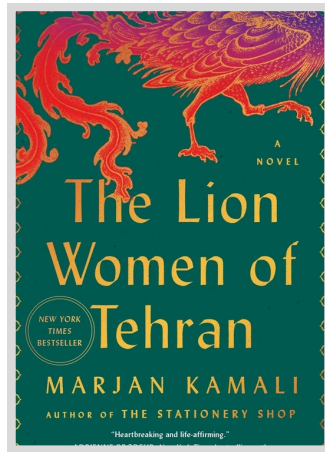


The Lion Women of Tehran

by Marjan Kamali



Summary

In 1950s Tehran, seven-year-old Ellie lives in grand comfort until the untimely death of her father, forcing Ellie and her mother to move to a tiny home downtown. Lonely and bearing the brunt of her mother's endless grievances, Ellie dreams for a friend to alleviate her isolation. Luckily, on the first day of school, she meets Homa, a kind girl with a brave and irrepressible spirit. Together, the two girls play games, learn to cook in the stone kitchen of Homa's warm home, wander through the colorful stalls of the Grand Bazaar, and share their ambitions of becoming "lion women."

But their happiness is disrupted when Ellie and her mother are afforded the opportunity to return to their previous bourgeois life. Now a popular student at the best girls' high school in Iran, Ellie's memories of Homa begin to fade. Years later, however, her sudden reappearance in Ellie's privileged world alters the course of both of their lives.

Together, the two young women come of age and pursue their own goals for meaningful futures. But as the political turmoil in Iran builds to a breaking point, one earth-shattering betrayal will have enormous consequences.

Courtesy of Simon & Shuster

The Lion Women of Tehran by Marjan Kamali



About the Author

Marjan Kamali is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Lion Women of Tehran*, an instant national bestseller, *The Stationery Shop*, a national and international bestseller, and *Together Tea*, a Massachusetts Book Award finalist.

Marjan's novels are published in translation in more than 30 languages. She is a 2022 recipient of the National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellowship. Marjan holds a bachelor's degree in English literature from the University of California, Berkeley, a Master of Business Administration from Columbia University, and a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing from New York University. Her essays have appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Literary Hub*, and *The Los Angeles Review of Books*.

Born in Turkey to Iranian parents, Marjan spent her childhood in Turkey, Iran, Germany, Kenya, and the U.S. She lives in the Boston area with her family.

Courtesy of the author's website: <https://marjankamali.com/about/>

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Discussion Questions

Please be aware these discussion questions contain spoilers!

1. The book opens from Ellie's point of view in 1980s New York City. What are some observations she has about the city? What does this tell you about how she sees herself there? How is her description of New York different from her description of Tehran?
2. What feelings does the city of Tehran invoke during Ellie and Homa's childhoods?
3. Ellie's mother has an obsession with the evil eye. Where do you believe this originates? How has this affected Ellie's mother's outlook on life, and, in turn, Ellie as she grows up?
4. How does Ellie's image of her father compare to the man Ellie's mother reveals him to be later in the book? How does Ellie's relationship with her mother change once she finds out? How does this help explain Ellie's mother's actions throughout the book?
5. How would you describe how Ellie's mother thinks of Homa? Why do you think she feels this way? How does this foreshadow what happens later in the book?
6. Describe the role politics in Iran plays throughout the book. How does it propel the plot forward? Does it function as a main character? How do the characters interact with politics, and how does it shape their futures?
7. Two themes of the book are betrayal and jealousy. How was this explored throughout the book (i.e. between characters, through the setting, between social classes, in politics, etc.)? Were there instances of betrayal that surprised you?
8. Homa's experience in prison devastated her plans and set her on a new trajectory for the rest of her life. What might have happened if she was not imprisoned and raped? How might her life have turned out differently? Would Homa and Ellie have remained friends?
9. Part Four opens from Homa's POV. How are her and Ellie's voices different? Discuss how the author uses shifting points of view as a plot device and what it adds to the narrative.
10. Homa talks about growing up to be "lion women" throughout the book. How would you describe "lion women," and how do Homa and Ellie understand the idea? How might it apply to women in general and how do Homa and Ellie embody what it means to be Lion Women?
11. Discuss the romantic relationships throughout the book. How do these relationships demonstrate gender and societal norms in Iran from the 1950s to the 1980s? Do any of them subvert traditional gender roles? How?

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Professional Reviews

Publisher's Weekly (04/23/24):

The insightful latest from Kamali (*The Stationary Shop*) chronicles the decades-long friendship of two Iranian women whose lives are upended by their country's political upheaval. After seven-year-old Ellie's father dies from tuberculosis in 1950, she and her mother are forced to move to a smaller apartment in one of Tehran's poorer neighborhoods. At her new school, Ellie befriends a spirited classmate named Homa. Several years later, Ellie's mother remarries and they move to a better neighborhood, causing the girls to lose touch. Ellie later attends a prestigious high school and is mortified when Homa, who she now views as uncouth, becomes her classmate and greets her in front of her new friends ("Homa was my past. My two worlds were not supposed to collide"). They eventually rekindle their friendship, but are once again divided when Homa is imprisoned for protesting the shah in 1963. Later sections follow a married Ellie in 1981 New York City, where she receives a desperate letter sent by Homa from Tehran. Though there's not much of a plot, Kamali sustains the reader's interest by exploring the contrasts and sustained connection between the two central characters. This will resonate with fans of women's fiction.

Booklist (06/01/24):

Homa and Ellie meet as children in the city of Tehran and form a seemingly unbreakable bond. Each has hopes and dreams of the future. Homa longs to become a judge so that she can right wrongs and create a more equitable community. Ellie learns the art of translation, but dreams of a kind husband and a large brood of children. Despite these differences, they become lifelong friends. Coming of age over three decades, the friends must also navigate their country's tumult, which includes social injustice, class divide, immigration disruptions, and the loss of women's rights. Kamali (*The Stationary Shop*, 2019) places food center stage with vivid descriptions, from the perfect New York pizza slice to traditional savory Iranian dishes, immersing readers in the culinary delights of Iranian cuisine especially—readers will virtually taste the food on the page. As these two remarkable women strive to overcome the hardships they face and fight for their rights, Kamali's narrative highlights the struggles of women in Iran and explores relationship challenges between friends and family.