

Skokie Public Library's Book Discussion Guide

MOONLIGHT ON THE AVENUE OF FAITH

by **Gina B. Nahai**

- In the particular emotional realm of *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith*, one's ability to live and love depends entirely upon one's capacity for forgiveness. Without forgiveness comes tragedy and death, as in the case of Miriam's daughter, Sara. With it comes the potential for redemption and even physical healing, as in the cases of Lili and Roxanna. What effect does the act of forgiveness have on the lives of the rest of the novel's characters?
- "That is how the world really functions," Miriam the Moon tells Lili at the beginning of the novel. Human beings are nothing more than the instruments of a callous Fate. Free will and conscious decisions are mere inventions of minds too feeble to accept the reality of our absurd existence. How does Roxanna the Angel's first-person narrative at the close of the novel -- in which she recognizes all of the choices she "let go to waste" in her life -- complicate and even challenge Miriam's early pronouncement about the futility of faith in free will?
- *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith* has been called a novel of magical realism. While magical realism has been traditionally regarded as a regional literary genre restricted to the Latin-American writers who initially popularized it as a literary form -- it is really an international phenomenon with a wide-ranging history. Beyond Gabriel García Márquez, writers as diverse as Toni Morrison, Salman Rushdie, Derek Walcott, and Jorge Luis Borges have contributed to its far-reaching influence among the literatures of the world. Where does Nahai's brand of magical realism fit into the genre as a whole? What qualities does her work share with other works of magical realism? How is it unique?
- Beginning in the eighteenth century with the Crow (the Lubovicher rabbi's wife), chart the course of the "bad luck" which Lili is assumed to have inherited from a long line of female ancestors. What was each woman attempting to take flight from? What do each of these women have in common?
- In the process of describing Roxanna's life toward the end of the novel, Mercedes the Movie Star also offers an insight into her own life's modus operandi: "Your mother was two people forever fighting each other," Mercedes says. "One was the runaway exile she was supposedly destined to become -- the bad-luck woman everyone expected her to be. The other was going to be so good....I used to tell her even then that Destiny is horseshit." To what degree is Mercedes the novel's most strong-willed, self-assured, and genuinely contented woman? On the other hand, what hints does Nahai provide to suggest otherwise?
- Both Mercedes and Miriam are possessed as young women with bewitching physical beauty. But while Mercedes goes on to trade exclusively on her erotic power as a woman to succeed throughout life, Miriam plainly takes no stock in her beauty -- nor in the conventional role of Iranian women -- even to the point of wearing men's clothing. In spite of these differences -- and in spite of the fact that they despise each other -- what are the essential similarities that exist between Miriam and Mercedes?
- How do both Mercedes and Miriam use the force of their characters to redress any cultural disadvantages they might have as women? How might one describe Nahai's vision of the balance between the sexes? Compare and contrast Mercedes's remarkable determination to transcend her ghetto childhood with Miriam's.



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am the Moon's equally strong will to overcome a relentless string of tragedies.

- One of the primary themes of *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith* has to do with the nature of escape. Tala'at escapes by running away with Habib's nephew. Effat leaves for Kent with an Englishman. The steel-willed Mercedez, of course, achieves several escapes in succession before finally arriving on Sunset Boulevard and setting up house as Mercedez the Movie Star. By stark contrast, Shusha escapes her misery by drinking a glass of poison. How do the rest of Nahai's characters escape? Which attempts result in failure? Why?
- Roxanna the Angel's role as a mother is clearly central, but what about her role as wife and lover? What is the legacy of her relationships with Sohrab the Sinner and Teymur the Heretic?
- In the sense that a work of art is an expression of and an explanation for a particular identity, how might Lili's practice of taking a pen and writing upon the surface of her own body comment upon the nature and function of the artist?
- In the years after Roxanna's flight, Lili tells us, "I had become invisible to myself and to everyone else." How does Lili react at different points in the novel to this constant feeling of transparency, of being "weightless and unfettered"?
- Considering the fate of each of her characters, what distinctions, if any, does Nahai seem to be making between the meanings of 'escape' and 'exile'? Between the meanings of 'escape' and 'redemption'? Explain.
- When Roxanna grows wings and deserts her family in the house on the Avenue of Faith in hopes of thwarting her unacceptable destiny, Lili notes that her mother is "upsetting the balance between dreams and reality." What does she mean? In what ways does the novel as a whole upset the balance between dreams and reality?
- What is the significance of Shusha's tear jar? By giving the bottle to Roxanna -- "It's the only thing Mother left us" -- what legacy is Miriam symbolically passing on to her sister? Why do you suppose Roxanna's first instinct is to destroy the jar?
- What other symbols and images emerge and tellingly recur throughout the novel? Consider, for instance, the Caspian Sea, feathers, sapphires, Pari-with-the-Boots, and sunflowers?
- What are your own memories of 1979, the year of Iran's Islamic Revolution? Looking back after reading Nahai's book, what is your sense of the Western media's perspective on the riots, the movie-theatre fires, the Ayatollah's over-throw of the shah, and the seven-month hostage crisis?
- If Los Angeles is truly the "land of choices and chances," then what would you say Tehran is the land of?
- Explaining why she subscribes to *National Geographic* and *Scientific American*, Miriam says, "I like to balance experience against science....Experience wins every time." How does this arch statement comment on the entirety of *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith*, and how does it inform and foreshadow the resolution of the novel's considerations of free will and fate?
- Although Jacob the Jello sees things through a perpetual cloud of opium, how accurate is it to say that he actually sees more clearly than anyone else in the novel? And how does it happen that, even after his death, his visions continue to haunt the inhabitants of the house on the Avenue of Faith?
- In the course of her novel, Nahai intimately acquaints us with the condition and status of women particularly Iranian Jewish women in Eastern society. What did you learn from Nahai's novel about Iran's gender politics? What details surprised you in particular?
- *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith* features a range of women who, dissatisfied with the limitations with which their lives have presented them, proceed to reinvent themselves. For instance, Fr aulein Claude conceals her past by transforming herself into a worldly, platinum-blond German who, through the entire course of her marriage, never once lets her husband see her out of makeup or high heels. What is the nature of Alexandra the Cat's transformation? Miriam the Moon's? Mercedez the Movie Star's? How do these various acts of reinvention serve to empower, imprison, or liberate them?