

Equal of the Sun
Anita Amirrezvani
Reading Group Guide

Introduction

In sixteenth century Iran, the princess Pari Khan Khanoom rules alongside her father, Tahmasb Shah. But when the shah dies without leaving an heir, the court at Qazveen is thrown into upheaval. Amid the squabbling about who will become the next shah, Pari is faced with a dilemma—how can she ensure that whoever becomes shah will accept her as an adviser as her father did? Pari’s eunuch and confidante Javaher—known for his ability to extract information from any source and navigate the tricky hierarchies at the court—comes to her aid. But he has his own agenda—to uncover who accused his own father of treason years before.

Topics & Questions for Discussion

- 1. In the opening pages of *Equal of the Sun*, Javaher notes: “People say that one’s future is inscribed on the forehead at birth—Pari’s forehead announced a future that was rich and storied.” Does Pari fulfill her prophecy? What about Javaher?*
- 2. Why do you think Pari opposes Haydar and supports Isma’il, even though she hasn’t seen Isma’il since she was a girl?*
- 3. How much did you know about Iranian history before reading *Equal of the Sun*? What was the most striking or interesting thing you learned while reading?*
- 4. Balamani calls information a “jewel” and it is from this proclamation that Javaher derives his name. How does information act as a currency in *Equal of the Sun*? Does Javaher live up to his name?*
- 5. There are many different, competing tribes in Qazveen, including the Ostajlu, the Takkalu, and the Circassians. Javaher himself has both Tajik and Turkic blood. How do these tribal conflicts influence Pari’s attempt at power?*
- 6. What do you think is the significance of the novel’s title, *Equal of the Sun*?*
- 7. Why do you think Javaher agrees to become a eunuch at such a late stage in life? Is it his only option?*

8. *Excerpts from the epic poem the Shahnameh appear before each chapter. How do these passages influence your understanding of the novel? What role does poetry play in Pari and Javaher's world?*
9. *Javaher attempts to avenge his father by discovering who ordered him killed. Does he find closure when he uncovers the truth? Discuss your response.*
10. *How does Javaher feel about Pari? Romantic? Paternal? Worshipful? How do these feelings change and evolve throughout the course of the novel?*
11. *Javaher says, "God demanded that his leaders rule with justice, but what if they did not? Must we simply endure tyranny?" Do you think Javaher and Pari come to a moral solution when dealing with Isma'il? Why or why not?*
12. *Pari describes Javaher as a "third sex." Do you see aspects of both masculinity and femininity in Javaher's character? What about Pari?*
13. *Javaher says, "Just because we have gotten rid of a Zahhak doesn't mean we have to become one." Are Javaher and Pari ever in danger of using their power too ruthlessly? Do they ever step over the line?*
14. *Why is Pari so stubborn in her treatment of Mirza Salman and Mohammed after Mohammed is chosen shah, even when Javaher and Shamkhal warn her against it? What are the ramifications of her actions?*
15. *From his relationships with his sister, Mahmood, and Massoud Ali, it's clear that Javaher would have liked to be a father. Do you think he regrets his decision to become a eunuch? How do his feelings change over the course of the novel?*
16. *Do you think Amirrezvani's observations about power and gender have resonance today? Discuss.*

Enhance Your Book Club

1. *Find a copy of the Shahnameh at your local library. Anita Amirrezvani recommends translations by Dick Davis and Arthur George and Edmond Warner. Have each member read a passage aloud at your book club meeting. Do any of the passages remind you of scenes from *Equal of the Sun*? Discuss the experience of reading the passages aloud with your book club members.*
2. *Food plays an important role in the court at Qazveen—especially the sweets offered to guests visiting the ladies' chambers. Prepare popular Iranian desserts—like *Shol-e-zard**

(saffron rice pudding) or Paloodeh (sorbet made of vermicelli noodles)—to serve to members at your book club discussion.

3. In the Prologue, Javaher says of Pari: “When I think of her, I remember not only her power; but her passion for verse.” Instruct each book club member to bring in their favorite piece of verse—it can be a famous quote, a sentence from a beloved novel, or a favorite poem. Share with the group and discuss why you choose it. What is it about the sentence structure or word choice that draws you in?