REVIEW: 'City of Lies: Love, Sex, Death and the Search for Truth in Tehran,' by Ramita Navai

Article by: GIENN C. ALTSCHULER
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“We believed what we were doing was the right thing,” Ghassem Namazi, the judge who sentenced a young man’s parents to death in 1988, tells the man, Amir, in 2013. “I lost my way because I was lying to myself, lying to the world, and above all I was lying to God. … I want to make this right, and I need your forgiveness”

The Islamic regime in Iran, journalist Ramita Navai reminds us, forces citizens who want to be true to themselves, to lie. In her new book, “City of Lies,” Navai provides an intimate portrait of life there through sketches of eight ordinary residents of Tehran who are connected, in a sense, by Vali Nasr, the city’s main thoroughfare.

Navai has changed “all names, some details, time frames and locations.” That said, her beautifully written book captures the pace, pulse and passions of day-to-day existence. Navai re-creates the sights and smells of alleyways, bazaars, cramped apartments and prisons. She describes “basijes” (volunteer paramilitary organizations), “jahels” (hoodlums who tuck knives in their pants and God in their hearts) and “sighehs,” temporary marriage certificates, lasting 90 minutes or 99 years, that exemplify “Shia pragmatism.”

Most of Navai’s subjects are struggling to resolve a conflict between religious obligations and sexual desires. Haj Agha does not tell his wife, Fatemeh, about his trips to Thailand, a nation notorious for its prostitutes, but changes his sinful ways when she confronts him. Leyla, a porn star, takes the “sigheh” seriously, contemplates moving to the United States, but is arrested and hanged. And Morteza, a religious militiaman, vehemently denies that he is a homosexual, beats up a motorist with blond hair tied in a ponytail, pierced ears, a tight T-shirt, jeans and black nail polish, who has been stopped at a checkpoint, then turns to his colleagues and says, “Don’t you ever come to me with your filthy tales again.”

In Tehran, Navai indicates, “sex is an act of rebellion,” in which members of the younger generation can assert “ultimate control over their bodies, if nothing else in their lives.” At the same time, “in the process of having to continually lie and hide natural desires, the sense of ordinary sexual behavior and its values is being lost.”

Sexual repression is, indeed, virulent and violent in Iran. And the backlash against it there may exact the costs Navai enumerates. Nonetheless, as she depicts a sad, sympathetic and exotic “City of Lies,” Navai also reminds us, perhaps unintentionally, that the government in Tehran is scarcely alone in intervening “in the most intimate affairs of its citizens” — and endangering deception and self-deception.
Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.

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