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*interfaces 2*

**ROAMING IN A VIRGINAL GARDEN WITH WOMEN WITHOUT MEN**

**a working paper**

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## A CURIOUS DISTINCTION

Shahnush Parsipur's novella, *Women Without Men*, has a significant, though somewhat unrecognized, place in the post-revolutionary Iranian literature. A clarification is necessary: Although the fifteen interconnected story fragments that together make the novella were written prior to the 1979 Revolution, the book in its entirety was published first in 1990.<sup>1</sup> This was a short time after the publication of her longer novel, *Tuba and the Meaning of Night (Tuba va ma'nay-e shab)*, placed Parsipur and her writing at the centre of an unprecedented popular attention. *Tuba* reached its third and fourth editions within only a few months, breaking the records in terms of the number of copies sold (estimated at fifty thousand), and made Parsipur one of the most sought-after writers by many publishing houses.<sup>2</sup> The book immediately received many reviews and critiques in the literary magazines of all political inclinations. Although Parsipur had published two collections of short stories before, in the words of one male reviewer *Tuba* marked its writer as a "serious novelist."<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, *Women without Men* placed its writer in prison shortly after it was published in its only edition of five thousand copies. It also caused the shut-down of the publishing house and the arrest and imprisonment of the publisher by the authorities.

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<sup>1</sup> In an interview with this author Parsipur stated that some of the stories were individually published in a number of magazines during 1977 and 1978. I have not been able to locate these magazines.

<sup>2</sup> In fact, Parsipur stands out in that period as the only writer who was given a monetary advance by a publishing house toward the writing of her next book, *The Blue Wisdom*. She did not enjoy this luxury, for she was imprisoned and the publishing house shut down, and copies of the new book's manuscript confiscated from her house. Fortunately, a copy of the manuscript which was sent to her friend survived, and *The Blue Wisdom* was published outside Iran two years later.

<sup>3</sup> Coming across this remark greatly surprised this author. Prior to *Tuba*, Parsipur had published two collections of short stories and another novel, which should have sufficed in considering her serious about her writing, especially since male authors do not seem to have any higher threshold for entering into the literary seriousness.

The majority of the reviews of this book have been published outside Iran and mostly only after the writer left the country upon her release a year and a half later.<sup>4</sup>

For people who are even slightly familiar with the post-revolutionary events in Iran, or those who remember the Rushdi affair, the imprisonment of a writer and threats to her personal safety and freedom of expression are nothing singular. Many prominent and popular intellectuals have suffered the prisons of the Islamic Republic. Many others have lost their lives in the oppressive campaigns of political cleansing, from Sa'id Soltanpour who was arrested on his wedding night and executed in the Evin prison less than a year after the revolution, to Mohammad Mokhtari and Ja'far Pouyandeh whose brutally slaughtered bodies were discovered in the wastelands around Tehran only two years ago.

But two facts single out Parsipur's case: 1) She was arrested by the Moral Prohibitions Committee (Komite-ye Monkarat) rather than the Revolutionary Guards (Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enghelab). This distinction is an important one. While there are certainly overlaps in the two forces' jurisdictions, the Moral Prohibitions Committee is primarily responsible for overseeing the enforcement of "Islamic morality" (*akhlagh-e eslami*) and the prevention of offenses such as consumption of alcohol, prostitution, prohibited social company and bad veiling. On the other hand, the Revolutionary Guards are responsible for the enforcement of the political ideology and the suppression of political opposition. 2) Parsipur was sent to the Ghasr Prison rather than the Evin Prison. The latter is primarily dedicated to those accused or found guilty of 'political offenses', while the former houses 'common criminals' such as murderers, thieves and drug dealers, and 'moral criminals'

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<sup>4</sup> Women without Men has not been reprinted in Iran since then. But it has been published in Farsi and in Swedish and English translations outside the country.

such as prostitutes, male homosexuals and, at least at the time Parsipur was incarcerated, “bad-veilers,” that is, women arrested for sub-standard veiling.<sup>5</sup>

## THE WRITER AND HER BOOK

The authorities marked Parsipur and *Women Without Men* as un-Islamic explicitly for offending the dominant codes of morality rather than expressing political dissent.<sup>6</sup> In her *Memoirs of Prison*, Parsipur describes the conditions in the months prior to her arrest. The Islamic Republic’s propaganda apparati, operating through many state-funded newspapers and magazines as well as the state-run television, had, on a number of occasions, demanded interviews with her after the publication of *Tuba and the Meaning of Night*:

In the same month they called from the television to programme an interview with me. I declined, explaining to the woman on the phone that I was against the compulsory hejab and therefore could not appear in hejab before the camera. She was convinced.<sup>7</sup>

[Two months later] a woman called from the television again. I explained the same thing to her. This woman had a stricter *hezbollahi* tone, and at the end she said: “So, this is how it is?!”<sup>8</sup>

*Tuba and the Meaning of Night* had sold twenty-two thousand copies in the first six months after publication and had remained in demand...

In Khordad my books *The Dog and the Long Winter* and *Women without Men* were presented in the Book Exhibit. All the five thousand copies of *Women Without Men* had been sold within a week, and all the five thousand copies of *The Dog and the Long Winter*, even though they were still in the printer shop, had been pre-sold.

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<sup>5</sup> Needless to say that women and men were kept in separate prison wards.

<sup>6</sup> This may in part explain why her incarceration provoked no oppositional response in the [struggling] independent cultural and literary press, magazines such as *Adineh* and *Donya-ye Sokhan* to which Parsipur was a frequent contributor. But this is another aspect of the story which I cannot adequately investigate, specifically because of problems in the way of accessing original data. This difficulty is one that every scholar whose work focuses on this period, or even earlier historical periods, faces as archives of related material are either too distant or non-existent.

<sup>7</sup> It is important to note, as is clear from Parsipur’s expression, that hejab (veil) has been compulsory in Iran since 1980.

<sup>8</sup> *Hezbollahi* literally means *belonging to the party of Allah*. Although Hezbollah has never been an official party in Iran (unlike Lebanon) the term is used by all sides to distinguish between Islamists (those who support Islam as the state ideology and agenda) and Muslims (those who believe in Islam as a faith).

Someone told me that in Bayan Magazine, which was a recent publication, there was an article against me and gave me the magazine... The writer had harshly criticized and insulted me and described *Women Without Men* as anti-moral and anti-Islamic.<sup>9</sup>

...

Pasdarán or Komite-ye Monkarat attacked the bookstore of Noghre Publishing to confiscate *Women Without Men*. All the copies had been sold. They also went to Esperak Publishing and confiscated all the copies of *The Dog and the Long Winter*.<sup>10</sup>

A torrent of insults had opened, and every night the Keyhan newspaper published an article against me...<sup>11</sup>

The attacks continued and all that I had done was being undone.<sup>12</sup> In Mordad, someone called from the newspaper Fazilat and demanded that I give them a story to publish. I declined and explained that I was very busy, perhaps in the future. The person insisted. I explained that, as I understood it, this newspaper was the publication of the Office of Velayat-e Faqih. The person said that it had been but it was no longer. I said that they should understand that I was an independent writer and did not belong to any group or organization. And if I cooperate with a publication which belongs to an organization I would automatically be affiliated with that organization. But I must attempt as a writer to live on the margins of this kind of affiliations...<sup>13</sup>

We said good-bye, and forty-eight hours later I received a letter demanding that I present myself at Setad-e Peygiri-ye Enghelab-e Eslami.<sup>14</sup>

Another day, another problem. But the difference was that now I had no control over my nerves. I was tired, depressed and irritable.<sup>15</sup>

... They blindfolded me and sat me facing the wall. After a while someone came and the interrogation started again. I was facing the wall and talking to this person.<sup>16</sup> He interrogated me about *Women Without Men*. I explained that the issue of virginity is psychologically very important to all Iranian girls and women. It is what makes many of them psychologically paralyzed all their lives, and, for this reason, their energy burns in anxiety, hopelessness and helplessness rather than being spent on creativity

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<sup>9</sup> Frequently, the state strategy for eliminating its opposition has been to employ media campaigns against the target. Thus, it is pretended that the authorities' actions are taken in complinace with "the will of the Islamic community" (ummat).

<sup>10</sup> This book was republished outside Iran.

<sup>11</sup> Keyhan at the time was one of the two major national dailies.

<sup>12</sup> Here Parsipur is refering to an earlier passage in which she writes about her struggles to survive as a professional woman writer.

<sup>13</sup> Maintaining their independence has been one of the biggest challenges facing intellectuals since the Revolution.

<sup>14</sup> This is one of the central branches of Sepah-e Pasdarán (Revolutionary Guards).

<sup>15</sup> Before this incident, Parsipur had in fact spent another five years in prison, that time in Evin, on the charge of possessing banned political publications.

<sup>16</sup> Her tongue-in-cheek sentence here implies *talking to a wall*.

and productivity. I explained that the protagonists in the story who talk about virginity are two girls of 28 and 38 years of age who are caught up in fear of [loosing] virginity instead of feeling productive. I explained that it is important for the society to talk about these issues and this may prevent many of the tragedies that occur...

The interrogator asked: "Why don't you cooperate with the Islamic Republic?"...

The session had ended. I returned home. A few days later they called from Komite-ye Monkarat and told me that I should go there. I said: "Put it in writing." An hour later a guard arrived at my door with a letter. They wanted me to go in the next day.

...

I went into a room where an interrogator and a Pasdar of some rank were waiting... The Pasdar said: "Look what you've done that has crossed your path with Komite-ye Monkarat."

I said: "I have done nothing."

He asked: "Why did you write about virginity?"

I said: "This is an issue which is important to women. You men can write also about whatever that's important to you, like impotence."<sup>17</sup>

While the long passage quoted above highlights some of the oppressive tactics used by the Islamic state for eliminating and/or coercing dissenting voices, it also clarifies the main reason for Parsipur's imprisonment: Writing about (against) virginity. This places the writer and her book right at the centre of the discourse of sexuality but, clearly, in a resistant position. But why virginity?

## **DOCTRINAL SEXUALITY AND POLITICAL HYMEN**

The Islamic sexual discourse rests on the strict separation of the private from the public. Traditionally, women and the issues important to them are considered to belong to the sphere of the private. (In principle, this is quite similar to male-dominated socio-cultural discourses in the West.) In Islamic doctrinal ideology, the separation of the private and the public is marked by the veil operating as a signifier for the female body, female sexuality and heterosexist, male-dominated sexual order. In this sexual order, female sexuality is

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<sup>17</sup> Parispur, 1996, pp. 396-405. Translation is mine.

permissible only within the framework of legal marriage (permanent or temporary). Intact hymen (virginity) thus operates as a veil protecting the chastity of an unmarried woman. It is precisely because of this function that the hymen is called the *curtain of virginity* (*parde-ye bekarat*).<sup>18</sup> The curtain is the marker of womanhood to the effect that an unmarried female, regardless of her age, is commonly referred to as *girl*. The distinction is significant for it is meaningful only within the heterosexist order. Virginity is not marred by just any sexual activity (for example in female-female or masturbation) but only in sexual intercourse with a man. And virginity is only a quality of *girls* to the effect that it is culturally considered to be their most prized possession or, as Farah Azari notes, their “capital” in the sexual market.<sup>19</sup> This has given rise to many regulatory practices. For example, quite commonly, particularly among the urban middle-classes, a woman that is about to be married is accompanied to a gynecologist by her mother and her future mother-in-law to obtain a certificate of virginity prior to the wedding. For the bride’s family, the certificate is a sign of their daughter’s proper upbringing and the family’s honour. For the groom’s family, the certificate is an assurance that what they are about to purchase is not second-hand, thus eliminating the need to return the bride to her family of origin.<sup>20</sup> The relations of ownership are of significance: Prior to marriage, a woman belongs to her male guardian, often the father, or, in his absence, the paternal grandfather, uncle or older brother. Upon marriage, the woman’s ownership is transferred to her husband. The Islamic juridical system, the *shari’a*, includes clear and

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<sup>18</sup> It is important to note that the word *hejab* (veil) originally means *curtain* in Arabic language. For a feminist reinterpretation of the Quranic verses on hejab, note Mernissi’s *The Veil and the Male Elite*.

<sup>19</sup> Azari, pp. 107-113.

<sup>20</sup> What must also be noted is that the prevalence of virginity as the sign of honour and morality has not completely curbed women’s engagement in sexual intercourse prior to marriage. Often, the same gynecologists who issue certificates of virginity also offer their services in “sewing the hymen” back, stitching modern disciplinary medicine to traditional sexual morality. In her article “Virginity and Patriarchy”, Mernissi refers to these practices, which she calls hypocritical, in the context of Arab Islamic societies. Note Mernissi, pp. 34-46.

strict inscriptions of this order. Thus, the discourse of virginity is inseparable from the discourses of normative heterosexism, familial legal jurisdiction over female sexuality, and social morality.

It is in this context that Parsipur's daring action to enter the discourse of sexuality in opposition to enforced virginity becomes a threat to the social order and necessitates her imprisonment and the silencing of her voice.

### **HISTORICIZING THE FEMALE (FEMINIST) LITERARY VOICE**

The emergence of the female voice in Iranian literature is closely tied with the discourses of modernity and the formation of the modern state at the turn of the century. While the traditional social order, segregating the private from the public and women from men, had little space for female literary voices, the discourse of modernity, emphasising the role of women as *educators* of the future generations, necessitated the desegregation of the sexes (Islamic segregation being seen as the sign of *backwardness*) and facilitated the rise of the female literary voice in the public sphere. Prior to this transformation, women's writing, if they wrote, was limited to the primarily homosocial spaces either in their families or in women's gatherings. But writing, as a practice, was rare and women's literary production was primarily oral, taking the form of storytelling and narrative verse. Massive modernization projects at the beginning of the twentieth century also included the Compulsory Unveiling Act in 1936 (*kashf-e hejab*) which its initiator, Reza Shah, saw necessary in order to remove the barriers to women's participation in nation-building processes. Modern schools for girls and secondary education for women date back to this



period.<sup>21</sup> So does the appearance of Parvin E'tesami (1907-1941) as the first prominent female literary voice in modern Iran. But Najmabadi observes that along with the unveiling of the female body and the emergence of the female voice in public came the veiling of women's language. In order to enter the public sphere, women's language had to be desexualized to be consummable in heterosexist company, and, in Najmabadi's words, a "metaphoric veil" descended as the material veil began disappearing. While women's oral literature contained frequently explicit expressions of sexual desire and pleasure, their newly published literature was devoid of sexual markers.<sup>22</sup> Milani observes this tension in E'tessami's poetry as simultaneous "revealing and concealing," shading her literary voice with aspects of masculinist social morality. Nevertheless, E'tessami's poetry had a feminist tone, as did many other female voices, as her primary concern was liberation of women from traditional social order.<sup>23</sup> Similar to her contemporaries, E'tessami considered women's subordination to be an effect of the traditional Islamic religion and culture rather than heterosexist male-domination in the socio-cultural and economic structures of power. She fervently promoted "modern" education for women through which they could enter into the public sphere. Thus the private, the spaces occupied by women, remained veiled.

By the middle of the twentieth century, a number of women writers published prose and poetry which was not only reflective on the position of women in the society at large, but

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<sup>21</sup> It is important to note that unveiling had been on the agenda of indiginous and independent women's groups for years. Moghissi, Paidar and Afari give accounts of women's initiatives for discarding the veil dating even prior to the Constitutional Revolution (1906-1911). But the resistance of the traditional religious establishment to change made general unveiling impossible until the state intervention in 1936. (Note Moghissi, pp. 39-45; Paidar, p. 59-68; Afari, p. 121-25.) Similarly, while private schools for women existed before Reza Shah's modernization campaign, "modern" education did not become generally accessible until this period.

<sup>22</sup> Najmabadi, pp. 487-91.

<sup>23</sup> I must note that here I use the term feminist to refer to ideas and practices concerned with women's position in the society and their liberation from male-cenered ideology and soical order. Note Milani, pp. 100-26, for a biographical and critical analysis of E'tessami's poetry.

took on a self-revealing and self-reflective character. They wrote about ideas and feelings that were marked as private and autobiographical, and, as Milani observes “strove to reconcile the emotional, sensual, and social aspects of a female self.” She characterizes these women’s writings as resistant as they “surrender neither to outside censorship nor to the self-censorship that develops in conjunction with it. Spontaneous and distinctive, they also refuse to submerge their voices in collective visions or aspirations.” Simultaneously, their writing “unveiled” men as the other in the heterosexist private and public spheres.<sup>24</sup> The most prominent voice that arose through this tradition was that of Forough Farrokhzad (1935-1967). Milani locates her unique contribution to the development of the female literary voice in two presences: The presence of the female self as sexual and desiring, and the presence of men as the object of this desiring self:

[T]hroughout her poetry, she puts herself as well as her vision of men into the text and contradicts prevailing notions of the feminine and the masculine. She is neither silent nor concealed, neither chaste nor immobile. She refuses to suffer and not complain. She does not endure restrictions and prohibitions with fortitude. She does not condemn self-gratification. She does not consider it improper to talk publicly even about men. She plays out her story, including her relations with men, on the literary scene. She laughs and cries in public and shares her many pains and pleasures with total strangers—her readers.<sup>25</sup>

Milani does not interrogate two readily observable ‘facts’ in the development of this female literary voice: 1) All of the writers she names and focuses on wrote poetry; and 2) a characteristic of Farrokhzad’s poetic language is its closeness to the everyday and oral language. While poetry, conventionally understood as the territory of the ‘subjective’, lent itself more easily to the emergence of the female voice, prose, and particularly narrative prose, remained closed to women writers until fairly recently. Excluding a few short stories by a few unknown women, the first female writer entering narrative prose was Simin

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<sup>24</sup> Milani, pp. 127-8.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* p. 137.

Daneshvar in the 1960s with two published collections of short stories followed by *Suvashun*, the first Iranian novel written by a woman.<sup>26</sup> Before Daneshvar Iranian modern (narrative) prose is characteristically male.

In the view of male literary critics and writers, Farrokhzad's most revered, acknowledged and inspiring contribution to the Iranian literature, particularly to poetry, is her use of the oral linguistic structures and the everyday words which allowed her poetry to slip in and out of the private/personal and the public/political seamlessly. This is precisely how she "revolutionized" Iranian literature to the effect that her poetic style is marked as the originator of the "Third Wave" (*modj-e sevom*) and "White Poetry" (*she'r-e sefid*) in the contemporary poetry.

#### SITUATING PARSIPUR'S NARRATIVE VOICE

By the time Parsipur entered the scene in 1970s as a professional writer, a few women writers had published novels and collections of short stories. But Parsipur's books, particularly *Tuba* and *Women Without Men*, occupy a uniquely feminist position for the following reason:<sup>27</sup>

Both of these novels are not only written by a woman, but they also put women in a doubly prioritized subject position: as the primary narrative agents and as subjects in the very titles of the books. With the exception of *Zari* in Daneshvar's *Suvashun*, prior to *Tuba* all other mentionable female literary characters (and there are not many of them) are

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<sup>26</sup> For an introduction and critique of Daneshvar's *Suvashun*, note Cook, pp. 189-99. Of course, in her well-intentioned effort to acknowledge the agency of Muslim women, what Cook fails to mention is Daneshvar's unique position as the wife of Jalal Al-Ahmad, a major figure in the Islamic revivalist zeal which centered on criticism of Western ideology and "westoxication."

<sup>27</sup> Again, I must mention that the use of the term feminist is my choice here. Parsipur herself rejects the label, like many other Third World women, on account of its Western origin.

male creations. Even in *Sauvashun*, the book's title refers to Zari's husband although Zari herself is the main protagonist. In Hedayat's short story, *Zarin-Kolah*, the woman who gives her name to the story is a prostitute who is the object of the male narrator's gaze and desire. In Afghani's *Ahu Khamom's Husband*, Ahu Khanom is the second wife and the novel primarily follows her husband's trials and tribulations in maintaining a balance between his sexual desire for her and his familial obligations to his first family. In *Soraya in Coma*, published in the same year as *Tuba*, Soraya is in coma in the entire novel, and the story is about the narrator's, her uncle's, perceptions of the Iranian immigrant community in Europe. In contrast, in *Tuba* and *Women Without Men*, Parsipur creates some of the most memorable female characters in modern Iranian literature. All of these women, as narrative agents, engage directly and as subjects in socio-political, cultural and historical discourses in the novels.

This may explain the popularity of Parsipur's novels, particularly among female readers. One literary critique and historian, in an article entitled "The Novel's Hot Market and Novel-Reading Ladies," while partially attributing the significant rise in the readership of novels after the 1979 Revolution to the increase in the number of women readers, writes: "Women, in particular, are the most enthusiastic readers of *Tuba*. Before the book was reprinted and while it was limited to the 1500 copies of the first edition, women searched all the bookstores for remaining copies."<sup>28</sup> Although this male writer's masculinist attitude shows itself in his dismissive treatment of Parsipur as a professional writer and her readers only as women "who force their poor husband to find the book at any price," he, nevertheless, gestures to an important fact which can explain why the Islamic authorities found it necessary to force Parsipur into cooperation or incarceration: Parsipur's literary

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<sup>28</sup> Emami, p. 71.

voice, precisely because she is a woman writing about women, reached a vast female audience. Her insistence to maintain her independence, together with her oppositional discourse, subverted and thus posed a threat to the male-dominated socio-ideological order.

But why did *Tuba* bring her ‘fame and fortune’ and *Women Without Men* land her in prison? The answer lies in the characters and the discourses they engage in. Tuba is a woman, born in the Qajar period, whose long life takes her through the Pahlavi reign and ends after the fall of Mohammad Reza Shah. Her main quest is for ‘knowledge’, for understanding her own gendered position in the torrent of historical, political and ideological events of modern Iran. The ‘knowledge’ she seeks does not include sexuality; in fact, it is entirely desexualized to the effect that we know nothing of her sexual life throughout the novel. Her inclination toward Islamic mysticism marks her framework of knowledge, thus denying her any carnal desires. In this book, Parsipur and her protagonist cast a critical look at the dominant politico-historical discourses that marked women as secondary social agents. The fact that the novel’s historical time ends at the time of the Revolution limits its potential criticism of the post-revolutionary discourses. As a chaste woman with Islamic beliefs, Tuba poses little threat to the Islamic state.

Allow me to introduce the protagonists of *Women Without Men* as we meet them in the first part of the book.

### **THE BOOK: STORIES ABOUT VIRGINITY**

Fifteen story fragments make up *Women Without Men*. The stories are about five women as the main narrative agents - Mahdokht, Fa’ezeh, Munes, Farrokh-Lagha, and Zarin-Kolah. The main cast of characters also includes three men in the present time of the book, Amir Khan (Munes’s brother), the Kind Gardener (Zarin-Kolah’s husband by the

end of the book), and Golchehreh (Farrokh-Lagha's husband). In spite of what the book's title may imply, the men do play structurally important roles in the stories.

Mahdokht is an upper middle-class woman with an obsession with chastity that, within the space of the very first story, turns into a fixation on virginity when she accidentally comes upon a scene in which Yadollah Baghban (Yadollah the gardener) and Fati (the fifteen-year-old maid) are engaged in sexual activity. The shock of witnessing the scene brings Mahdokht to the point of madness. She concludes, through considerable anguish, that her virginity is like a tree. So she decides to plant herself in the garden. When we see her again, she has been standing with her feet planted in the soil for several months.

Fa'eze is an unmarried middle-class woman of twenty-eight. She is secretly in love with Amir Khan but she is not able to directly express her desire to be his wife. Instead, she visits his house under the pretext of visiting Munes whom she considers stupid for having a round face and for failing to matchmake between her brother and her friend. Fa'eze too is obsessed with her virginity, but in a different way. She is highly sensitive to anything that may soil her reputation and give Amir Khan the impression that she is not a virgin and thus unsuitable for marriage. It is Fa'eze who, in a conversation she has initiated to establish her hymen's intactness, informs Munes that virginity is not a curtain but a hole.

Munes is also a middle-class woman, thirty-eight, and living with her parents and brother. All her life, she has been told that virginity is a curtain which can be torn as a result of rigorous physical activity. To protect her virginity, all her life she has denied herself the wish to climb trees for fear of falling and tearing her hymen. When Fa'eze assures her that virginity is a hole not a curtain, Munes loses the ability to sleep. She goes on the rooftop, and, thinking about taking her revenge, jumps down.

She dies. Or, maybe she thinks she is dead for soon she gets up and sets out on a quest that takes her walking in the streets for a few months. Eventually her path takes her to the strip of bookstores in front of the university and there, in a street vendor's display, she finds a book with the title "The Secrets of Sexual Pleasure [gratification or satisfaction] or Know Our Bodies." She reads the book several times, and finally realizes that she has grown and now looks at everything, including trees, differently. Fully confident in herself, she decides to return home. When Amir Khan comes home and discovers Munes, angry at her for being a shameless woman whose disappearance has ruined the family honour, he kills her. Munes dies again. The maid, Alieh, and the parents faint upon seeing the murder scene. Amir Khan doesn't know what to do, and is crying in confusion when Fa'ezeleh comes to ask after Munes. Thinking this to be the opportunity to trap Amir Khan, she reassures him that he has done the right thing, as a man and a brother, in defending his honour by killing Munes. Together they bury the corpse in the courtyard's garden. When the parents and Alieh come to, they have forgotten what they saw. On Fa'ezeleh's advice, Amir Khan decides to marry so Munes's disappearance would be forgotten. But Amir Khan gets his mother to propose to an 18-year-old girl who is "extremely beautiful, gentle, quiet, shy, chaste, kind, hard-working, bashful, timid, modest, clean, and wears the veil, and in the streets always looks down and blushes constantly."

On the planned wedding night, the disappointed and angry Fa'ezeleh sneaks into the groom's house with a talisman she has obtained for breaking the wedding, and begins burrying it in the garden. As she digs, she hears a voice asking her for help. In fear, Fa'ezeleh digs deeper. It is Munes. Her second death has given her the ability to read minds. From this moment on, Fa'ezeleh is under Munes's control. Then the wedding party arrives and the couple are sent to the bridal chamber with both families waiting behind the door to hear the

confirmation of the bride's virginity. Munes shows up and enters the bridal chamber by breaking the lock open. Amir Khan, who is totally drunk, and his new wife stop undressing in shock. Blaming her brother for killing her, Munes takes her revenge by informing him that his prized virgin got pregnant from her cousin last year, and that her family got him drunk so he wouldn't find out that he had been cheated. Munes then threatens Amir Khan that if he harms the girl in any way Munes will eat him in one bite. Then she and Fa'eze leave the house for Munes intends to start an anti-brother company so brothers wouldn't dare killing their sisters again. In the night's darkness, they set out toward Karaj.

Farrokh-Lagha is fifty-one, from an upper-class aristocratic family, and extremely beautiful. She is married to Mr. Golchehreh, an ugly, short, and mediocre man. Years ago, soon after her wedding, Farrokh-Lagha had fallen in love and started an affair with a Western-educated cousin. To protect his family honour, Mr. Golchehreh put up with his wife's infidelity, which soon ended due to the cousin's accidental death, but developed a hateful attitude toward her mixed with repressed admiration and love which shows in his nightly ritual of having forced intercourse with Farrokh-Lagha. On the day we meet them, the couple have an argument which leads into Mr. Golchehreh's accidental fall from the balcony and his immediate death. Freed after so many years, Farrokh-Lagha decides to sell the house. She buys a garden in Karaj which is perfect in every way except for the woman-tree standing near the river at the back of it. Farrokh-Lagha declares the garden closed to all men.

Zarin-Kolah, twenty-six, is a prostitute who maintains her cheerful spirit in spite of her heavy workload in the house. One Saturday, when an early-bird customer enters her room, she realizes in great horror that he doesn't have a head. In fact, from this day on, she sees all men as headless. She confides in the young virgin who has just been brought to the house



and they agree to compare their observations of men. When the young woman informs Zarin-Kolah that the men who enter the house indeed have heads, Zarin-Kolah decides to leave the house and repent. She goes to a public bath, takes a private stall, and washes and scrubs herself until her skin turns red. When she leaves, she sets out toward a shrine near Karaj. On the way, she cries so much that all traces of her former profession disappear from her face.

### **OF STORIES AND HISTORY**

The historical time of the novel coincides with a major political event in Iran's recent history, that of the 1953 CIA-backed coup d'état against the nationalist government of Mossadegh and the effective suppression of the democratic and anti-imperialist movement centered around the nationalization of the oil resources and industries. We know this because it is exactly three days before the coup when Fa'ezeh informs Munes that virginity is not a curtain, and it is on the day before the coup when Munes jumps from the roof into the hole of her first death. Relying on the readily available cultural knowledge, Parsipur evokes the entire history in a few condensed images in a few very short passages, showing the demonstrations, the guns and the dying men. If we ignore the two exact dates that the author gives, for all that we know, this could be any other numerous historical times with men and guns on the streets. This is the public. Women's place is in the private. In the home. In the garden. Clearly, the author is making a historical error for in our recent history women have actively participated in the revolutionary events on the streets. But unlike in *Tuba*, historical accuracy is not the author's intention here.<sup>29</sup> It is quite clear from the use of

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<sup>29</sup> One of the reasons for which *Tuba* has been highly praised is the accuracy and detailed treatment of the historical events and public spaces.

the semi-oral language and the linguistic structures that Parsipur is *telling* a story.<sup>30</sup> This is one of the main aspects that mark the narrator's voice as that of a woman's, storytelling being the acknowledged domain of women's narrativity. Mixing realistic language with magical events (like Mahdokht's transformation into a tree and Munes's deaths and rebirths in the blink of a few pages), the stories stand very close to being parables. And the women? They function as archetypes, rather than characters, as the stories give very little of their individualized history and detailed physical or psychological profile.<sup>31</sup> What meanings can be read through these parables and these archetypes?

## **A FEMINIST READING: THE SOCIAL AND THE SEXUAL DISCOURSES OF WOMEN WITHOUT MEN**

**gendered spaces: the separation of the public and the private**

**male domination: the violence of sexuality**

**female subjugation: the curtain of virginity**

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<sup>30</sup> Unfortunately, in the presently available English translation, much of the subtleties that mark this aspect of Parsipur's prose have been lost. It is not clear to me whether

<sup>31</sup> In a number of places, Parsipur acknowledges the influence of Yungian psychology, which she finds closer to Eastern philosophies, as opposed to Freudian psychology. It is also important to note that Parsipur has closely studied Chinese philosophies and published a number of translations on the subject.



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