

WOMEN WITHOUT MEN: A TALE OF WOMEN IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

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Abstract

The Islamic Republic of Iran has been at the forefront of news in the media for various reasons especially for its nuclear programme. Lesser known is its women who rally for democratic measures every day. Before the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the women of this country were seen as some of the most advanced in the world. Following the revolution, women faced segregation and sidelining as a result of the new laws based on the Shari a.

In this context, this paper attempts to view the condition of women in Iran through the novella by the Iranian writer Shahrnush Parsipur – *Women without Men*. Parsipur, who has been in exile a few years after the revolution, attempts to trace the problems faced by Iranian women today. Written in the style of magical realism, the book traces the lives of five women as they make their way to a garden in Karaj and eventually find themselves, going on to create new lives for themselves. Each of the women, be it Mahdokht who becomes a tree, or Farrokhlaqa, who becomes a socialite, find solace and respite in the garden before transforming themselves into something new.

Despite being written in the style of magical realism, to evade government censors, the audience gets a glimpse of life in Iran for women after the revolution and how they are fighting back with every ounce possible. Women in Iran are taking to the streets to protest the regime. They are taking to public unveiling to protest the crackdown by the country's law enforcers – the *basiji*. They are even using Internet campaigns in plenty, in the hope that the laws might change to provide them with the freedom they once knew. *Women without Men* thus becomes a reflection of not only these events, but also the struggle by women in Iran to come to terms with a strict regime and how they find liberation despite the debilitating circumstances.

Keywords: Iran, women, Women without Men, Sharnush Parsipur

1. INTRODUCTION

The Islamic Republic of Iran has been making it to the headlines for all the wrong reasons. Its nuclear programme has created a series of debates with even echoes resounding of an impending war with the nation. The Trump administration continues to declare embargo on Iran.

Amidst such troubled times, the women of Iran stand tall, attempting to defy the restrictions imposed on them by the ruling regime. Whether it is mandatory veiling, or the glass ceiling in government jobs, the women of Iran are taking to the streets or even the Internet, to register their protest against the freedom they have been denied.

It is on this aspect that Sharnush Parsipur talks about in her popular novella *Women without Men*. Parsipur's book continues to be banned in Iran and this talks volumes about the reach of her book. The book deals with five women from different walks of life coming together in a garden in Karaj in Iran. This garden proves to be a safe space for these women who evolve into their best selves.

2. BACKGROUND OF THE NOVEL

Parsipur is a popular writer from Iran, best known for her use of magical realism in her works. It is to be remembered that her choice of such a mode of writing was influenced by heavy censorship in her home country. Iran continues to pervade almost all walks of life of its citizens with its strict policies, aided by the notorious *basiji*, best known for their relentless policing of people on the streets for even the slightest deviation from the law in terms of dressing or social interactions.

While the law enforcers might have taken a step back in terms of policing, there continues to be large-scale harassing and intense crackdowns on anyone who disobeys or deviates from the law. It is in such a context that the novel *Women without Men* was produced in 1989. It managed to land the author in jail twice without a court trial. It also led to all her books being banned in Iran. They continue to do so even today.

3. THE WOMEN IN THE NOVEL

Women without Men is a novella consisting of the tales of five women from varied backgrounds who come together in a garden in Karaj. The novel weaves together tales of the real and the fantastical. Mahdokht is a woman who decides to become a tree by planting herself in the ground in the garden. "I'm not a seed, I'm a tree. I must plant myself" (10), Mahdokht explains. Her family is forced to sell the house and garden, unable to bear the shame of seeing Mahdokht become a tree.

Farrokhlaqa is married to a man she has come to despise. His primary hobby after retirement was to taunt and make fun of his wife. She accidentally kills him when he looks at her in a different way one day and she punches him in the stomach which causes him to fall the down the stairs and die. This leads her to selling her house and buying the garden in Karaj.

Faizeh and Munis arrive at the garden together. Faizeh wanted to marry Munis' brother and she helps him bury the body after he kills his sister in a fit of rage. But the man Amir marries a pretty, young woman leaving Faizeh disheartened. When Munis wakes up from the dead a second time, they leave the house together and make their way to Karaj. They are raped on the way by truck drivers but Munis finds insight into the tragedy that happened to her. Faizeh and Munis remain together till they reach the garden.

Munis is a woman who dies twice: once when she jumps from a building but wakes up, and a second time when her brother kills her and has her buried. From this too she wakes but with a new ability – the ability to read minds. With this ability she gains insight into the people around her.

Zarrinkolah is a prostitute who becomes distraught when she begins to see her customers headless. She is unable to tell anyone this problem and eventually she leaves the house and walks to Karaj. On the way she meets the good gardener and they arrive at the garden together.

The five women thus come together in the safe space of the garden to find healing and eventually discover who they really are. The garden thus becomes a safe space for the women before they become who they were truly meant to be.

4. THE GARDEN

The garden had nothing spectacular about it. It was like any other garden in Iran with the exception of the human tree. Yet it is this garden that provides a sanctuary for the five women and allows them to transform themselves into the person they desired to be.

It is in the garden that Mahdokht transforms herself from a human being into a tree. It is in the garden that Zarrinkolah gives birth. It is in the garden that Farrokhlaqa finally entertains her guest with spectacular music. It is also in the garden that Faizeh finds who she wants to be with and it is here that Munis finds that she needs to travel to find answers.

For each of the five women, the garden becomes a symbol of their freedom from male control and their capacity to reinvent themselves outside the confines of male society (Karim 164). The garden thus becomes a haven for them – a means of escape from the outside world. They are cocooned in the garden as they carry out construction and entertain guests. From there they learn to fly and take form into who they should be – whether a tree or as smoke – they transform into butterflies or their true selves, finally settling down in

the real world.

5. MAHDOKHT

Mahdokht was a school teacher who felt the need to regenerate herself without indulging in the messy business of sex. That is how she plants herself in the ground like a tree, near the river. She had chanced upon the gardener in coitus with the maid. This had caused a different set of thoughts to enter her. "My virginity is like a tree (Parsipur 10)," she thought suddenly. "I'm not a seed, I'm a tree. I must plant myself" (Parsipur 10).

Mahdokht's dream was to become a tree, sprout leaves and eventually spread her seeds all over the world. This dream finally did come true for her, when with the good gardener's careful tending, she burst into seeds that spread everywhere.

Mahdokht can be seen as a representation of the Iranian woman who wishes to grow beyond the boundaries set upon her by society and the laws. Despite Iran having strict laws, the Iranian woman chooses to live her life as fully as she can. Iranian universities are today filled with about eighty percent women. These women are pushing boundaries like Mahdokht did.

6. FARROKHLAQA

Farrokhlāqa was married to Golchereh whom she had come to despise. "Every day his wife waited patiently for him to go so that she could feel energetic and move about freely. Whenever he was in the house she would lose her ability to move, and she would hide in a corner" (Parsipur 56).

As they both despised each other, there was little love between them. When Golchereh shows tender feelings to Farrokhlāqa for the first time, she panics and punches him in the stomach which leads to him falling down the stairs and his instant death. This frees her from her husband's clutches for the first time and she is able to do as she wishes. So she buys the house with a garden in Karaj and supervises its construction work which is managed by the ladies and the good gardener. Eventually Farrokhlāqa finds her calling as a socialite and the wife of someone who like her wishes to move up the ranks.

Farrokhlāqa can be seen in the light of Iran as a representation of the women of that country. The Iranian woman is blocked by the glass ceiling from rising higher. Iranian women were forced, after the Revolution, to give up their higher postings like High court judges, to make way for men. The panoptical control Golchereh has over his wife, can be seen in this light. Women in Iran could not be who they wanted to be. To rise in society they need the help of men on whom their social standing depends.

7. FAIZEH

Faizeh is shown in the novel as being slightly vindictive in the beginning. When she and Munis decide to take the road to Karaj, they are raped on the way. It upsets Faizeh very much but they end up in the garden at Karaj where Faizeh helps with the construction work. After a while she began to frequent Tehran to meet Amir on a daily basis. Amir was already married. Nevertheless he later married Faizeh and set her up in their own home.

Faizeh can be seen as the ordinary Iranian woman's representation. She has no outstanding qualities or abilities but yet she finds a way to get the man whom she longed to be with - Amir. "Their life is neither good nor bad. It just goes on" (126). Faizeh shows that it is possible to reach one's goals despite restrictions.

8. MUNIS

Munis is shown at the beginning of the novella as a simple-minded woman. When Faizeh visits her, she has no courage to even turn on the radio in the house in the other woman's presence. After she discovers that virginity is not a curtain she jumps from a building and dies but comes back from the dead. She then roams the streets for days during unrest. When she returns home her brother Amir kills her for a second time. But when she returns from the dead she has gained the ability to read minds.

She and Faizeh take the road to Karaj. On the way they are raped by truck drivers. But while Faizeh cries over it, Munis tells her: "Well, Faizeh dear, I was a virgin too. To hell with it. We were virgins, now we're not. It's nothing to cry over (Parsipur 97)." At the end of the novella, Munis is told by the gardener that it is time for her to become light by comprehending the darkness (Parsipur 128). She spends seven years roaming the desert before becoming a school teacher.

Munis often takes a philosophical stance throughout the novel. She dwells on everything around her. Munis

also advises Farrokhlaqa on many matters. Munis is not the kind of woman to stand up and fight. Yet she finds her way in the end. This could be because she is your everyday subdued woman. Society has inflicted their ways on her and she has been forced to accept.

The Iranian woman can also be seen in Munis: she observes all that happens around her yet not participating in the violence she sees. Though she is killed twice, she returns from the dead each time. The Iranian woman too returns from a mental death – they continue to ask for their rights even though they are stopped each time. In Munis too we can see the Iranian woman in quest of knowledge. They enter universities, making up a majority of the students. Through learning they expect to see the path they have to take, like Munis. As T.S. Eliot says, “The journey, not the destination matters.”

9. ZARRINKOLAH

Zarrinkolah was a prostitute till she arrived at the garden. She left her job at the brothel when she began to see her customers as headless. She tried going to the bath house and performing ablutions but whether they helped or not is not definite. Not knowing how to pray, she repeated the name Ali several times. This landed the writer Parsipur in trouble with the law.

At the garden in Karaj, Zarrinkolah works with the good gardener. She becomes his wife and falls pregnant. During her pregnancy she becomes transparent and stops talking. She gives birth to a lily which the gardener plants in the garden. In the end, they sit on the lily and travel the world as smoke.

In Zarrinkolah, we can see instances of the Iranian woman. The Iranian woman must go beyond the boundaries imposed on them if they are to find themselves. They have to transcend the limits imposed on them if they are to go far. Many Iranian women fight silent battles of which the world knows nothing about. Their online crusades such as the Boob Quake or the one million signature campaign, show that like Zarrinkolah, they will do what is required to be happy.

10. WOMEN IN IRAN AND THE NOVEL

The novel had a huge impact on the citizens of Iran. Its continued status as a banned book is testimony to this fact. While the novel is written in the style of magical realism, it reflects conditions in Iran especially in the case of women. Following the Iranian Revolution of 1979, women found that contrary to their expectations, the revolution had brought more problems, not less. Veiling became mandatory. Women in higher positions were asked to resign. The government adopted strict Sharia laws for governance. The internal policing force known as the *basiji* were brought in to roam the streets and reprimand women for matters like wearing make-up or showing a few strands of hair from under their veil.

Women in Iran found life far more difficult than before and consequently took to every means possible to show their resistance. They began enrolling in large numbers in universities. Many of them took to the streets to protest the strict laws. The government continued to function unheeding Iranian women's requests. Women took to writing online for which many faced imprisonment and in some cases even death.

Iranian women were not giving in without a fight. Even today they continue to show their resistance in countless ways. Many writers have been forced into exile and some have disappeared without a trace. What Parsipur's novel attempts to do is give voice to the women of Iran. It is this aspect that made the novel popular before it was banned.

11. CONCLUSION

Parsipur dreams of a country where women have equal rights and the freedom men have. Though still a dream her hope is that through various means they can make inroads into a fundamentalist rule and thus help the eventual realization of not only her own dream, but that of her counterparts at home, as well.

Through her protagonists, Parsipur attempts to provide readers a glimpse of life in modern Iran and how it is possible to overcome oppression by re-visioning their lives. Parsipur raises a voice of hope that in the Islamic Republic of Iran, where women have returned to the voiceless state of the Dark Ages, freedom and rights are still attainable.

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