

A Family Under Siege: The Seed of the Sacred Fig

— *Reviewed by* NEHAD KENANIE



Mohammad Rasoulof's *The Seed of the Sacred Fig* is a powerful and unsettling thriller, a story of family, paranoia and the insidious reach of oppressive regimes. Set against the backdrop of Iran's "Woman, Life, Freedom" uprising, the film explores how political turmoil can fracture even the most intimate bonds, turning a family's home into a battleground of suspicion and fear. This story resonates deeply with the experiences of many refugees, who know firsthand the devastating impact of conflict and persecution on family life.

The film centres on Iman (Missagh Zareh), a devout civil servant, newly promoted as an investigator in Tehran and mapping his trajectory to becoming a judge. His wife, Najmeh (Soheila Golestani), and their daughters, Rezvan (Mahsa Rostami) and Sana (Setareh Maleki), anticipate a more comfortable future. His promotion, however, coincides with the eruption of widespread protests following the death of Mahsa Amini, protests that challenge the very foundations of the regime Iman serves.

Iman's new position thrusts him into a moral quagmire. He is expected to rubber-stamp harsh sentences against protestors, many of them young people like his own daughters. He justifies his complicity by clinging to the belief that the regime's laws are divinely ordained, a justification that echoes the rhetoric of many authoritarian regimes. This echoes the power dynamic of the regime over the Iranian people, with Iman exercising similar unchecked power within his own family. He demands absolute obedience, mirroring the state's control over its citizens. His paranoia about his job, and the potential repercussions for his family should his activities become known, create a constant undercurrent of tension. The walls of their apartment, meant to provide safety, begin to close in, reflecting the increasing claustrophobia of living under a repressive system.

Rasoulof masterfully interweaves the personal and the political. The protests outside the family's apartment directly inform the dynamics within. Rezvan and Sana, in common with many young Iranians, are drawn to the protests, witnessing the brutal crackdown on dissent through their phones and TikTok videos.

When Rezvan's friend, Sadaf (Niousha Akhshi), is shot in the eye and face during a protest, they question their father's unwavering support of the regime, creating a generational divide that mirrors the larger societal conflict. Najmeh finds herself torn between her loyalty to her husband and her empathy for her daughters, a difficult position familiar to many women living in patriarchal societies.

The film takes a sharp turn into thriller territory

when Iman's government-issued gun goes missing. This single event unleashes a torrent of suspicion and paranoia. Suddenly, the family dynamic shifts. Iman, consumed by fear and the need to protect his position, becomes an interrogator, subjecting his family to the same tactics of intimidation and control used by the state. The "who stole the gun?" mystery becomes a gripping and compelling narrative device, driving the plot while exposing the simmering, deep-seated anxieties and mistrust. Each woman becomes a suspect.

The parallel between the regime's power over the Iranian people and Iman's power over his family is a central theme. Just as the regime uses fear and surveillance to control its citizens, Iman uses similar tactics to control his family. The film suggests that authoritarianism isn't just a political system; it's a mindset that can permeate all aspects of life, even the most intimate relationships.

The Seed of the Sacred Fig is a film born of courage and defiance. Director Rasoulof, now living in exile in Germany, risked his freedom to make this film. He was sentenced to eight years in prison in Iran following the film's completion, a stark reminder of the dangers faced by artists who dare to challenge oppressive regimes.

The film's very existence is a testament to the power of art as a form of resistance. The fact that it was made in secret, under constant threat of discovery, adds another layer of meaning to its portrayal of fear and repression.

The film's use of real footage from the protests is particularly impactful, the raw, unfiltered images of violence and brutality serving as a stark reminder of the human cost of oppression. They also highlight the courage of the protesters, particularly the young women at the forefront of the movement. Rasoulof's decision to incorporate this footage breaks down the fourth wall, reminding us that the events depicted in the film are not fiction; they are a reflection of the reality faced by millions of Iranians.

The Seed of the Sacred Fig is not an easy watch. It is a film that will leave you feeling disturbed and unsettled. But it is also a profoundly important film – a powerful and timely reflection on the nature of power, the resilience of the human spirit, and the enduring importance of family.

This film offers a valuable opportunity to consider the universal themes of displacement, the breakdown of trust and the struggle for freedom. The context is specific to Iran, yet the film's exploration of these themes resonates with the experiences of refugees worldwide.

It is a film that will stay with you long after the credits have rolled, prompting reflection both on the challenges faced by families caught up in political upheaval and on the enduring hope for a better future. R