

# Anahita's Woven Riddle

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Review by Jasmyne (Bibliophiles)

## Summary

Anahita, our central character, is a nomadic weaver living in 19<sup>th</sup> century Iran. As she is approaching a marriageable age, her father informs her that she is to wed the leader of their tribe in the coming year. As she finds the man utterly repulsive, Anahita becomes determined to have a hand in her own fate. She devises a contest in which suitors must guess the meaning of the riddle woven into her wedding carpet. Often horrified by Anahita's somewhat suffragetist ideas, her village is all for abandoning the riddle contest when it causes unexpected and devastating consequences. However, their opinion soon changes when they find out whom they can really trust. Anahita herself is badly shaken by this turn of events and even offers to abandon her riddle contest, but this time her village is behind her and will not let her fail. As for her suitors, her test of wit draws a truly extraordinary group of men, including a shepherd, a school teacher and a prince.

## Analysis

With every work of art, there is always the seen and the unseen. What you see are the words on the manuscript or the oils on canvas. However, hidden forever are the blood, sweat and tears, and most importantly, the soul of the artist. I think that this book represents this fact excellently through Anahita's weaving. Inside her wedding qali are not only intricate designs but her memories, hopes and dreams.

You need to look below the surface to appreciate the full beauty of the work.

Our culture and the society we grow up in both profoundly affect our judgement and attitude. For example, the western world's stereotypical image of a perfect person would have different qualities than say, the perfect Ethiopian. This is because with each culture or society there are different admired traits and different ideas of what is perceived as normal. When Farhad states that marriage is what gives women value, he is merely citing his culture's view of women in the society. Anahita is also a character steeped in her culture. Though her ideas may be progressive, she is grounded in her heritage and her culture influences her just as it would anyone else. Her culture and heritage symbolize who she truly is at heart.

An arranged marriage is what the plot of the book stems from. In the nineteenth century, women throughout the world were considered inferior to men and were treated as their property. Arranged marriages would be used to make alliances, increase a family's status or just as a way to ensure that their daughter's future life was comfortable. However, in most arranged marriages, love is not a factor and this can lead to a very unhappy married life. With choice may come love, but there are both good and bad choices as well as unforeseen consequences. The motto of yesterday is "rather safe than sorry", and the motto of today is "follow where your heart leads you". A combination of the two would be the perfect compromise.

I love how Anahita's character grows in this book. You can spot it's branches shooting out, leaves unfurling and then see it blossom all in the space of 300 pages. How she has matured is shown most poignantly at the end of the book when she is given the chance to choose her own husband. As she makes the most important decision of

her life, you can see that her thoughts are much more mature than they were when we saw her first. The last sentence of the book is itself reflective. "Only one short year ago, I argued with Maman that I would never weave a stranger's name into my wedding qali".

The use of Sufi poetry brought a new dimension to the book, making it simpler, yet more complex at the same time. Very few words were spoken between Anahita and Arash, yet it was their shared thoughts that bound them together. These thoughts and ideas found a form of expression through poetry. The Sufi poems are a metaphor for life and love, the thing not learned from books. The poems speak in riddles, but their message is clear. When reading them you gain special insight, as well as different ways of seeing. They bring you closer to yourself, your inner self. Anahita and Arash look deeper and that is why they find meaning in these poems. For them, the poems are not just a metaphor, but they embody the true meaning of life and love.

I found that most of the writing techniques used in this book, such as the switching of the narrative between Anahita and her suitors, served their purpose well, but one thing that I did not like was that at times, blocks of time were left out of the story. I did like how the plot developed. It was fairly straightforward but there were plenty of twists and quirks to make it interesting, especially at the end of the book when Arash gives Anahita the option of choosing her own husband. I enjoyed the descriptive detail in the language used as well as the use of Persian words.

I would rate this book 9/10 for a delightful read that embodies the old and the new, stability and change, and the seen and the unseen. People who would enjoy this book are those who look below the surface to find "the park within".