


MARCH/APRIL 2020

# DISCUSSION GUIDE

**AMNESTY**  
INTERNATIONAL   
**BOOK CLUB**  
**DISCUSSION**  
**GUIDE**



# ARIA

BY NAZANINE HOZAR

RECOMMENDED BY **ANOSH IRANI**



# WELCOME

## Amnesty Book Club members

Welcome back to the Amnesty International Book Club! To celebrate 2020's International Women's Day on March 8th and the Persian new year on March 20th, our guest reader, Anosh Irani, has picked *Aria* by Nazanine Hozar. Nazanine Hozar's stunning debut takes us inside the Iranian revolution—but seen like never before, through the eyes of an orphan girl. Through *Aria*, we meet three very different women who are fated to mother the lost child: reckless and self-absorbed Zahra, wife of the kind-hearted soldier; wealthy and compassionate Fereshteh, who welcomes Aria into her home, adopting her as an heir; and finally, the mysterious, impoverished Mehri, whose connection to Aria is both a blessing and a burden. The novel's heart-pounding conclusion takes us through the brutal revolution that installs Ayatollah Khomeini as Iran's supreme leader, even as Aria falls in love and becomes a young mother herself.

In this guide, you will find Irani's reflection on the book, as well as discussion questions, an Amnesty Background section, and an action you can take to call on Iranian authorities to free Yasaman Aryani, jailed for advocating for women to have the right to choose what clothing they wear.

Thank you for being part of the great community of Amnesty International Book Club. We appreciate your interest and would love to hear from you with any questions, suggestions or comments you may have. Just send us an email at [bookclub@amnesty.ca](mailto:bookclub@amnesty.ca).

# ARIA

*The Iranian revolution  
seen through the eyes  
of an orphan girl.*

## About Amnesty International

Amnesty International is a global movement of more than seven million supporters, members and activists in over 150 countries and territories who campaign to end grave abuses of human rights.

Our vision is for all people to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion, and are funded mainly by our membership.

Until everyone can enjoy all of their rights, we will continue our efforts. We will not stop until everyone can live in dignity; until every person's voice can be heard; until no one is tortured or executed.

Our members are the cornerstone of these efforts. They take up human rights issues through letter-writing, online and off line campaigning, demonstrations, vigils and direct lobbying of those with power and influence.

Locally, nationally and globally, we join together to mobilize public pressure and show international solidarity.

Together, we make a difference.

For more information about Amnesty International visit [www.amnesty.ca](http://www.amnesty.ca) or write to us at: Amnesty International, 312 Laurier Ave. E., Ottawa, ON K1N 1H9.

## About this month's author, Nazanine Hozar

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Nazanine Hozar was born in Tehran, Iran at the onset of the Iranian Revolution. She moved to Canada during the Iran-Iraq war. Her first novel, *Aria*, tells the story of the interconnected lives of a group of Iranians in the thirty years leading up to the 1979 revolution.

*Aria* is published by Knopf Canada and is a top ten Globe and Mail bestseller.

Nazanine holds an MFA in creative writing from the University of British Columbia and is currently working on her second novel.



*"A sweeping saga about the Iranian revolution as it explodes – told from the ground level and center of chaos. A Doctor Zhivago of Iran."*

—Margaret Atwood



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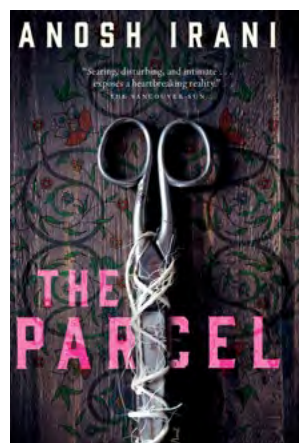
## About this month's reader, Anosh Irani

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Anosh Irani has published four critically acclaimed novels: *The Cripple and His Talismans*, a national bestseller; *The Song of Kahunsha*, which was an international bestseller and shortlisted for Canada Reads and the Ethel Wilson Fiction Prize;

*Dahanu Road*, which was long listed for the Man Asian Literary Prize; and *The Parcel*, which was shortlisted for the Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction, the Writers' Trust Fiction Prize, and the Ethel Wilson Fiction Prize. His play *Bombay Black* won the Dora Mavor Moore Award for Outstanding New Play, while his anthology *The Bombay Plays: The Matka King & Bombay Black* and his play *The Men in White* were both finalists for the Governor General's Literary Award for Drama. His latest collection of short stories, *Translated from the Gibberish: Seven Stories and One Half Truth*, has been published by Knopf.



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## Anosh Irani's reflection on *Aria*



A newborn baby left for dead, encircled by ravenous dogs. That's how Aria's journey—the eponymous heroine of Nazanine Hozar's expansive and gripping debut novel—begins. Rescued by a young Iranian army driver named Behrouz, Aria's destiny is shaped by the three women who end up mothering her: Behrouz's wife, Zahra, selfish and unhinged, who in stark contrast

to her husband's kindness, unleashes cruelty on the child; Fereshteh, a wealthy woman who opens her heart and home to Aria, and—much to the chagrin of her immediate family—bequeaths all her wealth to the girl; and Mehri, Aria's birth mother, who refuses to even hold the baby, as her husband, furious at not getting a son, threatens to kill the child.

But Aria is not one to succumb. She is a force unto herself. Or perhaps she is a prism through which Hozar views the history and cultural upheavals of her birthplace, Iran, through decades of disturbance, from the 1950s, when a US and UK-backed coup dispossesses prime minister Mohammad Mosaddeq and helps bring the Shah to power, to the Shah's fall as the country is torn apart by the Iranian revolution in 1979, making way for the Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamic Republic. Throughout all this, Hozar gives us a compelling character in Aria, whose fury at being abandoned results in a painful hunger to belong. This relentless need to belong is felt throughout the novel, underneath every page almost, like a subterranean shadow that causes cracks in the novel's surface and then disappears, only to re-emerge in the relationships Aria forges, from her moving bond with

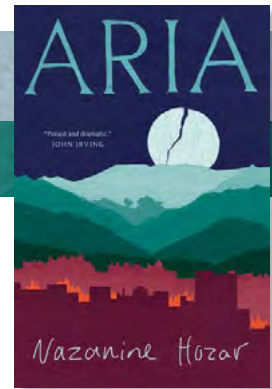
Kamran, a boy who lives close by to her and is as much of a misfit as Aria is, to her rambunctious relationship with her more privileged friends, Hamlet and Mitra.

Hozar builds the novel with patience and demands that of the reader as well. “The bricks are supposed to go on top of each other, but not exactly on top. Layered, see?” explains Kazem, as he talks about his trade to his son, Kamran. That is what Hozar aims for—a layered, complex main character who, each time she tries to do a good deed, immediately ends up doing something untoward as the pain of the past wells up inside her. It is this imbalance that keeps us guessing what will happen next and leads us to the novel's remarkable conclusion. Moreover, almost every character has a secret, is hiding something from the government or themselves, and ends up running from both. The personal and political are deeply connected—the inner lives of the novel's characters are in turmoil, much like the nation itself.

Currently, Iran is in the public consciousness, especially in Canada, after an Ukrainian International Airlines flight was shot down by the Iranian Republic on January 8, 2020. All passengers—176 of them—lost their lives. 63 Canadians were on board. The specter of pain keeps haunting the Iranian people, and diaspora, time and again. And one must turn to literature, to novels such as *Aria*, to find *something*—not solace because there is no balm for lost lives—but perhaps something to engage with, a tool to keep the dogs of madness and despair at bay. As Kazem the bricklayer says to his son, trying to underplay the damage done to his mangled finger after an accident at work: “It's all right. Everything heals.” But it's quite apparent that Kazem himself finds it hard to believe.

—Anosh Irani

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FROM GUEST READER ANOSH IRANI

1. In an interview with the *Globe and Mail*, the author says that “Hope will turn you mad.” Is there hope in *Aria*—the novel as well as the character? Do you feel novels must have hope in them? Can you think of a novel that did not have hope, but still succeeded in moving you?
2. Would it be fair to say that the city of Tehran is a character in the novel? How does Aria interact with the city of her birth? How does it shape her? Is she, in any way, able to shape it?
3. Could the mother characters represent different aspects of Iran? What could they represent?
4. “You know what can happen to us if they catch us, though?” Behrouz asks Rameen early in the novel (Pg. 34). “Not too many captains teach their men how to read books that scare the Shah.” Can you think of some of the books of the past—fiction or nonfiction—that have created unrest/disturbance? Does literature have that kind of impact today? Can literature create change during times of unrest and oppression?
5. The name Fereshteh means “Angel.” With respect to Aria, who do you think is the real angel in the story?
6. How does the political turbulence in Iran have an impact on the relationships between the characters in the novel? In spite of this turbulence, the author does manage to portray small victories/moments of love and joy. Did any of these moments stay with you?
7. As the novel progresses, one keeps getting the feeling that Hozar is leading us towards a formidable conclusion. What impact did the ending have on you? What do you think Aria’s life will be once the story ends?

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FROM THE AUTHOR, NAZANINE HOZAR

1. Near the end of the novel, when the Islamic regime takes control of Iran, compulsory hijab and veiling is forced on all women, regardless of their religious beliefs. How could the lack of choice for women affect a society’s mental and economic health, no matter the geo-political or cultural origins of that society?
2. Both before and even more so after the 1979 Revolution, Iran remains a country in which women’s bodies are frequently policed by men, as well as other women, and failure to comply with it may have extreme consequences. But is this encroachment on the female body only relegated to outwardly autocratic countries like Iran? Has and does it take place elsewhere?
3. Women’s rights and freedoms were one of the first basic human rights to be removed after the 1979 Revolution. Why, in so many countries where authoritarian regimes take control, are the rights of women often the first to go?
4. In what ways can the silencing of women and the gender apartheid affect men? Do we begin to see this in the novel and how?

# BACKGROUND

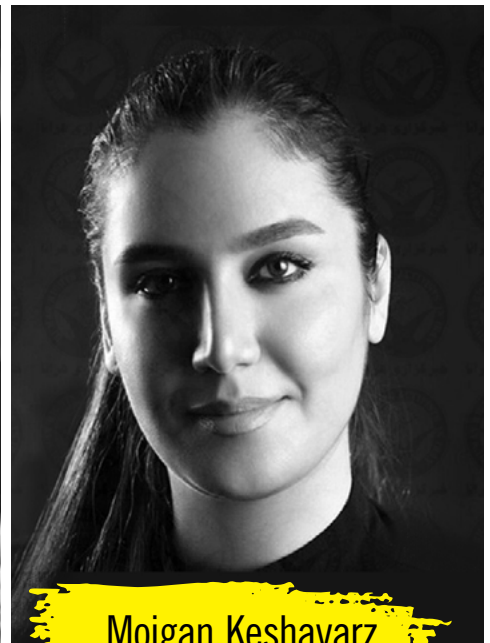
## Jailed for advocating for the right to choose what clothing you wear



**Yasaman Aryani**  
**16 years**



**Monireh Arabshahi**  
**16 years**



**Mojgan Keshavarz**  
**23 years, 6 months**

Two Iranian women human rights defenders, Yasaman Aryani and Monireh Arabshahi, have each been sentenced to 16 years in prison, while a third, Mojgan Keshavarz, has been sentenced to 23 years and six months in prison.

Women human rights defenders in Iran face smear campaigns, harassment, and lengthy prison sentences for peacefully advocating for justice and equality. But despite an ever-shrinking space to advocate for human rights, Iran has a thriving and active community of women human rights defenders who, despite grave risks to their safety, continue to courageously advocate for justice and equality.

Women human rights defenders continue to call on Iranian authorities to end discrimination against women in law and practice, including in access to divorce, employment, equal inheritance and political office, and in family and criminal law. They speak out against acts of violence against women and girls, including domestic violence and early and forced marriage, which are widespread and committed with impunity. They call for women to be allowed to run for president, and to sit at the cabinet table in government. They advocate for women to be allowed full access

to public spaces including football stadiums. They press for access to sexual health education and contraception. They call for women to have the right to choose what they wear and not be subject to compulsory veiling.

Amnesty International is actively campaigning for the release of many women human rights defenders in Iran, who have all received long prison sentences solely for their peaceful advocacy. We continue to advocate for the release of Narges Mohammadi, who has been sentenced to 16 years in prison for advocating for gender equality



and against the death penalty. We continue to press Iranian authorities to release Atena Daemi, who was sentenced to seven years in prison, also for her peaceful advocacy in support of women's rights and against the death penalty.

Most recently, Amnesty International has been advocating for world renowned women human rights defender and human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh to be released from prison. Nasrin has been sentenced to 38 years in prison and 148 lashes for defending the right for women in Iran to choose whether or not to wear the hijab, and for serving as the lawyer for other women who peacefully protest Iran's law on compulsory wearing of the hijab.

Iran's law mandating that women wear the hijab allows police and paramilitary forces to harass and detain women for showing strands of hair under their headscarves or for wearing heavy make-up or tight clothing. State-sanctioned smear campaigns have been conducted against women who campaign against the compulsory hijab. "Iran's authorities appear to be lashing out in response to the increased defiance displayed by Iranian women and the growing peaceful popular movement against forced veiling laws in a bid to intimidate them into silence and submission," said Magdalena Mughrabi, Deputy Middle East and North Africa Director at Amnesty International.

Women human rights defenders, Yasmin Aryani, Monireh Arabshahi, and Vida Movahedi have been detained and sentenced to prison for peacefully protesting against forced veiling.

Iran's intelligence and security bodies have also subjected several other women human rights defenders to threatening telephone calls, warning them that they will be arrested if they continue to campaign against forced wearing of the hijab. Some have been summoned for questioning and fear imminent arrest.

The criminalization of women and girls for not wearing hijab is an extreme form of gender-based discrimination and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment that deeply damages women's dignity. Instead of persecuting and jailing women who are standing up to this outrageous injustice Iranian authorities should immediately and unconditionally release all women human rights defenders detained for their peaceful activism.

Iranian authorities must allow women to choose whether or not to wear the hijab. They must stop harassing, arresting, and imprisoning women human rights defenders who are peacefully protecting compulsory veiling, and release all those detained on this basis immediately and unconditionally.

**Amnesty International firmly opposes all forms of Islamophobia and condemns any and all acts of white supremacist racism and violence against Muslim communities.**



# ACT NOW!

Amnesty International Switzerland staff demand the liberation of Yasaman Aryani. Photo taken outside the Permanent Mission of the Republic of Iran to the United Nations, Geneva, Switzerland, on December 10, 2019.



## Urge the Iranian government to release Yasaman immediately!

In Iran, it's a crime for women to appear in public with their hair uncovered. Yasaman Aryani, a 24-year-old activist, wanted to change this. She's been sentenced to 16 years in prison for campaigning against forced veiling.

It was International Women's Day 2019 when Yasaman and her mother took off their headscarves and walked through a women-only train carriage in Tehran, handing out flowers. Yasaman spoke of her hopes for a future when all women would have the freedom to choose what to wear, "me without the hijab

and you with the hijab." After a video of this went viral, Yasaman was arrested and charged with "inciting and facilitating corruption and prostitution" through promoting "unveiling."

After the authorities held Yasaman in solitary confinement and threatened to arrest her family if she didn't "repent," they sentenced her to 16 years in prison. She is required to serve 10 years of this sentence.

Yasaman's cruel punishment is part of a wider crackdown on women campaigning against discriminatory forced veiling laws in Iran. The Iranian authorities must not be allowed to rob Yasaman of the best years of her life – simply because she believes women should have the right to choose what they wear.

### Help us advocate for Yasaman's release.

Sign the petition, call on the Iranian authorities to:

- Unconditionally release Yasaman Aryani from prison; and
- Unconditionally release from prison all other women human rights defenders detained for peacefully protesting against forced veiling.

To take action, go to <https://bit.ly/387w5Nv> to sign the petition.



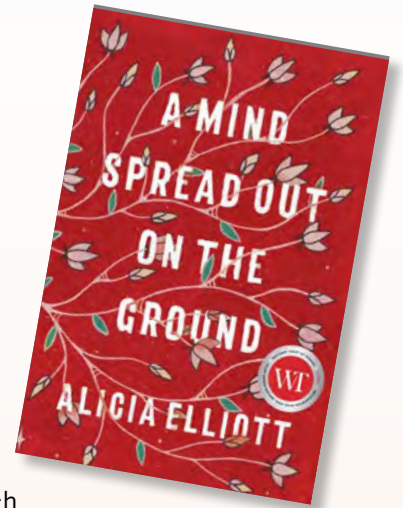


## COMING UP FOR MAY/JUNE 2020

### A MIND SPREAD OUT ON THE GROUND

By Alicia Elliott

Recommended by guest reader:  
Arielle Twist



**A bold and profound meditation on trauma, legacy, oppression and racism in North America from award-winning Haudenosaunee writer Alicia Elliott.**

In an urgent and visceral work that asks essential questions about the treatment of Native people in North America while drawing on intimate details of her own life and experience with intergenerational trauma, Alicia Elliott offers indispensable insight into the ongoing legacy of colonialism. She engages with such wide-ranging topics as race, parenthood, love, mental illness, poverty, sexual assault, gentrification, writing and representation, and in the process makes connections both large and small between the past and present, the personal and political—from overcoming a years-long battle with head lice to the way Native writers are treated within the Canadian literary industry; her unplanned teenage pregnancy to the history of dark matter and how it relates to racism in the court system; her childhood diet of Kraft Dinner to how systemic oppression is directly linked to health problems in Native communities.

With deep consideration and searing prose, Elliott provides a candid look at our past, an illuminating portrait of our present and a powerful tool for a better future.

**The discussion guide will be sent out in May 2020.**

In the meantime, if you have any questions or comments, please contact us at [bookclub@amnesty.ca](mailto:bookclub@amnesty.ca).

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- Check us out on Facebook at **Amnesty International Book Club**, Twitter at **@AmnestyReads**, Instagram at **@AmnestyBookClub** and join our discussion group on **Goodreads.com**



*"Outrage prompted me to join Amnesty, but hope for a future with justice moved me to leave a gift in my will."*

—NANCY KINGSBURY

# WHY I'M LEAVING A GIFT IN MY WILL TO HUMAN RIGHTS THROUGH **AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL**

Long-time Amnesty International supporter and Book Club member, **NANCY KINGSBURY**, tells us how joining the organization changed her life, and why she wants human rights work to be part of her own legacy.

I first joined Amnesty International nearly 30 years ago, after visiting a campus display on prisoners of conscience from Central Africa. An overpowering sense of outrage prompted me to join the Amnesty group on campus. I continued to volunteer with Amnesty, writing letters, acting as coordinator, and even joining the Board of Directors.

Looking back at Amnesty's history, I have witnessed the growth of a powerful and vital movement. Today, we speak out for the protection of refugees worldwide, and seek justice for missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada. We address our own government regarding their arms deal with Saudi Arabia, and mobilise thousands of people to send messages of solidarity to individuals locked away in dark corners. We are also increasing our efforts to face the greatest human rights challenge of our time: climate change.

All this and more have made me see how far Amnesty has come, and imagine how far it can go in the future. All this has moved me to leave a gift in my will to Amnesty.

I have confidence that Amnesty International will be a financially responsible and effective human

rights organization long into the future—and this way my commitment to human rights can be more than life-long.

Join us as a **Human Rights Guardian** by leaving a gift in your will to human rights through Amnesty International.

To find out more information, or to let us know that you have left a gift in your will, please contact **Hala Al-Madi** at: **1-800-266-3789/613-744-7667 ext 223** or email: [halmadi@amnesty.ca](mailto:halmadi@amnesty.ca)

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