

## *Women Without Men* by Shahnush Parsipur **FROM UTOPIA TO REALITY**

by Asghar Massombagi, *The Iranian*

**S**hahnush Parsipur's *Women Without Men* came out right after the 1979 revolution when the Iranian literary life, along with the rest of the society was too consumed with explicit politics of power to take notice of a rather strange little novel (a novella really as the book is a slim 135 pages). Why then bother writing a book over two decades after its initial publication?

Well in spite of its size, *Women Without Men* packs quite a punch and, at least in my opinion, marks quite a watershed in Iran's modern prose, which up to the 1979 revolution, with the notable exception of Simin Daneshvar, was largely male dominated. It's clearly a seminal work. Has it influenced other female or male writers? If not, it should have. It's mixture of realism, surrealism and fabulism as well as its appropriation of Iran's modern literary history is bold and post-modern.

Parsipur's ambition is no less than to articulate what it means to be an Iranian woman, or to be precise the Iranian womanhood as it is represented by Tehrani women. In poetry, both Forough Farrokhzad and Tahereh Saffarzadeh had previously charted the dicey waters of presenting works that were clearly marked by their experiences as women.

In fiction however, Daneshvar's work was permeated with too much of masculine politics of her contemporary male writers and the politeness of her middle class upbringing. It would take a braver, perhaps more trans-

gressive writer to use the word *jendeh* (whore) liberally in a book and describe a prostitute having sex with her trick in a language unbecoming of a nice Iranian middle class lady writer.

Parsipur's writing career goes back three decades and *Women Without Men* certainly contains both thematically and stylistically, elements of pre-revolution Iranian literature. But its urgency to present a female narrative is very much a post-revolutionary one.

Briefly, the novel concerns the lives of five women, who temporally exist in different time periods and belong to different social classes. Farrokhlagha is an aristocrat from an old family and lives in the prosperous northern Tehran; Mahdokht and her friend Faeze are working class girls from southern Tehran. Faeze is in love with

Mahdokht's brother Amir and is hopeful that one day she will marry him.

Amir however is too busy being an anti-Shah activist to bother with Faez's desperate insinuation of love and marriage; Zarrinkolah is a prostitute who works and lives in the Tehran's notorious red hot district; and Munis is a shy, timid girl from a middle class family, hostage to her virginity and destined to be an old maid and work as a teacher.

Their paths cross, in the book's surreal and fabulist logic, because their destinies are determined by their gender. These women occupy that inner sanctum of muted gestures, brief glances, hushed voices, internal monologues, day dreams, gossips and petty rivalries that is a strong aspect of womanhood in a society like Iran.

The anxiety defining their lives is the specter of virginity and the potential loss of it. Virginity becomes a metaphor for the claustrophobic, at times nightmarish, experience of being a woman, excluded from the public arena and exiled into inner lives. Farrokhlagha and Zarrinkolah have prostituted theirs, the former for social status and the riches, the latter for a mere chance to exist.

Faeze and Mahdokht lose theirs

Photo Watson Institut



to the rapist truckers, hence being punished for their acts of transgression. Munis, the good respectable girl, is merely a prisoner of hers, her long repressed desires knotted into sever neurosis.

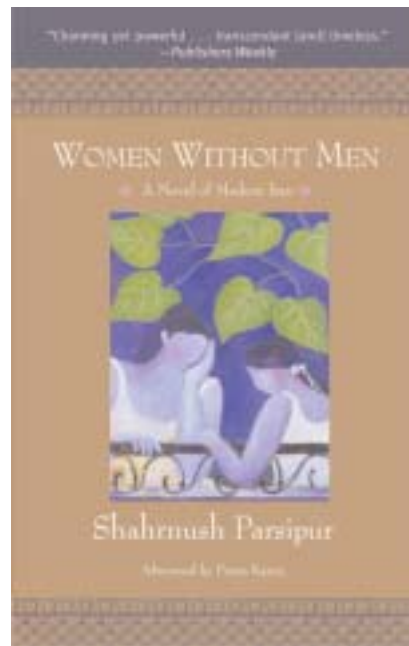
After a series of highly charged dramatic tableaux, from rape and sister killing to resurrection and murder, the five women end up in a beautiful garden oasis in Karaj. The majestic Farrokhlagha having bought the garden from Munis's family resides over the other women like a secular mother superior.

Her ambition is to become a literary personality and towards that end she turns the garden to a salon, attended by artists and literati. She takes poetry classes and sets out to compose a poem which is to make her name and transform her from the beautiful trophy wife of a well to do bureaucrat to an individual on par with any man.

Meanwhile the other women tend to the house and the garden. They clean and prune and cook and tend the guests and make occasional visits to the city. Once the initial euphoria dies down, the original bond amongst the women begins to disintegrate. Farrakhlagha, in her ivory tower, tires from the all the fussing and squabbling between Feaze and Mahdokht. Faeze yearns for Amir's arms and can't stand being around cipher presence of Mahdokht who can listen to everybody's inner thoughts.

The women having arrived at the utopia of their womanhood find themselves divided by boundaries of class, and the burden of human nature -- the petty jealousies and squabbles that marked their private worlds in the city continue to haunt them in their utopia of the Karaj garden.

In the end they achieve their desired destinies, grand and



poetic as well as minute and quotidian by leaving the garden and joining the humanity in general. They do get from life what they set out to get. Farrokhlagha marries a man she loves and ends up in Paris of her Julie Andrews dreams; Faeze marries Amir; Zarrinkolah becomes as pure as light, having literarily washed shame and grim of selling her body and bears a beautiful child who is a flower; and Munis metamorphasizes into tree, in effect an abstract idea of life.

Is the garden a kind of utopia, a sort of all-women Eden? (There is one lone male, an elderly gardener shacking up with Zarrinkolah). Initially, yes, at least that's what the women imagine it could be. But no sooner the writer brings her characters to the garden when she sets out to tear down its foundation. And that's what saves the book from a potentially reductivist fate.

Parsipur is much sharper than the average girl power, writer. Throughout she remains clear eyed and sober. The garden where the five women come together is no feminist utopia -- the women stay divided by their

prejudices, limitations on their imagination and their social origins. In fact once they leave the society that marks them by their gender and become a sort of non-gendered citizens of the garden, their differences surface. In place of patriarchy, money, social class and human nature separates them.

Parsipur's prose closely reflects the lives of her characters. One minute realist, next minute fabulist, then surrealist. In one instant it mimics the socially conscious political novels of post-1953 coup then turns into a parabolic and phantasmagoric tale.

In doing so Parsipur has written a book which is not only a critique of the patriarchal Iranian society but also a critique of masculine, male-dominated Iranian literature. *Women Without Men* is both about an idea of life as well an idea of literature, that is, not only about what it means to be a woman in Iran but how to write about this experience.

To start with, the title of the book, I assume, is a play on Hemingway's famous collection of short stories, *Men without Women*. However where Hemingway's muscular, spare and realist prose portrays an epic mural of masculinity in crisis, Parsipur's style veers in and out of realism, fabulism and surrealism. In place of Hemingway's men of action, Parsipur's characters live internal lives permeated by repressed desires and long gone memories.

Parsipur mixes the realist style with the fabulist and the surreal with such ease that the reader moves ever so naturally from the clear eyed description of the demonstrations on the historical 28th of Mordad, to the surreal death and subsequent resurrection of Mahdokht.

In what one might call a post-modern technique, Parsipur

usurps and employs the literary styles of the male writers to weave a narrative of a group of disenfranchised women. The narrative of political writers of post 28th of Mordad era is primarily about the coming of age of a young activist man and the maturing of their political consciousness, to the exclusion of female characters, except as sexual catalyst in their maturing.

Amir the political activist brother of Mahdokht could easily be a protagonist of Beizaei or Dolatabadi's stories. But instead of walking the burning streets of Tehran or Ahvaz with Amir, we're stuck with Mahdokht and Feaze, impotent and helpless at home, excluded from the political arena. By making Amir a close minded sister killer, Parsipur questions the dominant masculine pre-revolution literary discourse.

In yet another literary appropriation, Farrokhlagh's story is told in a style close to Virginia Wolf's tales of regret and lost time. Farrokhlagha lives a primarily internal life, one suffused with memory of old lovers, passionate kisses behind elm trees, summer afternoon walks in the tree lined street. And she bubbles with resentment towards her husband, a boring, unfeeling government official as she fantasizes about plotting his murder.

To tell the story of Feaze and Mahdokht's flight, the writer then borrows from the popular melodramas of an earlier era in Iran, where women from decent families, through some fault of their own leave the safety of their family (often transgressing against the authority of their fathers and brothers) and end up raped (the rapist truck drivers are the staples of this genre), dishonored, often landing in a brothel.

This post-modern quilt of a narrative is then framed with Farsi mythology and its concept of garden of pleasures and

knowledge. Then the Karaj garden, the oasis away from the heat and grim of Tehran, is this garden of pleasures and knowledge where the women escape to.

The fact that the garden fails to live up to its utopian billing is not a measure of the writer's pessimism but her sobriety. She doesn't fetishize womanhood. Women are not inherently better or worse than men. They're just people, warts and all and deserve a chance in happiness like everyone else. [*The Iranian* - August 17, 2001] [S]

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Shahnush Parsipur  
**Touba**  
**and the Meaning of Night**

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In the late Nineteenth century Iran, to help her recently widowed mother avoid an unwanted marriage, Touba, at the age of fourteen, gets married to her father's cousin - a man 36 years her senior. She divorces her husband at the age of eighteen after going on a food strike but she finds it hard to manage an independent life and is forced into marrying a Qajar prince. Amongst the prince's relatives

there's a man by the name of Prince Gill with a wife called Leila. This couple leads a life different than the other courtiers.

Touba gives birth to four children and as the Qajar dynasty begins to lose power she is driven into poverty and to support her children she's forced to yield to manual labor - carpet weaving. In the meanwhile her husband marries fourteen-year-olds. Touba divorces him too and later becomes witness to the murder of Setareh, a girl-by her own uncle-impregnated by force by some soldiers. This event destabilizes Touba's state of sanity. They bury the girl under a pomegranate tree and Touba assumes the guardianship of the girl's little brother and the care taking of her grave.

Touba's daughter, Munes, falls in love with a man by the name of Ismail. But their wedding is canceled because of Ismail's imprisonment. Munes is forced to abort her unborn child with very elementary means and consequently becomes infertile. At the same time she's subject to Touba's rage. Later on Ismail leaves the prison and they get

married. They consequently adopt the three children of a mason and each of these children joins a separate political movement in his/her adulthood. The book ends with the death of Maryam, one of the children, who is pregnant and she's buried under the same tree as Setareh. In the final scene, Leila, Prince Gill's wife, comes to visit Touba and reveals some secrets to her.

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