Women and Domesticity in Modern Persian Literature

Women’s writing has occupied a significant place in the development of modern Persian literature, although women’s increased literary production is far more evident in the post-revolutionary period. There is a great deal of variety both in the genres and themes employed by women writers. Not surprisingly, one of the striking aspects of contemporary women’s writing in Iran is the representation of domesticity and how women occupy and/or are socially and culturally conditioned to configure themselves in the space of the home and the nation.

In this analysis I would like to juxtapose and analyze two representations of women and domesticity in the works of two writers, Simin Daneshvar and Zoya Pirzad, respectively from the pre-revolutionary and contemporary periods. To situate these works in the patterns of development of modern Persian prose literature, I will begin with a brief historicization of the turn to the modern in Persian literature.

Students of modern Persian fiction trace the origins of prose fiction to Muhammad Ali Jamalzadah’s famous story “Persian is Sugar” in 1921. In his preface to Once upon a Time, Jamalzadah envisioned linguistic and literary reform as a necessary step toward the creation of a new body politic and a modern nation populated with educated and politically aware citizens:

Today Iran is behind on the road of literature compared to most of the countries of the world. In other countries literature has, in the course of time, gained variety; and thanks to this variety it has captured the soul of people from all walks of life, and has induced everybody, men and
women, the rich and the poor from schoolboys to old men, to read; and it has thus caused spiritual development of citizens. But unfortunately in our Iran moving away from the norms set by the ancients has been regarded as a ruination of literature. Commonly the very substance of the Iranian political despotism, which is well-known the world over, dominates the matter of literature as well; that is to say when a writer holds his pen in his hand, his attention is directed solely to the group of the learned and the scholars, and takes no interest whatsoever in the others. He even ignores the many who are fairly literate and can read and comprehend plain, uncomplicated writings quite well. In short, the writer does not subscribe to “literary democracy.” There is no doubt that such an attitude is deplorable, particularly in a country like Iran, where the ignorance and benightedness of the populace is the obstacle to any kind of progress.1

Jamalzadeh’s comparison of Iran to other nations and his reflections on Iran in light of what has happened beyond the borders of his homeland are a product of his own position as a displaced Iranian who left Iran at the age of sixteen and lived the rest of his life in Europe. His extraterritorial position enabled him to experiment with new forms of expression in Persian. He demonstrated a zeal for recording Persian colloquialism and sayings, peppering his stories with them.

Jamalzadeh’s vision of literary and cultural modernization included a critique of Iranian women’s oppression. In a story translated as “What’s Sauce for the Goose,” we

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come across this description of Iran, attributed to a foreign visitor, using defamiliarization as a means of drawing attention to the absence of women from public life:

But one strange thing about this country is that, apparently, there are absolutely no women in it. You see little girls, four or five years old, in the alleyways but never any women. No matter how much I thought about this I could never figure it out. I had heard that a “city of women” existed somewhere in the world where there were no men, but I’ve never heard of a “city of men” …

Another thing that is very strange about Iran is that a substantial part of the people, about half the population of the country, wrap themselves from head to foot in black sacks, not even leaving space to breathe. And that’s how they go about the alleyways, in that black sack. These people are never allowed to speak and have no right to enter a teahouse or any other place. Their baths are also separate and, at public gatherings like passion plays and mourning-fests, they have their own viewing sections. ²

The modernizing attempts of the nation eventually opened up new spheres to women and made room for women’s education and participation in public life. But as Afsaneh Najmabadi and other feminist historians have pointed out, the desegregation of women went hand in hand with an obligatory heterosexist logic that endowed women with the dual responsibility of raising and educating the new Iranian citizens and becoming the guardians of the nation’s spiritual core. This is not to say that Iranian women did not

attain certain equalities in the pre-revolutionary era, but their image remained closely linked with the guardians and educators of the nation. We see reflections of this double imperative in the deeply ingrained concept of self-sacrificing mother and wife in modern Persian literature, poetry, novels and stories written by women. The best illustration might well be one of the most popular novels of the pre-revolutionary period, Savushun, written by Simin Daneshvar, a pre-eminent writer of modern Iran, and first published in 1969. She has continued to write fiction after the revolution, although her later works have not enjoyed the same popularity as her first novel.

To bring into focus the representation of domesticity, I turn to a particular scene in Savushun in which the female protagonist, Zari, is at one of her most domestic moments, attending to a group of her husbands’ guests whose visit is a clandestine meeting to organize armed resistance against the British occupying forces and their Iranian collaborators:

She entered the room and placed the hookah in front of her husband. The air in the parlor was hot and stifling with all the doors shut, and she could see the sweat-beads on the men’s foreheads… She went to the cupboard and took out some fans which she placed on the table in the middle of the room. Then she took out some side-plates and knives and forks and set them noiselessly on the table.

“I’ll be the only one facing danger in this plan,” Sohrab continued. “I know my death will be just one step away. But if I don’t do it, the nightmare of our massacre will drive me mad. You say this plan is yet another kind of show… my dear fellow, don’t you see I’ll be courting
death of my own free will” He put a hand on his eyes and suddenly wept…

Strangely enough, the two water-melons which Zari had just cut open were both yellow and unripe. She took this as a bad omen. The third water-melon wasn’t too bad, and she was about to cut each slice in a zig-zag pattern when she decided that her guests were too preoccupied to notice. He placed the dish of melon slices next to the map of Iran which they had spread out on the table. They were all bending over it now…

This part of the narrative ends with Zari being asked by her husband, albeit indirectly, to leave them. Elsewhere in the novel, the relationship between Zari and Yusof is more richly represented and lays bare the depth of love and affection they have for one another. But as this scene demonstrates, her proper realm of power is the domestic domain. Even when outside forces intrude into her sphere and she is called upon to extend hospitality to the guests, she remains a hostess and a caretaker hovering at the edges of the discussion about the nation’s future. As the men pore over the map of Iran, Zari considers cutting the watermelon into decorative pieces. The juxtaposition of the metaphoric carving out of the nation by foreign and native forces and Zari’s limited reach to carving up of food and nourishment for the men defending the nation delineates women’s role in the project of the formation of an autonomous modern nation. Her physical and symbolic expulsion from the closed-door meeting at the request of a loving and protective husband underlines the gender boundaries she and Yusof keenly observe. Yusof admires his wife for the

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courage and fortitude she displayed during her school days, but their marriage maps his identity onto the larger national arena, while hers becomes confined to the interior of the home they share together. When Yusof loses his life to the noble cause of defending his nation against foreign occupiers, Zari is forced out of the protected interior and she proves herself equally capable of standing up against forces that impinge upon her life and that of the nation. By the end of the novel, we could say Zari and Yusof have both made enormous sacrifices for their principles. In this sense they could be seen as near equals of sorts.

Interestingly enough, this version of gender equality is evident in Simin Daneshvar’s own life. She was married to Jalal Al-e Ahmad, a prominent Iranian writer and political activist known for his critique of Iran’s subjugation by the West. In his famous 1962 treatise *Gharbzadegi*, variously translated as “Occidentosis,” “Westitis,” or “Plagued by the West,” he described the nation as suffering from a disease that had eroded “authentic” Iranian national identity. In a passage reminiscent of Edward Said’s description of self-Orientalization, Al-e Ahmad writes: “… the west-stricken man can only recognize himself through the writings of western orientalists. He has single-handedly turned himself into an object to be placed on the microscope of Orientalism, and he relies only on what the orientalist sees there, rather than what he really is or feels or sees or experiences himself. This has to be the ugliest symptom of westitis.”⁴ Al-e Ahmad extends the metaphor of the disease to a feminization of the nation: “The west-stricken man is a gigolo. He is effeminate. He is always primping; always making sure of

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his appearance. He has even been known to pluck his eyebrows!”\textsuperscript{5} This passage lays bare the gendered nature of Iranian discourses of nationalism, independence, and authenticity. Al-e Ahmad’s conflation of national independence and male virility echoes the division of responsibilities for the defense of the home and the homeland we saw in Simin Daneshvar’s novel.

Against this backdrop, I would like to juxtapose the scene from Daneshvar’s novel with one from a collection of interconnected stories by Zoya Pirzad, entitled \textit{The Acrid Taste of Persimmons}. The section in question appears in the first part of the story entitled “Apartment.” The central character, a woman named Mahnaz, is about to leave her husband, Faramarz. Unlike the characters of Daneshvar’s novel, the affection between husband and wife does not last beyond their initial courting. Faramarz’s desire for children, his insistence that Mahnaz leave her job, and his obsessive control of everything in their shared apartment contribute to her calm resolution to end the marriage. As Mahnaz sits at the kitchen table, reminiscing about their life together, she recalls one particular dinner party she and Faramarz gave. The guest list was made up of Faramarz’s superiors and the dinner party was intended to represent him at his best. Having taken into account his various injunctions about what to serve, Mahnaz slaves for a week to prepare for an evening she remembers this way:

When the guests arrived and were seated, Faramarz motioned toward the kitchen. And Mahnaz served tea. Then Faramarz glanced in the direction of the nut dish, and Mahnaz served the guests pistachios and almonds. Then she brought out the hors d'oeuvres. For a second time, she served tea

\textsuperscript{5} Al-e Ahmad, 70.
to everyone with the exception of the managing director’s wife who drank only hot water. Faramarz glanced at the dining table, and Mahnaz cleared away the hors d’oeuvres. She did not remove the nut dish because the managing director’s wife had exclaimed: “What delicious pistachios!” and Faramarz had gestured to Mahnaz not to take the dish away. In her trips back and forth between the kitchen and the parlor she heard the men talking about work at the company. The women listened in silence. Mahnaz was just wondering why the women weren’t talking when Faramarz said: “Dear Mahnaz, why are you going back and forth so much? The ladies are bored. Come sit down and chat with them.”

The pace of the evening and the execution of Faramarz’s orders encapsulate Mahnaz’s married life. The event goes almost completely according to plan until Mahnaz ventures an opinion at a certain moment about what is being discussed among the men. She intervenes to offer them a business solution. After the guests have left, Faramarz tells Mahnaz: “My dear, you were a great hostess this evening, except your beans were a little too hard. And I think you added too much garlic to the chicken. I am just saying this for the sake of the next time. And by the way, speaking of the next time, please don’t speak of the company’s business to my boss. He doesn’t like women interfering in work.”

With this assertion, Faramarz asserts a clear demarcation between men and women’s work. This division of labor, masterfully performed and celebrated in Savushun, rings hollow in this story. Not only is Mahnaz’s work not confined to the realm of the

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7 Pirzad, 115.
apartment, she is also subject to Faramarz’s assertion of authority on what could be considered women’s domestic concerns. The passage about the dinner party demonstrates his obsessive concern about how food must be served, as do most of his exchanges with Mahnaz about all manner of house-related chores from how to dust furniture, how to make tea, and when to wash the curtains. This is not so much a role reversal as a sign of gender crisis. As his perceived field of power is impinged upon by his wife, Faramarz is increasingly drawn to incursions into what he believes to be Mahnaz’s proper domain of labor and authority. But the trouble with this mode of extending his power is that it does not have the desired effect on Mahnaz. She does not recognize the boundaries that are so fundamental to Faramarz’s self-actualization and acts on her instinct against his injunctions. She holds on to her job, opts against having children, and uses her inheritance to buy an apartment for herself.

The problems Mahnaz and Faramarz encounter in their marriage are not the only ones represented in the interlocking series of stories in this collection. The second part of the apartment cycle is devoted to a young couple whose marriage is equally troubled. Simin and Majid are cousins whose marriage becomes an extension of their childhood familiarity and puppy love. Their marriage is put off to allow Majid to complete a five-year stint of study in the US. But by the time he returns, he has to be coaxed with economic incentives to consent to the marriage. In the meantime Simin has devoted five years to sewing, knitting, crocheting, and embellishing her trousseau. She decorates the apartment into which they move after the wedding with many knickknacks and her decorative handiwork. Yet the meticulousness with which she maintains the apartment leaves no impression on her aloof husband. She assumes the role of the perfect
homemaker who might have made Faramarz, of the preceding story, happy. In fact this is precisely what Mahnaz, Faramarz’s wife, observes to herself, when she walks through Simin’s apartment with an eye to purchase it. The apartment has been put up for sale because Majid has declared the marriage over and has announced his decision to file for divorce. As the apartment changes hands, we observe how one woman’s dream home, now reminiscent of a failed marriage, becomes another woman’s haven. Unlike Mahnaz, Simin is aggrieved by her fate and finds herself at a complete loss. She also feels a profound sense of shame for having failed to fulfill the promise of the ideal wife. She cannot understand why her perfectly adorned apartment, her well-timed meals, and her total devotion to domesticity cannot induce a happy marriage. She too longs for well defined roles which would have given her at least the recognition that she is not at fault for the failure of their marriage. Like Farmaraz, she is ill at ease with the shifting definitions of the duties and responsibilities of man and wife.

Yet another woman, Leila, the protagonist of the story, “Stains,” finds herself in a faltering marriage as she crosses paths with the other characters. In the course of her marriage, Leila becomes not so much an ideal wife as an expert at removing stains. Her initial impetus for removal of stains comes from a desire to clean a badly stained bath tub in the apartment she and her husband buy. Her search into various remedies gradually shifts to becoming knowledgeable about all kinds of stains. Her expertise eventually becomes a source of income, as she begins to give group sessions to other women about the art of stain removal.

Leila’s most reliable source of information on stains is a book published in 1941 by a Mrs. H. M. entitled Guide to Stain Removals. She comes across this book in a street
vendor’s collection of odds and ends. The author’s motivation for writing the book, as announced in the preface, was to help other women economize, through saving clothes they might otherwise have discarded because of a stubborn stain, and lighten their hard working husbands’ burdens. Ironically, however, the more expert Leila becomes at removing stains the more she and her husband drift away from each other. In search of a solution, Leila delves into Mrs. H. M.’s view of wifely duties in the preface to her book, and she reads:

Women search in vain for responsibilities outside their home and family environment. For a truly responsible woman can discharge of her duties to her kind, to humanity, and to her nation in the pure and sacred surroundings of home. A dutiful woman shines like a bright flame in the very heart of her family and illuminates her environs with the light of purity, sincerity, and serenity.  

As the message fails to resonate with Leila, she turns the book over and looks at the black and white picture of Mrs. H. M. printed on the back cover and tries to get a sense of the woman who speaks with such authority and certainty about women’s supportive role for their husbands. Of course the type of situation Leila faces is not covered in Mrs. H. M.’s idyllic concept of marriage. Her husband’s long absences from home and his infidelity leave the kind of stains Leila cannot successfully remove.

The instability of fixed gender roles captured in these stories raises questions about envisioning modern Iranian women as sacrificing wives and responsible mothers of the nation. Equally important, the stories demonstrate that the shifting boundaries affect

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the traditionally prescribed roles for men as well. The questioning of prescribed roles for wives and husbands gives way to the breakdown of relationships and divorces. The intersection of the lives of women who choose to leave their husbands or who are left by disenchanted husbands suggests a broader movement across gender boundaries and speaks to a realignment of the image of the woman as citizens of the modern nation. These female characters do not easily step into the role of self-sacrificing wives and mothers. Even when they continue to dutifully perform the roles they believe to be assigned to them, they and their partners can no longer capture the ethos of a bygone era.

Gender inequities and what I have called gender crisis are certainly part and parcel of the shifts and breaks depicted in these novels and short stories, but they fit into a broader and more complex interrogation of gender, individual, communal, and national identity formation. Mothers, wives, and husbands come under question or query their sense of self. This national malaise is a far cry from the type of national illness Al-e Ahmad diagnosed in his analysis of the early sixties. There is no foreign body or source of infection pinpointed in the conditions and lives depicted in the recent literature produced by women. This literature of the contemporary era, thirty years after a revolution whose objective was to rid the nation of its ailments, paints a different picture of what ails the nation. The array of characters and the complexities of the lives they represent attest to a departure from a myth of a nation united against exploitation by external forces. In the narratives of seemingly ordinary characters, these stories shine a light on the neglected interior spaces of the nation and invite us to look deeper into its core.

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