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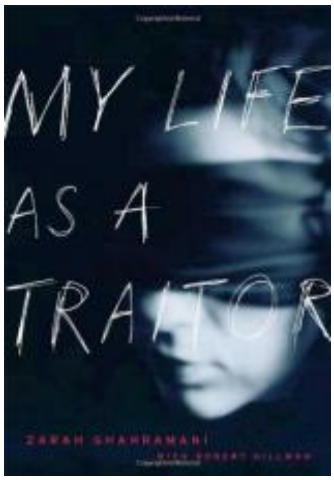
My Life as a Traitor

by Zarah Ghahramani



About the Book

Raised in a family that valued tolerance, Zarah Ghahramani came of age in the wake of the Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic Revolution, which sought to stifle the intellectual freedom so cherished in her household. Daring to flout Iran's oppressive edicts as a university student, she was outspoken and progressive, even allowing her headscarf to slide back and reveal a few inches of her hair. Such "activism" led her to be swept off the streets of Tehran by secret police in 2001, at the age of twenty. Held in the notorious Evin Prison, Zarah endured psychological and physical torture without any promise of when, or if, she would ever be freed. Courageously defiant even in the midst of scathing interrogations, she struggled to retain her idealism. Eventually released after a sham trial, she was forbidden from returning to the halls of learning that had fortified her mind and soul.

My Life as a Traitor blends the atrocities at Evin with precise, moving recollections of the stories from Zarah's youth, ranging from her father's memories of life before the Revolution to ancient legends of her Persian heritage. Expanding the dialogue begun with illuminating accounts such as **Reading Lolita in Tehran**, **My Life as a Traitor** is a singular tale of inspiring dissent.

Discussion Guide

1. As you read about Zarah's youth, which aspects of Iranian life surprised you the most? What discoveries did you make about the history of Iran and Iraq and their recent war?

2. Zarah describes the rich spiritual traditions of Zoroastrianism, which sustains and inspires her. In what ways did the Islamic Revolution affect secular life in Iran? How do religious wars in general affect the faith of civilians? Should governments have any role in regulating faith-based organizations?

3. How did your perception of Arash shift as details about him unfolded? How did the reality of his friendship with

Zarah compare to the images conjured by her interrogators?

4. In chapter eight, Zarah describes her relationship with Behnam, including the magazine-style checklist that spelled doom when she first met him. How might her experience with dating have differed in a less repressed culture? Would she have fallen in love with him so easily?

5. How did the memoir's dual timeline enhance your reading? What was the effect of interweaving memories of an idealistic childhood with scenes of brutality in Evin?

6. Discuss the title, **My Life as a Traitor**. Where does the true betrayal lie in Zarah's story? What does it take to build genuine patriotism among a citizenry? Should all forms of political expression be legal?

7. In chapter ten, Zarah describes a cousin who died after setting herself on fire. Why was it impossible for her cousin's husband to understand that her "daydreams [were] dismissed forever when she was a child . . . She had her soul thieved from her"? Why would many Iranian women, some of them Zarah's relatives, not understand it either? What convinced another cousin, Ellie, to believe the mullahs in chapter eighteen?

8. Chapter twelve describes the history lessons Zarah received at school and at home. Through what process can "official" history become manipulated? How can truth outlast propaganda?

9. In chapter thirteen, Zarah recalls grudgingly having to learn Arabic, feeling disdain for the Arabs who brought Persia to its knees fourteen hundred years ago. How does such ancient history manifest itself in current events? Why do western audiences often lack knowledge of the history beyond western civilization, while non-westerners such as Zarah can quote classics of British literature?

10. What did Zarah gain from her conversations with Sohrab, the uninhibited man imprisoned above her? What do their two very different situations indicate about justice in Iran?

11. At the end of chapter twenty, Zarah writes, "My political activism was to my mother a form of vanity, a boast to the world of my moral beauty." Can political activism exist without a sense of moral superiority and exhibitionism?

12. Throughout her imprisonment, Zarah is vocal about loathing her captors, and she refuses to concur with their lies. How would you have fared in a similar situation? What separates those who remain courageously defiant from those who succumb to aggressors?

13. Speculate about the reasons for Zarah's release. What did the government accomplish by arresting and torturing her? What determined her fate in their hands? In what way were the terms of her release like a second imprisonment, leading to life in exile?

14. Was Zarah's gender an advantage or a liability during her time in prison? How did her mother serve as a role model for survival in a misogynistic society?

15. How did you react to commentary delivered by Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad at Columbia University in 2007? Does his regime offer any promise of reform, or does it signal higher levels of corruption and intolerance?

Author Bio

Zarah Ghahramani was born in Tehran in 1981. After her release from prison, she moved to Australia. **My Life as a Traitor** is her first book. Robert Hillman is a journalist and novelist who has traveled widely in the Middle East.

Critical Praise

"**My Life as a Traitor** is both shocking and inspiring: a graphic portrayal of the horrors that are unleashed when the idealism of youth challenges the dogmatism of zealots. Zarah Ghahramani has written a very human story of bravery and fear in the face of violence; her story is one of longing for beauty and freedom. Zarah's memoir of her time in Iran's infamous Evin Prison is unforgettable in its portrayal of brutality, but it sings with a young woman's love of life and liberty."

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