



Wasafiri

ISSN: 0269-0055 (Print) 1747-1508 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rwas20>

# Massoumeh: The Story of an Iranian Family in Times of Revolution

Shiva Rahbaran

To cite this article: Shiva Rahbaran (2017) Massoumeh: The Story of an Iranian Family in Times of Revolution, Wasafiri, 32:1, 74-76, DOI: [10.1080/02690055.2017.1254323](https://doi.org/10.1080/02690055.2017.1254323)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02690055.2017.1254323>



Published online: 24 Feb 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



# Wasafiri New Writing Prize

LIFE WRITING WINNER: SHIVA RAHBARAN

## *Massoumeh: The Story of an Iranian Family in Times of Revolution*

I was executed at dawn, on Shahrivar 4th 1361 AH (26 August 1982 AD), aged eighteen and nine months. I am buried in the cemetery *Behesht-e Zahra* [Zahra's Paradise] in a row with six other girls, who are all more or less my age. What is there to say about an execution? We were lined up, told to march to the courtyard, where a group of five women were executed before us by their 'repentant' former comrades-in-arms. The smell of blood, bullets and excrement was nauseating. I thought, so, that's how death smells.

We paced as if under a spell. The night before our execution, in the intimacy of our cell (while we were still waiting for some miracle to save our lives), some inmates reported stories about men and women clad in black shrouds calling themselves 'the Filth of the Earth' at the top of their voices and passionately requesting their own execution. Others told us stories about heroic prisoners whose cries of 'Freedom ...!', 'Long live ...!' or 'Death to ...!' had echoed for days around the walls of the courtyard. But we, we didn't utter a word. We bent our heads forward helpfully for the executioners to tie a strip around our heads and cover our eyes. Then we let them chain our wrists to the poles covered with blood and pockmarked with bullets. I could hear the girl next to me whimper like a dog. I was numb all over. There was a loud cry of *Allah-o-Akbar*, then a stream of shit and urine followed by a fury of bullets tearing through our ribcages, shredding our hearts and livers. The

pain was excruciating. And then, as abruptly as it had started, it stopped.

\*

My comrades and I — oh yes, we are a lucky lot. Our families succeeded in getting us gravestones. The officials believed that, having sided with one of the many groups opposed to the government of the young Islamic Republic of Iran, we did not deserve them. But our families succeeded after years of standing in long queues, enduring tirades of insults from officials and making donations to the families of the dead and living martyrs of the war against Iraq. All they wanted was permission for a gravestone — nothing fancy, promise. Just a little reminder of the foolishness and sins of their children, sir. Yes. Our families pulled it off. They succeeded in getting us gravestones made out of black granite, with our names, dates of birth and date of execution chiselled on them in beautiful Persian calligraphy: *Nayyereh O. 1341–1361; Sadigheh M. 1342–1361; Nahid I. K. 1335–1361; Zohreh Sh. M. 1340–1361; Zohreh M. 1338–1361; Fatemeh Kh. 1343–1361*; and last, but not least my name, *Massoumeh Golbaf 1342–1361*. Our families thought it fitting to break with tradition and not add heart-rending poetry, as our short lives, squeezed between the two dates, was telling enough. Now they can visit us and wash our gravestones as tradition would have it. Now they can decry the injustice and lament our fate.

Many others, like my cousin Mansur (who is also my brother-in-law), are in a much worse situation. They lie under a heap of dry desert earth outside the boundaries of *Behesht-e Zahra* in unmarked graves. Their graveyard is called *Lanat Abad*, roughly meaning the Land of the Damned. The irony or perhaps the bitter cynicism of this

name lies in the fact that *Abad* or *Abadi* is the word for oasis. But the place where my cousin Mansur lies is far from it. It is a deserted, infertile and hostile sea of dust, frequented on and off by women in black chadors, who look like crows and have frightening sounds gush from their throats.

My comrades and I witnessed such scenes too, before our families succeeded in getting us gravestones. It pierced our already sieved hearts to see our relatives crouching over us, pulling out their hair, scratching their faces and yet crying as quietly as possible because the officials had forbidden them their right to mourn properly. You see, we really didn't deserve to lie in *Behesht-e Zahra*, but we were lucky; our relatives were lucky. Now they don't have to live with the shame of having to visit us in the Land of the Damned. Now we lie in the pleasant coolness of our graves, under our black granite and marble gravestones. The cypress trees that our relatives planted at our gravesides have grown to majestic heights. Their graceful shade protects the mourners and their geranium pots on hot Fridays in the summer and their evergreen leaves cheer them up in the bleakness of the graveyard's winter.

Our families sit wrapped in the shade and lull their pain to sleep. They wash the dust off our gravestones with water from a plastic bottle, stroke them and say a *fatehe* prayer to bless our souls and the souls of all innocents lying under this earth. Then they sit for a while, drink water and eat sweet dates filled with walnuts and sprinkled with coconut shreds. They sit crouching around us and talk and remember.

'Who would have thought? She was only eighteen. Her only crime was to take part in a few demonstrations, distribute a few leaflets, sell the odd opposition newspaper.'

'It was the neighbour's daughter who denounced her. She always held a grudge against Massoumeh.'

'Come on, we all know that the neighbour's daughter was tortured. Anybody would talk under torture.'

'No, Massoumeh didn't.'

'How do you know?'

'The neighbour's daughter came out of prison and Massoumeh was executed; that is how I know. Torture shows the difference between people's characters. Torture reveals whether people have a backbone or not, and those who have no backbone get away with their lives.'

'So, are you saying that torture is good?'

'I am just saying our family has backbone.'

'It is not hard for us to pat our shoulders, when sitting at their graves! Should we now adorn our heads with their pain? "The martyr-cultivating Golbaf family, proudly presents the broken backs of two innocent..." ha? And anyway, many informers were executed too.'

'Cut it out, you two! Think of the soul of the innocents lying under this earth. Think of their shredded liver and pierced hearts. What did they do to deserve this? What have we done to deserve this? And anyway, what are you two doing here? Wasn't it enough that you infected my child with your talk of freedom and made my life hell? Her mom hardly leaves her room since then. Wasn't it enough

that you broke your parents' hearts with your politics and brought your sister under this earth? All this talk about your neighbour's daughter is rubbish! You know that they had come for you two and took Massoumeh with them only because you weren't there! Shayesteh, where is your baby, anyway? Where did you leave her? Did you put her in the care of your comrades in hiding? My God, you two! Have you got any idea what could happen to you; what could happen to your baby Ziba if the revolutionary guards saw you here? Are you listening to me at all?'

'Ah, dear, is life worth living without Massoumeh? If it wasn't for my baby Ziba; if it wasn't for avenging Massoumeh's blood; if it wasn't for avenging Mansur's blood, I would go and spit in the face of the revolutionary guards and ask them to shoot me! Oh God, it hurts so badly, I wished I could die.'

'But we were lucky. It hurts to say it, but we were lucky compared to many other families.'

'True, we were lucky. Five siblings and lost only one! Mahin Khanom, lost two sons out of three; her youngest, Ali, died a normal death by hanging ...'

'Yes, the best thing that could happen to you in their dungeons is a good death, no? Hanging, firing squad, poisoning...'

'True, sister — but my beloved Mansur, her eldest, wasn't as lucky as his brother Ali. He died under torture. First they pulled out his fingernails and then they beat him until his kidneys failed and his spleen burst. It was the blows of the famous Saalak, who was jailed for murder under the Shah and became a devout Muslim while serving his sentence in Evin. He tortured Mansur so badly that he often had to be resuscitated for another round. You know how Dr Shoja was summoned to Mansur's bed at one in the morning to resuscitate him for the umpteenth time? But Mansur was already dead. Dr Shoja got so angry that he started shouting, "Why do you get me out of my bed when you have already killed him? Do you think I am Jesus Christ?" Yes. That Dr Shoja! It's hard to know what to think of him. He was sentenced to death himself at the beginning of the revolution because he was a senior minister under the Shah, but he was lucky. God's representatives on earth need good physicians, too! Now Dr Shoja has a nice practice in Tehran. Tahereh went there the other day to show him her heart. You know how she suffers since Massoumeh has been taken away from us. Our baby sister was always like a daughter to her. No wonder — considering that Massoumeh was only seven or eight years older than Tahereh's eldest daughter, Aava. Anyway, Tahereh went to Dr Shoja to show him her heart. Dr Shoja saw her family name and asked whether she was a relative of Mansur's. She said, "Yes, he was my cousin and my brother-in-law." You know how Dr Shoja keeps a low profile and never talks. But this time something happened to him. Maybe he could see that Tahereh's heart was broken. Maybe it was because tears welled up in Tahereh's eyes as she told Dr Shoja that she was able to save the lives of Mansur's wife and daughter by hiding them from the revolutionary guards, but that she was unable to do anything for Mansur at all. Or maybe it was Tahereh telling Dr Shoja that her great-grandfather and grandfather were

both doctors and modernisers of medical practices in nineteenth-century Qazvin. Maybe it was a combination of all those things. I don't know. Tahereh said that, all of a sudden, the words just flooded out of Dr Shoja: "His kidneys had failed. No wonder! Not even Rambo's kidneys would have survived those blows and beatings. I had his kidneys dialysed. He had almost gone blind. But he never talked. His spleen had burst under the blows of Saalak and still they had the cheek to send for me at one in the morning! Bastards! I can resuscitate people, but I am not Jesus Christ. They had killed him. They threw him on a stretcher and all the way down the corridor blood was dripping onto the tiles. But he never sang, Mrs Golbaf. Yes, He saved many lives." So, you see, Dr Shoja is fair.'

'Oh, he is fair, alright! Only I ask myself how did he save his own skin, ha?'

'Well, they needed him, so they spared his life. Maybe he offered his services? I don't know. He was a doctor. Never heard of the Hippocratic Oath? He was just doing his duty. Besides, who doesn't want to save his own skin?'

'Mansur didn't. He never talked. He never said where Razmandeh and I were hiding. If he had, there would have been a proper family tomb at this spot. Yes, we were lucky.'

'If you call losing your beloved baby-sister a happy incident, then yes, we were lucky!'

'There's no need for sarcasm, Miss Know-it-all! In this country, in our times, we are a lucky family and you know it.'

\*

From afar our families look like average Tehrani families picnicking and chatting on a hot summer afternoon among pots of flowers, under charming cypress trees. Thanks to their sacrifice our graves do justice to *Behesht-e Zahra*; to Zahra's Paradise, the huge City of the Dead in the south of Tehran. Thanks to their patience, Fatima Zahra, the only Child of the Seal of Prophets, Mohammad, is our guardian too.

My family and the families of my grave-mates had to do their bit to deserve this blessing. They never pushed their luck. They followed the rigorous instructions of the authorities. They cried quietly, fainted softly into each other's arms. They did not arrange for one of those typical, ceremonious funerals, which go on forever, especially if the loved one has died at an early age. They didn't even know we had been buried until it was too late. They never complained that the government went against all the traditions and religious laws of Iran by not allowing any of the female members of our families to be present at the washing of our bodies. Our families, though, didn't want to upset the authorities too much and lose the little chance they had to petition for our gravestones. So, they kept quiet. Oh, the shame of having your loved ones lie in an unmarked grave.

On second thought, maybe they were lucky to have been robbed of their right to wash our bodies. They were in a terrible state. Shortly before being shot, we had all been raped by our lawful husbands, to whom we had been married for a few hours. While they pushed themselves into us we thought, 'Death must be better than this.' We had all still been virgins and, had they executed us in that state, we – according to the Islamic teaching – would have gone directly to heaven. So, we had to be deflowered in accordance with the Sharia, within wedlock. An unlawful act of deflowering would not have been accepted by the Angels who, in such a case, would have treated us as virgins and sent us straight to heaven. In God's State the fury of Angels is feared more than the wrath of its citizens.

So, we were married to the revolutionary guards who were in charge of our ward. Some of them were quite nice before forcing themselves on us. They promised us that, as our lawful husbands, they would have full guardianship of us and thus the opportunity to appeal against the verdict. But they didn't. So we were shot. When our parents went to receive our death certificates, they were also given our marriage certificates and our marriage portion; in our case it was a Koran and twelve sugar canes each symbolising one of the holy Imams of the Shiite Moslem belief. Thus nobody could have accused the government of acting unlawfully.

My niece, Aava, who has taken it onto herself to write my story, had a dream on the night of our execution. She dreamed that five girls were lined up against a wall, with their scarves correctly in place. Suddenly seven perfect brains replaced the heads against an orange background. Aava's heart pounded in her ears; she woke up sweating and crying. She ran to her mother, my sister Tahereh, who was nursing her two-month-old baby son. My sister stroked her daughter's wet forehead and told her that the whole family had been having nightmares since the day of my arrest. Only this morning she had had to brush the tears off the face of her other daughter, who had dreamed of me sitting high on a huge pile of rugs with a halo around my head saying that I had to go somewhere but that everything would be alright. My sister assured her trembling daughters that these nightmares would come to an end soon.

My sister Tahereh recited Hafez to her daughters while they hid under her blanket and looked at her with terror in their eyes: 'The lost Joseph will return to Canaan, don't be sad/The abode of Sadness will turn into a rose garden, don't be sad.' My sister, like all Iranians, always sought advice and solace in Hafez's poetry.

Hafez's verses proved to be like empty walnut shells crushed under the feet of the *flâneurs* at the Caspian Sea.

Time taught my loved ones to arrange themselves around the open wound in their midst. Joseph did not return to Canaan nor did our house of sadness turn into a blossoming rose garden.