tremors is a collection of fiction revolving around the ideas of migration, exile, hybrid identities, and coming to terms with these. The book is divided into three sections, each of which, according to the editors, revolves around a central theme. The stories in the first section, “American Homeland,” involve fictional accounts of the challenges of “immigration and assimilation in the United States” (p. xii). This, in fact, is not always the case. In Dena Afrasiabi’s “String,” for example, the female narrator, Forugh, is at home in the United States, for the only challenges facing her are the memory of her dead mother and the shadow of her sorrow-stricken Iranian father lurking in the background. Similarly, in Salar Abdoh’s “Fixer Karim,” it is the immigrant Heavy K who continues to ease past assimilation barriers in the United States, to the astonishment of the well-established Iranian-American narrator, so much so that the story ends with Heavy K appearing as the lead singer in a country band. In a number of stories, (e.g., Taha Ebrahimi’s “Family Trouble” or J. Kevin Shushtari’s “The Sweet Dry Fruit of the Lotus Tree”), in fact, the narrator’s family is well established and feels at home, sometimes with an American parent, until ghosts or guests from Iran upset the peace.

The second section, “Iran, Land of Resilience,” has been so named because the setting of these stories is Iran, although not all of them entertain such a view about the land. One example is the excerpt from Zohreh Ghahremani’s *Sky of Red Poppies*, in which the dark days of oppression under the

Shah and his feared secret police (SAVAK) are relayed from the viewpoint of an urban girl with a royalist father. Similarly, Farnoosh Moshiri's "White Torture" paints a gloomy picture of the savage suppression of dissent under the Islamic Republic. In both stories, history and epochal change do little to lift the country out of its glum state of oppression. Likewise, the excerpt from Anita Amirrezvani's *Equal of the Sun* ("A New Assignment") gives an intriguing account of court politics in pre-modern Iran, where a man decides to undergo surgical castration in an attempt to further his career in royal employ as a eunuch. Though set in Iran, the story does not valorize the country as the section's title suggests.

The third section, "OtherLand," is said to include stories that go beyond the preoccupation with reconciling the two sides of the Iranian-American equation and into the "larger global context" (p. xii). Again, however, this section presents stories that have little to do with this stated context beyond charting the Iranian-American narrator's itinerary of travels abroad before returning to the United States. Amy Motlagh's "The Ginkgo Trees" is one such example.

Despite these structural flaws, however, this book is certainly a contribution to Islamic studies in general and Iranian studies in particular, since it opens up space for those interested in Islam or Iran who may not be conversant with Persian to participate. Compared to similar collections in translation, this book provides unmediated access to the world of Iran, Iranians, Islamic Iran, and Iranian-Americans. But this unmediated access poses a challenge: It dictates a certain reading of Iran, one effected both by editorial choices and the individual authors' representations. The book's editorial division into the three above-mentioned sections suggests geopolitically minded separate spaces of experience, implying a rift that, much like the hyphen in Iranian-American, overwrites literature as the account of human experience. It is this stance that causes the editors to appraise Ari Siletz's "The Ascension (Me'raj)," for example, as a mere "imaginative exploration of the role of superstition and faith in an earlier period in Iran" (p. xii), overlooking the story's rich reservoir of magical realism drawing on fantastical elements in Iran's ancient Perso-Islamic culture.

A similar binaristic view (of tradition versus modernity, faith versus progress, Iranian versus American, and so on) lies at the foundation of some of the authorial representations in this collection, as evidenced by the editors' choice to include them alongside other more nuanced pieces. These are stories that, in their representation of Iran, employ little imagination beyond drawing on manufactured stereotypes and stock Orientalist images of sweetened tea, saffron soaked dishes, flowing black hair, big dark eyes, or the smell of jasmine and dust. Isolated examples of this sort abound in the stories in this cat-

egory: “In Iran, extended family are expected to live with each other forever, sometimes building houses around a common courtyard” (p. 72).

Two stories in particular re-enact such stereotypical narratives from beginning to end: the excerpts from *Unveiled* (untitled) and *Together Tea* (“Tehran Party”). The former draws on a myriad of synchronic images (*gesmat*, *jinn*, *mehmon khooneh*, *andaroon*, *joob*, Avenue Pahlavi, Foreign City Man, Avenue of the Tulips, *birooni*, *najes*, *faranghi*, *hammad*, *dallak*, *zoolbiah bamieh*), superimposing them on the Tehran of the mid-1900s and fielding them, as the forces of tradition, against the lone narrator-figure named after the renowned poet of the same period: Forough Farrokhzad. The latter paints an exaggerated picture of Iran in the early 1980s revolving around the infamous Revolutionary Guards’ raids of private parties. The author uses one such party as the setting of the story, which soon degenerates into a mocking exaggeration of the *tarof* (the ceremonial politeness characterized by ornate language in Persian) as well as a mockery of the Persian accent in English. The participants in the party, supposedly upscale Tehranis, come across as naïve (yet secular) personalities who hold black-and-white views of the world (“the chaos of Iran” versus “the orderly world of England,” p. 221). One such character, Leila, a progressive English teacher, gives an English book as a present to the adolescent narrator, exclaiming, in the Tehran of the 1980s, “For your future, Mina Joon ... It will be the language of the world one day” (p. 226).

Such instances aside, the collection still merits attention as a significant contribution to the field of Iranian and Islamic studies, not only because of its status as the first of its kind in English, but also for bringing Iranian fiction to the global stage.

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