



Revolution Street By Amir Chehelan (Oneworld, £12.99) » Order at the discounted price of £11.69 inc. p&p from the Independent Bookshop

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Revolution Street begins with a sobering description of a young girl having her vagina clamped and stitched up in an underground clinic in Tehran. The male surgeon calls her a whore as she bites down on her lip to avoid moaning in pain, while the nurse screams insults at her. Set in the Eighties in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution, the novel exposes the oppression suffered by women in a society where girls are forced to undergo hymenoplasty to preserve their virginity, rape victims are called sluts, and women whipped for not wearing hijab.

The novel also reveals the double standards of a male-enforced Islamic regime that penalises sexually active women while permitting men to be as promiscuous as they please.

Dr Fattah, the middle-aged surgeon who performs a hymenoplasty on the young girl, falls victim to his own prejudices when he becomes besotted by his patient. Determined to win her hand in marriage from the man she is already promised to, he becomes embroiled in a dark underworld of criminality to try and ensnare her.

But while the novel is set against a rich backdrop of historical and social change, its storytelling does not live up to the dramatic events that shape its plot. Dr Fattah's quest to marry the young girl, Shahrzad, fails to read like the exciting thriller that the book sets itself up to be.

Throughout the novel there is a frustrating sense that we are being told, rather than shown, how the Iranian Revolution impacted the main characters' lives. The book's numerous characters feel more like types than fully formed people. We are told that Dr Fattah is a middle-aged man with a paunch and stale breath, but few other details are given to feel we understand his psyche.

Shahrzad is nothing more than a limp, lifeless character. We are never privy to her thoughts about being forced into marrying a man 20 years her elder, which seems to go against the novel's aim to expose voiceless women living under sharia law.

The sex scenes also undermine the plot's intention. While not many male authors would be so willing to tackle the subject of reconstructed hymens, Chehelan seems to shy away from describing sex in detail. In one scene the act of penetration is described as "crossing the threshold".

While it's clear the novel seeks to address big issues, the means with which it does so ultimately leaves it feeling flat.