

Simin Daneshvar in the light of her novel Savushun

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Abstract

Simin Daneshvar is the first woman novelist in Iran she covers the issue of gender and Iranian national identity in her novel Savushun. It is the first novel to be published by an Iranian woman in 1969. The novel describes Iran's condition when Reza Shah Pahlavi overthrew years of Iranian dynasty and established a monarchy. Savushun is important as historical aspect and as well as essential to the present day discussion of gender and politics, especially for women.

Keywords: simin daneshvar, woman writers, savushun, feminism, Iranian nationalism, gender

Introduction

Simin Daneshvar born in 1921 in Shiraz. She began her writing career as early as 1935. Her first article, "Winter Is Not unlike Our Life," was published in a local Shiraz newspaper. She was employed at Radio Tehran, where she wrote a series of programs entitled "The Unknown Shirazi," for which she received scant pay. In acute need of money, she even wrote articles on cooking. Daneshvar received her Ph.D. in Persian literature from Tehran University. Subsequently, she became acquainted with Jalal Al Ahmad, the famous contemporary writer and social critic, during a trip from Isfahan to Tehran. They were married in 1950. Two years later, Daneshvar received a Fulbright scholarship and left for Stanford University for two years. During this time, she published two short stories in English in *The Pacific Spectator*. Upon her return to Iran, she joined Tehran University as an associate professor of art history, a post she held for twenty years. Daneshvar was never granted a professorship, not for the lack of credentials, but due to the influence of SAVAK (Shah's secret police) as she would learn later from the president of the university. She had always been an outspoken and articulate lecturer who believed that her primary responsibility was to her students. Precisely for this reason, she would have many confrontations with the SAVAK throughout her years at the University. During the mid-1970s Daneshvar kept a low profile. She maintained her position as associate professor and became the chairman of the Department of Art History and Archaeology. In addition to her work at the University, she wrote a series of short stories. Daneshvar's stories reflect reality rather than fantasy. Daneshvar's stories reflect reality rather than fantasy. They contain themes such as child theft, adultery, marriage, childbirth, sickness, death, treason, profiteering, illiteracy, ignorance, poverty and loneliness. The issues she deals with are the social problems of the 1960s and 1970s.

In 1979, Daneshvar retired from her post at the University, and in the following year published *To Whom Can I Say Hello?* In 1981, she completed a monograph on Al Ahmad, *Ghoroub-e Jalal (The Loss of Jalal)*. This is the most moving piece she has written, as well as the best descriptive work on the personality of one of Iran's literary leaders. Daneshvar relates her last days with Al Ahmad with great detail and

emotional understanding. Her prose is formal, proving her mastery of Persian classical literature. Daneshvar currently resides in Tehran.

Daneshvar was hospitalized in Tehran for acute respiratory problems in 2005. She was released after one month in August 2005. She died at her home in Tehran on 8 March 2012 after a bout with influenza. Her body was buried on 11 March at Behesht-e-Zahra.

Novels

- savushun(1969)
- The trilogy *Wandering [Sargardani]*
- *Wandering Island (Island of Wandering) [Jazire-ye Sargardani]* (1992)
- *Wandering Cameleer [Sareban-e Sargardan]* (2001)
- *Wandering Mountain [Kuh-e Sargardan]* (never published, unknown reason)

Short story collections

- *The Quenched Fire [Atash-e Khamoosh]* (1948)
- *A City Like Paradise [Shahri Chun Behesht]* (1961)
- *To Whom Shall I Say Hello? [Be Ki Salaam Konam?]* (1980)

Translations by Daneshvar

- *Arms and the Man* by George Bernard Shaw (1949)
- "Enemies" by Anton Chekhov (1949)
- *Beatrice* by Arthur Schnitzler (1953)
- *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne (1954)
- *The Human Comedy* by William Saroyan (1954)
- *Cry, the Beloved Country* by Alan Paton (1972)
- *The Cherry Orchard* by Anton Chekhov (2003)
- Works by Alberto Moravia and Ryunosuke Akutagawa

Translations of Daneshvar's works

- In English, *Savushun'* has been translated by M. R. Ghanoonparvar (1990) and, under the title *A Persian Requiem, by Roxane Zand* (1992).
- *Daneshvar's Playhouse*, a collection of short stories that includes "The Loss of Jalal", is translated and arranged by Maryam Mafi (1989).

- Sutra and Other Stories, a collection of short stories (1994).
- Translation into Spanish: *El bazar Vakil*, Grupo Editorial Norma, Santafede Bogota, Colombia, 1992. Work by Hernando Valencia Goekel, from the English version called *Daneshvar's Playhouse* (1989).
- Translation into German: *Drama der Trauer - Savushun*. GlareVerlag, Frankfurt/Main 1997.
- In India, *Savushun* is translated into MALAYAM by S.A. Qudsi.
- In Norway: "En familiefra Shiraz" translated into Norwegian by N. Zandjani. Gyldendal Norskforlag. Oslo 2007.
- Also Japanese, Russian, Chinese, and Turkish
- Simin and Savushun

Simin Daneshvar's *Savushun* (in Farsi it's called *Suvashun*) is mourning for the state of women in Iran. This is a *Novel about Modern Iran*, it is set in Shiraz in the last years of World War II, after the invasion by the Allied troops and the occupation of southern Iran by the British army. It chronicles, in 23 chapters, the life of a middle class landowning family in this period, when everyday life had been brought into turmoil by the presence of the occupying troops and the pressure they brought to bear on the economic and social fabrics of the society, with soaring food prices contributing to tension and strife in the local community. The story is narrated through the eyes of Zari, a happily married woman who struggles to protect her family. The plot is set in motion when Zari's husband, Yusuf, driven by patriotic feelings and frustrated by the indecency of local opportunists and the harsh behavior of the occupying forces, refuses to sell his estates' crops either to the foreign invaders, or to the Qasqai tribal leaders, Malek Rostam and Malek Sohrab who are in the midst of a rebellion against the central government. A web of political intrigues and hostilities is created that leads to the novel's explosive and tragic end. Yusuf is not ready to surrender in front of the occupying forces and their Iranian supporters which lead his death on trip of village. Zari in defiance of orders issued by the local authorities, proceeds to hold a burial procession. The mourners, rapidly increasing in number, are soon dispersed by government troops called in to avoid a mass demonstration. Zari is forced to bury Yusuf unceremoniously at night.

In this novel Daneshvar brilliantly utilised the pre-Islamic legend of Siyavash, a hero celebrated in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* Iran's national epic and regarded as a symbol of innocence, as a metaphor for the state of the nation. In the *Shahnameh*, Siyavash was cruelly slain at the order of Afrasiyab, the Turanian ruler and anti-hero of the *Shahnameh*. Siyavash's fate was indeed a tragic and unjust one, and as such, inspired a national ceremony of mourning. In *Savushun*, the reader is go through Iran's political unrest through the eyes of Zari during Reza Shah's reign. Daneshvar presents Zari as a symbol of an every woman, making her life a paradigm of a middle-class woman's experience as these national conflicts occur within and outside of her home. Zari illustrates the public and private sectors of a woman's experience during Iran's turmoil. Although she places Zari within a utopian garden surrounded by nationalistic symbols, the outside influences of both the British occupation and patriarchal conventions invade her home. When Zari leaves her home for volunteering endeavors with the prison and mental institution, she witnesses the effects of political and cultural

injustices in the prisoners and the patients. This is Daneshvar's way of linking women's experience with the outcast population of society to show that women were defined by similar unfair standards.

Zari's experiences as a wife and mother show the strained relationships between men and women and also between women of differing classes and backgrounds. These glimpses of the outer and inner worlds of a woman's experience suggest various ways a country's political climate affects women. The British occupation, the governmental tyranny of Reza Shah's reign and the male dominated private sectors of women's lives are explored in this novel. Although the novel reflects the historical era of Reza Shah's reign, Daneshvar's commentary on the injustices done toward women and the citizens of Iran can be applied to various stages of Iran's political unrest:

first, Reza Shah's reign, then the abdication of Reza Shah by his son Mohammad Reza Shah, and last after the Islamic Revolution and the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty with the emergence of Sharia law in Iran.

This sense of cultural nationalism becomes apparent in the novel with the various types of characters Daneshvar introduces (such as the villager Kolu, different types of women, Khanom Fatemeh and Ezzatoddowleh and the men such as Khosrow, Yusuf and Dr. Abdollah Khan, and how they are vital to Iran's national identity because ultimately they are all Iranians dealing with similar conflicts and tribulations.

Daneshvar chose to embody nationalistic Iranian themes, social issues and cultural beliefs such as political injustice, marriage, death, cultural boundaries class and gender roles, within the novel. Through her use of metaphor, tone, allegory and animal imagery she is able to explore not just women's experience, but human rights in relation to political ideology and gender relations.

Daneshvar's writing paved the way for other Iranian women writers to be

published and established a new style where women writers could express a woman's experience. Her influence can be seen in contemporary writers such as Shahrnush Parispur, who has adapted the image and allegory of the garden in her acclaimed novel, *Women Without Men*, or her social novel portraying women's roles after the Islamic Revolution, *Tuba and the Meaning of Night*.

This literary style of Daneshvar has become a prominent style in Iranian

women's literary tradition and women writers are still working toward a time for women's emancipation and human liberation within a male framework, but through their own voice and experience.

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