



CENSORING AN IRANIAN LOVE STORY

CENSORING AN IRANIAN LOVE STORY (New York, 2009), the first novel published in English by noted modernist writer Shahriar Mandanipour (Šahryār Mandanīpūr, b. Shiraz, 1957). The novel, translated by Sara Khalili (Sārā Ḳalili), has not been published in its original Persian.

Mandanipour came to the United States in 2006 as the third International Writers Project Fellow at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. He spent the following two years as a Visiting Scholar at Harvard University, and in 2009 he was a Visiting Writer at Boston College. Among Mandanipour's most noted books in Persian are, *Mūmiā va 'asal* (Mummy and honey, 1997) and the two-volume novel *Del-e deldādegi* (The courage of love, 1998; For a descriptive analysis of Mandanipour's fiction see Ḥassan Mir'ābedini, *Šad sāl dāstān-nevisi dar Iran* (A hundred years of fiction writing in Iran), Tehran, 1987-98, vol. II, pp. 1058-67).

Censoring an Iranian Love Story is the second novel written by an Iranian novelist, which has first appeared in English translation. Preceding the publication of its Persian original by over a decade (Sweden, 2001), *Šāh-e siāh-pušān* by [Hušang Golširi](#) (1938-2000) was translated by Abbas Milani as *King of the Benighted* and was first published under the pseudonym Manuchehr Irani in Washington D.C. in 1990.



Censoring an Iranian Love Story, “a brilliant novel about the frustrating and sometimes perilous situation of the book industry in a country, in which both writer and censor appear as fictional characters,” (Kamali Dehghan) consists of two separate yet intricately interwoven plots. In the first storyline, Madanipour tells the love story of Dara (Dārā), and Sara (Sārā), whose names he has chosen from first-grade textbooks that were pulped right after the Islamic Revolution. Sara is a student of literature at Tehran University, and Dara is a former political prisoner who for this very reason has been expelled from the same university. They see one another in the midst of a political protest by students opposing the government, and fall in love. But at a time when gender separation is forcefully imposed on the society, and in all public venues the omnipresent patrols from the Campaign against Social Corruption (Gašt-e mobāreza bā mafāsed-e ejtemā’i) arrest young couples who display any degree of closeness and friendship, being in love and carrying on a romantic relationship in the Islamic Republic of Iran is unlike what is customary in many countries. Despite their fears and trepidations, the young couple use creative ploys to communicate and meet—they correspond by coding letters in books they borrow from a public library, they meet in the emergency room of a hospital, and even in a mosque. Their trysts, which create satirical and at times tragic scenes, gradually, impact their love negatively.

The second storyline begins in tandem with the first, in which the writer/narrator, “tired of writing dark and bitter stories,” is trying to compose, “with all his being...a love story...with an ending that is a gateway to light.” (*Censoring an Iranian Love Story*, p. 8) But his, “dilemma is that [he] wants to publish [his] story in [his] homeland, (ibid), where writing a love story under the strict censorship appears to be more dangerous than falling in love. Just as Sara and Dara face dangers and obstacles in pursuing their relationship, the writer, named Shahriar (the alter ego of Madanipour himself), too faces dangers and obstacles in narrating his story. Shahriar takes the readers along as he composes each sentence and creates each scene and shares with them his anxieties over the censorship agent’s judgments. Will he dictate deletion, or revision, or will he altogether deny the book a publishing permit? With humor and irony the writer explains the workings of the censorship apparatus in Iran and tells us how he is even forbidden to use the word breast, much less to depict romantic trysts and lust and passion. By taking the reader along on his journey to writing a love story, the reader soon realizes that “... as much as humor dominates the book, it quietly gets at something else—the omnipotence of tyranny. In the novel, censors scrub literature, magazines, [and] movies of



anything that may invoke love or lust. The idea of an Iranian love story is a sad oxymoron” (Daniel).

The censor, Porfiry Petrovich—an alias based on Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s (1821-1861) detective in the novel *Crime and Punishment* (1866)—has terrifying yet realistic encounters with the writer, and by cautioning and threatening him not to commit a crime by writing provocative and sexy scenes, he renders the writer’s task seemingly impossible. “In fact, at its best [the novel] becomes a kind of Kundera-like rumination on philosophy and politics, exploring the nervous interface between the public and the private in a totalitarian state, even as it playfully investigates the possibilities and limits of storytelling,” (Kakutani, “Where Romance Requires Courage,” *The New York Times*, June 30, 2009, p. C1). Yet, by employing his literary skills and experience, the writer struggles to find ways of escaping the censor’s scissors and deceiving the censorship machine. “One of the great successes of this book is how thoroughly it persuades the reader that a novel about censorship could not help also being a novel about fiction-making,” (Wood, “Love Iranian Style.” *The New Yorker*, June 29, 2009, p. 72).

Just like the characters of his story, who, inspired by love create new ploys to meet, the writer too searches for and creates new literary devices to convey scenes of his story to the reader. At times the writer uses symbolic and metaphoric language, at times he resorts to modern narrative techniques such as the stream of consciousness, and at times he employs the implicit connotation of words to guide his reader’s intellect to the white spaces in between the lines. In other words, by censoring his own story, he reveals censorship-defying techniques to save the life of his story and his own as a writer. “It is clear from the novel’s outset that what seem like Calvinoesque intellectual literary games are, in an Iranian setting, played for far higher stakes: Mandanipour’s narrator writes in an attempt to divert the course of history,” (Messud, “The Fate of Sara and Dara.” *The New York Review of Books*, April 29, 2010, p. 58).

The writer’s confrontations with Mr. Petrovich, his occasional presence in the lives of his characters, and his inspiring them for their love to survive, create ironic, comical, and surreal scenes; until at the end of the novel, the writer too is caught off guard when his story’s censor declares that he has fallen in love with the fictional Sara and that the writer must use his creativity to exit his love rival, Dara, from the scene. “In making Mr. Petrovich fall in love with Sara, Mandanipour has triumphed. A ‘perfect and beautiful story,’ he warned



his censor, ‘is the most dangerous story,’” (Reynolds, “Book Review: Censoring an Iranian Love Story”).

Mandanipour’s narrative style in *Censoring an Iranian Love Story*, as in his previous works, deftly yet determinedly reflects an imaginative approach to the use of symbols and metaphors, and an inventive experimentation with time and space. Surrealistic sub-plots course through the novel; creatures and characters inspired by the tales of *One Thousand and One Nights*, a hunchback midget, a man selling talismans and magic, ancient armies, ghosts of poets, and reincarnations from a thousand years ago coexist with the living and play a part in their destinies. As noted by a critic “Mandanipour wants us, his Western audience, to understand that in contemporary Iran, there is no boundary between realism and surrealism,” (Messud, “The Fate of Sara and Dara.” *The New York Review of Books*, April 29, 2010, p. 58). The novel is also characterized by Mandanipour’s drawing on a distinct playfulness and poignant wit not previously present in his prose. Throughout the two storylines, he nimbly experiments with the interplay of irony, comedy, and tragedy, the lines between which he carefully constructs as perpetually fragile and barely perceptible. “Mandanipour’s writing is exuberant, bonhomous, clever, profuse with puns and literary-political references; the reader unversed in contemporary Iranian fiction might easily think of Kundera ... or of the Rushdie of *Midnight’s Children*.” (Wood, “Love Iranian Style.” *The New Yorker*, June 29, 2009, p. 72).

Following its release in the United States and the United Kingdom, the novel drew wide critical acclaim and was extensively reviewed in Western press. The novel was subsequently translated based on the English version into ten other languages: Catalan (tr., by Albert Torrecasana, Barcelona, 2010), Dutch (tr., by Ankie Klootwijk, Amsterdam, 2009), French (tr., by Georges-Michel Sarotte, Paris, 2011), German (tr., by Ursula Ballin, Zurich, 2010), Greek (tr., by Hilda Papadimitriou, Athens, 2010), Italian (tr., by Flavio Santi, Milan, 2009), Polish (tr., by Maciej Swierkocki, Warsaw, 2010), Portuguese (tr., by Marcos Maffei, Rio de Janeiro, 2009), Spanish (tr., by Ignacio Gómez Calvo, Barcelona, 2010), and South Korean (tr., by Yisun Kim, Seoul, 2011).

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James Wood, "Love Iranian Style," *The New Yorker*, June 29, 2009, p. 72.