



Women With/Out Men: Deconstructing ShahrnushParsipur's *Women without Men*

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ShahrnushParsipur has established herself as one of the iconoclastic authors of late twentieth century Iran through works, such as, *The Dog and the Long Winter* (1974), *Touba and the Meaning of Night* (1989), *Women without Men* (1990), *The Blue Reason* (1994), *Prison Memoir* (1996), *The Simple and Small Adventures of the Spirit of Tree* (1999), and *Asieh between Two World* (2009), to mention the major ones. Her literary endeavour has primarily been devoted to the illustration of the subjugated status of women in the Islamic patriarchy of Iran. One of the dominant themes of her fictional writings is women's struggle for self-realization and emancipation, battling the restrictive cultural mores of Iran. Hers are tales of one or more women striving to achieve their desired qualities of life as against the socially prescribed lifestyle for women—a struggle which more often than not has a surrealist conclusion, suggesting the rather impracticability of such struggles being successful in the cultural climate of Iran.

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In exploring the dominated status of women in Iran, Parsipur has repeatedly brought up such taboo subjects as female sexuality, virginity, sex segregation and the practice of veiling in her writings. In the process of elucidating the popular perception behind some of these cultural perceptions and practices, she underscores the futility as also the hidden patriarchal agenda underlying these practices. Her unabashed and matter-of-fact observations on these issues have made her fall foul of the government of the Islamic Republic, resulting in her thrice imprisonment (one of them immediately following the publication of *Women without Men* in Persian in 1989) and banning of all her works in Iran. However, the atrocities meted out to her by the state have only reinforced her zeal for rebellion, as testified by her series of publications that followed and has continued till date. She has repeatedly critiqued the social customs and attitudes which, she felt, are detrimental to the interests of women, especially their psycho-spiritual growth as human beings. Her fictions explore the nature of desires and aspirations in women and the ways and means through which they are likely to be fulfilled in the orthodox patriarchal social order of Iran. Parsipur's protagonists are, therefore, on an average, seekers of meaning and fulfillment in life. Their challenge lies in undoing the centuries of moral conditioning done to women by the various social institutions, including family, and discover a higher purpose to their lives.

Women without Men: A Novel of Modern Iran (2011 [1990]; Persian: *Zananbedoonemardan*, 1989), one of the most celebrated as also the most controversial of Parsipur's fictions, too is dedicated to the theme of women's quest for a fulfilling life. Parsipur sketches five women—Mahdokht, Fa'iza, Munis, Farrokhlaha and Zarrinkolah—who represent five parallel journeys to achieve a gratifying life. They are united by a sense of inadequacy with their current states of existence and, therefore, driven by an urge to discover a higher meaning and purpose to their lives. However, the connotation of a "fulfilling life" differs for each woman, exemplified by their varied aspirations. Parsipur assigns a goal to each of them that she makes them reach in the end. They serve as five different cases in point for the author to study the nature of desire in women.

MahdokhtParhami and Munis are perfect cases of cultural conditioning, successfully brainwashed and convinced of the sacrosanctity of virginity in women—the gospel preached by the Iranian patriarchy. Being a witness to the sexual intercourse between Fati, the girl living under the custodianship of her brother, and Yadollah, the gardener, in the greenhouse of the garden, Mahdokht earnestly wishes for her brother to discover the incident and kill the girl. Killing the girl, she feels, will save the children in the family from the company of

an “unchaste” woman. Munis, on the other hand, has been told since childhood that virginity is a “curtain” which needs to be safeguarded so much so that she was forbidden from climbing trees lest the “curtain” is torn.

However, both Mahdokht and Munis experience a moment of epiphany in the novel. The greenhouse episode awakens Mahdokht to the essence of her virginity—“my virginity is like a tree” (8)—a metaphorical statement which is likely to imply that the destiny of her virginity, like a tree, is fruition, i.e, to procreate. For Munis, the enlightenment comes from her friend, Fa’iza who evades her misconceptions with her pithy remark, “It’s an orifice” (22) and not a membrane as Munis was told by her mother. However, the way the two ladies respond to their new-found wisdom is strikingly different. While Munis decides to get to the root of the matter through reading, Mahdokht actually plants herself in the garden of Karadj in order to grow into a tree—a process magic-realistically depicted by Parsipur. Reading the book, “Sexual Fulfillment or How to Know Our Bodies”, purges Munis’s mind of all forms of socially fabricated misconceptions and taboocentring the human body as well as her own sexuality. She now sees through the societal hypocrisy and intrigue concerning a woman’s sexuality and the instrumentality of these myths in curtailing the freedom of women. Educated and enlightened, Munis emerges as a woman of strength who goes missing for a month, returns home, gets stabbed by her brother, Amir, and then emerges from grave gifted with the exceptional capability of reading minds. Disgusted with the whole social scheme of subjugating women, Munis starts for Karadj in search of a meaningful life. Fa’iza, who serves as an eye-opener for her friend, Munis, is attracted to Munis’s brother, Amir—her sole object of desire in life. However, Amir prefers to marry a much younger girl, believing her to be a virgin. Heartbroken, Fa’iza accompanies Munis to Karadj.

Mrs. Farrokhlaqa Sadroddin Golchehreh, the fourth woman in the novel, is a lady tied to a cold, unfulfilling marriage from which she achieves a welcome release after thirty years when she accidentally punches her husband to death. The loneliness and boredom with the place following the mishap prompts her to sell the house and move to the orchard-villa at Karadj.

The fifth woman in the novel is Zarrinkolah, an accomplished sex worker, running her business at the New City at Golden Akram’s place. Zarrinkolah’s turning point in life comes when she starts seeing her customers without heads. The “headlessness” seems to metaphorically signify a grim reality of her profession—the absence of identity, and hence, the sense of similitude inspired by the men who come to her for sexual gratification. The headless phenomenon also connotes a monstrous appearance suggesting the beastly demands the customers make on her mind and body. However, in the light of local superstitions, her perception is interpreted as a “curse” and she is advised by one of her colleagues to undergo an ablution and pray to get rid of the omen. Nevertheless, the ablution followed by the prayer brings about a spiritual awakening that makes her realize the futility of her job. She is advised by a street vendor to go to Karadj to find peace.

The garden in Karadj serves as a feminist utopia where the women, in the company of each other as also Nature, get in touch with their real selves and realize their respective aspirations in life. Mahdokht gradually transforms into a complete tree. Fa’iza realizes that her happiness lies with Amir and ultimately returns to him. Munis is advised by the Kind Gardener to venture into the heart of darkness to discover the light of wisdom that she seeks. Consequently, she roves about the seven deserts of Arabia for seven years to earn the wealth of experience that she keeps disseminating as a schoolteacher for the rest of her life. Farrokhlaqa wishes to refashion her life and identity, and aspires for social mobility and recognition. Encouraged by Munis, she tries her hands at poetry and then becomes the model for a young artist, but with little success. However, her marriage to Mr. Merrikhi brings in the much-awaited success for Farrokhlaqa who becomes the head of an orphanage.

In Karadj, Parsipur portrays Zarrinkolah as a woman who loses all material aspirations in the company of the Kind Gardener whom she meets on her way to Karadj. She is nurtured by the Kind Gardener, gets married to him and gives birth to a morning glory which the couple dedicate to Nature by planting it on the banks of the river flowing past the garden. Parsipur seems to suggest a kind of salvation attained by Zarrinkolah as the couple sits on their new-born morning glory and rises up to the sky as a trail of smoke.

Thus, in *Women without Men*, Parsipur experiments with female desires vis-à-vis the socio-cultural limits of permissibility. It depicts the parallel journeys of five women towards their desired goals in life, routed through the garden of Karadj where they meet. The garden being a Kingdom of Nature is free from all worldly limitations, customs and conventions and, hence, the place where the women discover themselves and their priorities in life. Parsipur, therefore, puts forward the thesis that human society being essentially patriarchal is hostile to the interests of women who must shun it in favour of a place like the garden of Karadj to find genuine happiness and bliss. Fulfillment for women presupposes the renunciation of the human (patriarchal) world and its temptations. The desired spiritual upliftment is possible only in the company of Nature. This ideological project of Parsipur can be seen to have been founded on the following binaries: woman/man; individual/society; spiritual/material or physical; Nature/culture; death/life; and ideal/real, where the author privileges the first term of every binary in the narrative. However, a closer look and a deeper probing into the text throws up ample

evidences to challenge these established hierarchies. This paper attempts a Derridean deconstructive reading of this novella, first, underscoring the nuts and bolts of the feminist contestations of Parsipur and then pinpointing the evidences undermining those premises.

The very title of the novella seems to proclaim a dismissive attitude towards the desirability of men in the life of women. It is indicative of a separatist feminist agenda that this novel seems to propagate. As one proceeds through the text, one realizes that it is indeed one of the ideological contentions in the novel. There happens to be a man responsible for the misery of each of these women: for Mahdokht, it is her brother, Houshang Khan; Amir Khan for both his sister, Munis, and lover and later wife, Fa'iza; SadroddinGolchehreh for Farrokhlaha; for Zarrinkolah, it is her clients. All of these men have a decisive part to play in leaving their respective women (sisters or wives) utterly frustrated and disillusioned with life and head for the garden of Karadj to seek solace.

Though not as oppressive a brother as Amir Khan is to Munis, Houshang Khan does not approve of Mahdokht's idea of becoming a tree, fearing the disgrace and popular contempt the incident is likely to invite. Being unsuccessful in convincing Mahdokht to give up the idea as well as to uproot her from the ground, he sells the villa for a meagre amount to Mr. Ostovary.

Amir Khan is the most tyrannical and unscrupulous of all the male characters in the novel. He is a male chauvinist who stabs his sister, Munis, when she returns home after going missing for a month, for maligning the reputation of the family. He buries the body of Munis in the backyard of the house with the help of Fa'iza who becomes a partner in crime out of her love for Amir. However, Fa'iza's hopes are dashed when Amir chooses to marry a girl of eighteen who, he thinks, is a virgin until his assumption is falsified on their first night. Nonetheless, Amir continues to keep in touch with Fa'iza after marriage and ultimately marries her without the knowledge of his first wife. His marriage to Fa'iza is prompted, not by love, but by his hope of getting in touch with Mr. Atrchian through Fa'iza, who makes a false promise of introducing him to Amir. Thus, Amir Khan is not just a pitiless brother, but a faithless husband to two women.

SadroddinGolchehreh is the reason for Farrokhlaha's marital disharmony. His attitude towards his wife is a strange combination of the extremes of hatred and tenderness. A face-to-face encounter with Farrokhlaha invariably brings in a contemptuous grin on his face and a biting feeling of hatred in his heart. However, in situations when he is not directly facing her, he feels an "overwhelming tenderness" towards her—a feeling which never finds an expression, except just prior to his death. Their marriage is a mismatch where the husband could never live up to the expectations of his wife. Rather his cold, abusive, sadistic behaviour pushes Farrokhlaha to a state where the very presence of her husband would induce a sense of discomfort and rob her of her usual dynamism.

Zarrinkolah being a sex worker has, of course, seen the ugliest faces of masculinity. Besides these men, there are other minor male characters who inflict pain on women in the novel. Yadollah, the gardener who had sex with the servant girl, Fati, in the greenhouse of the garden seems to have had promised marriage to her. However, when caught in the "act" by Mahdokht, he hits Fati on face and quits his job in no time. On their way to Karadj, Munis and Fa'iza are raped by a drunken truck driver and his assistant.

On the other hand, Parsipur sketches women who show solidarity towards their fellow species and lend them helping hands when in need. Thus, Fa'iza rescues Munis from her grave when stabbed by Amir; Munis takes Fa'iza to the garden in Karadj; Alia, the maidservant in Amir's house, conveys the news of his marriage to Fa'iza, sensing her feelings for Amir; Madam Baji, the psychic and visionary, advises the lovelorn, miserable Fa'iza to get over her feelings, for "[b]lissful as shared love can be, unrequited love is naught but unremitting heartache" (38). Farrokhlaha provides shelter to the other four women in her villa in Karadj and is encouraged by Munis in her attempts to write poetry. Zarrinkolah is advised by a fellow sex worker to pray and do charity to get rid of the "curse" that makes her see her customers without heads. Zarrinkolah, in turn, feeds Mahdokht with her milk to help her sprout into a tree in the garden of Karadj. Thus, in Parsipur's narrative, the women display a remarkable sense of sisterhood when hurt or ditched by men.

Coming to the binary opposition individual/society, it has already been stated that the basic agenda in Parsipur's narrative is to explore the possibilities of fulfillment of individual aspirations bypassing the socio-cultural restrictions for women. The motives and actions of her women are, therefore, mostly at odds with the prescribed code of conduct of the society. Achieving the life of their heart's desire necessitates putting up a war with the imposing conventions of the society to which they belong. Mahdokht wanted to grow into a tree—an aspiration her family members refused to support. Her elder brother, Houshang, feared the social disgrace that such an act would bring to the family: "Soon people will find out about my sister becoming a tree and start making fun of us, for example, calling us the Arbormans, Arborsons, and so on, or cover our walls with graffiti, and ruin the century-old reputation of our family" (76). Hence, Mahdokht is deserted by her family members who sell the villa and the orchard, and leave Karadj. She is left to battle her way through all the hardships till she transforms into a complete tree.

Munis's perception of life and the world is largely conditioned by her family till she is thirty-eight when she is introduced to a new dimension of reality about life, her body and sexuality by Fa'iza, her friend. She grew up to be an adult with the belief, "God would not forgive a girl who lost her virginity in any way" (25), instilled into her mind at the age of eight by her mother. Consequently, Munis had to spend her childhood suppressing her longing to climb trees, lest the hymen rips open as warned by her mother. When Munis returns home after going missing for a month, she is stabbed by her brother to restore the "lost honour" of the family.

Fa'iza is a woman who strives to show her individuality and live life on her own terms. Accordingly, she is repeatedly confronted with and stymied by socio-cultural restrictions. Thus, she is warned against going out alone by Nana Jan (grandmother) and Amir and advised to wear *chador* since there are demonstrations all over the city of Tehran.¹ She is even cautioned by the driver of the cab that she boards. However, a major share of restrictions on her freedom of movement and action comes from Amir, the man she has an obsessive desire for. It is he who warns her against stepping out of the house unaccompanied, discourages her from coming all the way from Karadj to Tehran in the evening, teases her with the way she looks in *chador* and offers her to enter into a concubinage² with him, since legal marriage is not possible without getting a divorce from his first wife. Amir, who functions as a mouthpiece of the Iranian patriarchy, actually tries to curb much of Fa'iza's freedom to be herself.

In Mahdokht, Munis and Zarrinkolah, Parsipur portrays a quest for spiritual fulfillment over bodily desires. Mahdokht, as already discussed, chose to realize her inner call to transform into a tree and "sprout offshoots that would spread to the entire orchard" (9). Parsipur employs magic-realistic techniques to depict the process of transmutation, from the time she plants herself on the riverbank and "the clay around her ankles" hardens, till the stage when the tree is reduced to a "mountain of seeds". The process, therefore, concludes with a complete mutation of the physical self. Moreover, the trials and tribulations marking each stage in the process of metamorphosis convey the impression of a monkish quest for salvation in Mahdokht.

Munis, who headed for Karadj driven by her sense of disgust with the patriarchal society, its affectations and double-standards for women, suffers from a sense of inadequacy with her existing knowledge which cannot bestow on her the "sanctity of light" which motherhood has imparted to Zarrinkolah. Her acquired ability of mind-reading is only filling her mind with futile information, which cannot provide her a taste of the higher, nobler truths of life. Hence, she is overtaken by a dire need for enlightenment which can only be intuitively acquired through the ordeal of experience.

Zarrinkolah becomes the most selfless character in the novel on reaching Karadj. The physical pain of ablution (getting her full body scrubbed three times by the bath worker) brings about a spiritual awakening in Zarrinkolah who gives up her "business" of the body to head for Karadj. The idyllic orchard of Karadj and the company of the Kind Gardener complete the transformation initiated by the process of ablution in Zarrinkolah. She spends all her time in the company of the Gardener, helping him around, collecting dewdrops to feed the Mahdokht-tree to help her sprout. She reaches the heights of spiritual fulfillment on getting pregnant with the child of the Kind Gardener. Parsipur portrays the process through the magic-realistic technique: "As her pregnancy advanced and the contour of her body changed, Zarrinkolah became increasingly translucent, like crystal, with light shining through her" (94). The growing transparency of her body is emblematic of the ongoing process of spiritual purification and refinement brought about by the ennobling feeling of childbirth and motherhood. On giving birth to a morning glory, the Kind Gardener invites her to go on a "journey" which presupposes leaving her "bundle behind". That the journey is destined for spiritual fulfillment is indicated by the fact that the couple sits on their morning glory, wrapped in its foliage, and rise up to the sky as a puff of smoke, suggesting a renunciation both of the material world and the physical selves.

The supremacy of the mind over body is also suggested by Parsipur's take on virginity voiced through Fa'iza and Farrokhlaha who boldly declare, "it is possible to live without virginity" (86), and Munis's unperturbed attitude following her rape. The violation of the body cannot taint the purity of the soul.

In *Women without Men*, Parsipur has constantly drawn parallels between her women and trees and suggested the Kingdom of Nature to be the perfect habitat for women. The text is replete with images of the pristine glory of nature that evoke a sense of freshness and serenity which, according to Parsipur, effectuates a spiritual awakening in women. It drives them close to their essential nature which they discover in the company of Nature. Moreover, Nature serves as a haven of peace and contentment, a gust of breeze, for the women in the middle of the stifling cultural climate in which they operate. Thus, Zarrinkolah starts for the garden of Karadj to "find a breath of cool air in th[e] beastly summer heat" of Tehran. The ennobling and healing effect of nature on

¹The novel is set against the backdrop of the coup d'état of 1953. For more details on the coup d'état, see Keddie.

²A religiously sanctioned system of live-in relationship in some Islamic countries, including Iran.

wretched human souls is exemplified through the garden of Karadj where the women flock to alleviate their heartaches and discover a higher purpose to their lives.

Parallels between women and the trees are also established by the facts that Mahdokht, Zarrinkolah and Munis are nurtured by the Kind Gardener with a “green thumb” to help them achieve a life that is spiritually fulfilling, and Zarrinkolah gives birth to a morning glory. The torrential river that flows past the garden is a symbol of life force in the narrative. Mahdokht, as she awaits her fruition, and Zarrinkolah during her pregnancy keep looking silently at the river. Munis sees the river flowing through Zarrinkolah’s transparent body pregnant with life.

Throughout the novella, Parsipur keeps drawing mesmerizing portraits of the enchanting glory of nature, painted mostly in shades of green and blue—the dominant hues in the novel. The novel opens with an alluring description of the orchard, “vibrantly green” with a small pool “green with algae” and a “gravel path flanked by willow trees” bordering the pool. The idyllic garden stands as a foil to the demonstration-ridden chaotic city of Tehran with streets “thick with crowds that seemed to be running back and forth, as if chasing each other”, “the convoy of trucks packed with people” and the “procession of tanks” (24).

However, the most graphic nature images start pouring in once Mahdokht starts showing signs of turning into a tree, “covered with blooms” and harbouring “chirping birds” in April. Parsipur often breaks into fantastic descriptions to suggest the sense of otherworldliness associated with the whole affair. The hypnotic effect of the song sung by the Mahdokht tree to Farrokhlaha’s guests is thus described:

It was as if they were all encased in a drop of water the size of an ocean. Slowly seeping through the layers of the earth, the drop joined a myriad of elements at the earth’s inner core in a dance, a perpetual, harmonic movement with no beginning or end. (93)

And then,

. . . a green mist set in, engulfing everything and everyone—one color of the rainbow dominating all other colors. All who were present were dissolved into the mist, and then dripped like dewdrops from the tip of a leaf. (93)

The vivid description, stage by stage, of Mahdokht’s gradual transformation into a tree is where Parsipur makes nature come alive in all her colours. From the “clay around the ankles” that hardens, to the “freezing rainstorms” that “tore her clothes to shreds”, Parsipur portrays the process of metamorphosis through each season—the “winter frost” that froze her, the “first spring showers” that splintered the ice with a thaw and produced “the tingling of sprouting buds on her limbs”, till the time when Mahdokht ceases to be a human being, a member of the human society, and is reduced to a “mountain of seeds”, the elementary source of life in the Kingdom of Nature.

Similarly, Parsipur describes the lack of depth of insight in Munis in spite of her worldly wisdom through images of nature: “She did not differentiate between earth and gravel, but she distinguished the earth from the sky. She had not seen the skies of the earth, but she knew there were earths of the sky” (101-102). Like Mahdokht, Munis also has to expose herself to the onslaughts of Nature to attain the desired fulfillment in life. Parsipur evokes a sense of the fairytale as she writes, for seven years “she passed through seven deserts, fatigued and aged, devoid of hope and vision, but replete with experience” (110). Thus, while human cultures, with its partisan norms and conventions, oppress women and frustrate their hopes and aspirations, Nature provides a congenial atmosphere for self-realization and spiritual emancipation to the women in Parsipur’s novella.

Parsipur forges an interesting bond between life and death in the novella. Munis dies (or feels dead) twice in the novel and feels the stultified sense of being dead once when “nothing seem[s] strange to her anymore” (100). In the first instance, she jumps off the terrace of her house, and after a month, she is stabbed by her brother, Amir Khan. The first attempt to death is made probably to terminate the life of lies that she has been made to live until then, while the second comes as a response to her attempt to rebel against that deception. Interestingly, both the death-like experiences have a transformative effect on her psychological being. The first makes her take to the streets for a month and come across the book that drastically alters her conceptions about human body and sexuality. The second endows her with the fantastic ability to read minds, change the shape of her face and the pupil of her eyes—abilities that considerably influence the course of her future.

The other death that is of remarkable significance in the novel is the death of Farrokhlaha’s husband, Sadroddin, at the hands of his wife. His death causes Farrokhlaha to sell the house to Mr. Ostovary and shift to the orchard-villa in Karadj where a new life awaited her. Thus, the author seems to propose that, at times, death begets a new life. It is important to kill the past so that a new future may unfold.

Parsipur’s women in *Women without Men* are characterized by a common craving for an ideal state of existence that is in contrast to the real conditions they find themselves in. They are, therefore, tormented by a sense of inadequacy and dissatisfaction with the status quo that they strive to alter. Mahdokht is befuddled by a host of unrealizable desires: she wants to adopt a few orphan children and change their lives for the better; she

wishes to possess a thousand hands enabling her to knit five hundred sweaters for these orphans. The only wish that she manages to realize is that to become a tree.

The disparities between the ideal and the real states of affairs sadden her. She has no tolerance for any discord and wishes for an undisrupted harmony “even among all shades of green in the world”. The large windowpanes that are incapable of keeping out the heat of Tehran summer, the noisy children of her brother in the villa in Karadj who over-eat and then burp, and her brother’s decision to have five children irritate her to the core. She regrets being a witness to the sex-scene in the greenhouse and hates the girl for her “loose” morals. She even loathes her touch. Her personal limitations, such as her inability to grow as a tropical tree, depress her.

For Munis, Zarrinkolah, the sex worker, who, in the company of the Gardener, achieves the “sanctity of light”, represents the ideal state of being. Her bookish knowledge of the truth about human sexuality and her superhuman quality of mind-reading have failed to impart the light of wisdom which can be gained only along the path of experience. Munis also laments the fact that the world cannot yet offer enough safety for “a woman to travel by herself”. She has to “either become invisible, or stay cooped up in a house” (85).

Farrokhlaqa, on the other hand, perceives the ideal, first in the reverie of FakhroddinAzod, the love of her youth, and later in fame, social prestige and recognition. Her memories of the time spent with Fakhroddin gleam as an intangible, remote idea of an ideal romance in her mind. It serves as her only refuge in her loathsome life with Golchehreh. After Golchehreh’s death, Farrokhlaqa sets herself the task of setting her life straight, acquire influential contacts and rise to a position of prominence. She aims at becoming a member of the parliament. To that effect, she tries her hands in writing poetry to publish in newspapers and magazines as per Munis’s advice. Realizing her lack of poetic sensibility, she becomes a model for a young painter. However, Farrokhlaqa’s longing for power and authority is finally fulfilled in charity as she becomes the honorary head of an orphanage.

Now that we have identified the binary oppositions structuring the text and understood its basic ideological contentions, let us look for contradictory evidences in the narrative that will deconstruct these binary oppositions and, hence, the avowed ideological project of the novel. As we have seen, in *Women without Men*, Parsipur attempts to explore the possibility of a world exclusively for women, devoid of men. The garden of Karadj is her suggested model for such a world where the paradigms of permissibility of the patriarchal society go dysfunctional and women are allowed to realize wishes as fantastic as turning into a tree. The women who head for the garden are not only sickened by the native patriarchy, they all have a man (or men) responsible for their distress.

However, it is not difficult to find evidences in the text where a man is instrumental in effecting a turning point in the life of a woman. Thus, while, on the one hand, Mahdokht’s brother, Houshang Khan, is disapproving of her idea of becoming a tree, Mr. Ostovary is all sympathy for her. Zarrinkolah is advised by the street vendor to go to Karadj to seek solace for her wretched soul and joined by the Kind Gardener who takes her to the orchard-villa. Farrokhlaqa receives support, first from Mr. Ostovary who finds her the villa in Karadj, then by the young portraitist for whom she becomes a model, and finally by Mr. Merrikhi who marries her and helps her achieve her dream.

However, the greatest support to the women in the text is offered by the Kind Gardener who happens to be a man. It is he who nurtures Mahdokht with morning dew and the milk of Zarrinkolah to help her sprout, counsels Munis to seek the light of wisdom in the “depths of depths” of darkness, teaches household chores to Zarrinkolah, marries her and confers the bliss of motherhood on her. Though he says, “A true woman gives birth by herself” (99), his statement is falsified by the fact that it is *his* child that Zarrinkolah gives birth to.

Again, it has to be said, that in spite of the support and guidance received from the respective men, the women have to work their ways through all the impediments to their desired destinations themselves. The men merely provide the necessary guidance and advice. Be it Mahdokht’s transformation, Munis’s odyssey through the seven deserts, Zarrinkolah’s childbirth or Farrokhlaqa’s professional success, they are only aided, but not accompanied by men in their respective journeys.

Men as they help women, there are ample female characters in the novel whose attitude towards their fellow species is leastfavourable. Thus, Mahdokht despises Fati for having sex with the Gardener and wishes her to be killed by her brother. Fa’iza, the most self-obsessed character in the novel, envies her sister-in-law, Parveen, and bitches about her to people. In spite of being a friend to Munis, she joins hands with Amir in his villainy in the hope of winning his love and assists him in burying Munis’s body in the backyard of the house. Though Munis takes her along to Karadj, she secretly keeps considering Fa’iza as stupid and impractical because of her round face. She hates Zarrinkolah for her past and her “incessant jollity”. Similarly, Munis develops a sense of jealousy towards Zarrinkolah. “The prostitute”, she feels, “ha[s] won too easily, having achieved the sanctity of light, as spontaneously and effortlessly as laughing” (100-101). Fa’iza and Farrokhlaqa rob other women of their share of marital bliss by getting romantically involved with married men, Amir and

Fakhroddin, respectively. Akram, the owner of the brothel where Zarrinkolah served as a sex worker, is one of the ugliest exceptions to female solidarity in the novel.

Though Farrokhlaha houses the other four women in her villa in Karadj, she does not turn out to be a very hospitable host eventually. She treats them as her employees and orders them around. Being the self-seeking person that she is, once her hopes of becoming a poet and a model for the portraitist are dashed, she constantly wishes to get rid of the women who are of no use to her anymore. Farrokhlaha who initially declared, "He [the Gardener] is the only male we're going to keep around", is heard saying, "I will call up Mosayeb and Ahmad as we'll need man servants to do the work" (97) as she makes preparations for a new series of parties to get in touch with the "movers and shakers" in the town. She seems to have realized the impracticability of a life without men.

The women, who are up against the prescripts of the patriarchal society, are often seen mouthing the culturally enforced ideologies to their fellow sisters. Thus, Mahdokht curses the servant girl, Fati for indulging in pre-marital sex. Fa'iza censures her sister-in-law for picking up a fight with her brother and going to her mother's: "No decent woman with a lick of sense would do such a thing" (17). Being jealous of Fa'iza's culinary skills, her sister-in-law, Parveen, tells her, "A woman who messes around with Fetty in the hall should think more of protecting her virginity curtain than throwing dinner parties" (21). Fa'iza, in turn, supports Amir's act of stabbing Munis, saying "You are a brother. You have honor, and a duty to protect it. You killed her? You did the right thing" (32). Munis who ridicules her brother, Amir, for his obsession to have a virgin wife, admonishes his wife on their first night, saying "Didn't you get knocked up last year by your cousin? And didn't you have an abortion by Mrs. Fatemi?" (44). In spite of all the freethinking and self-will that Fa'iza displays, she insists that the marriage between Zarrinkolah and the Gardener is solemnized by a cleric. Thus, the fact that emerges from the instances cited above is that the women themselves act as spokespersons of the social order against which they rebel. The cultural paradigms that they try to flout are very much ingrained on their minds without their knowledge. A society is constituted of individual members. Hence, societal norms and conventions are products of collective beliefs and attitudes of its individual members. In advocating the socially prescribed mode of behaviour and censuring the lapses, they are actually reinforcing the socio-cultural mores. Having said this, it must also be admitted, that the opinions quoted above only echo the moral conditioning to which these women have been subjected since childhood. The society psychologically conditions its members to perpetuate the system.

Moreover, it is interesting to note that at the end of the novel, with the only exception of Mahdokht, the other four women fit themselves in some or the other socially approved roles for women. Fa'iza settles down as Amir Khan's second wife; Munis as a schoolteacher; Farrokhlaha as a happily married woman who accompanies her husband abroad, sacrificing her prospective career as the head of an orphanage; and Zarrinkolah, too, as a happy wife and a mother. Mahdokht, who transforms into a tree and is then reduced to a heap of seeds, ultimately distributes herself to every corner of the earth as seeds. The plights of the women seem to validate the fact that it is impossible to escape the limits of the human world order and its paradigms of normativity.

The argument stated above further deconstructs the binary of Nature/culture that the author tries to establish in the narrative. In spite of being symbolic of an ideal world, it has to be borne in mind that the garden itself is not outside the precincts of the human society. It is bought as a piece of land in exchange for money—a manmade system of ownership. Moreover, the garden needs the human care of the Kind Gardener for its maintenance. Mahdokht, who plants herself in the garden, is not only nurtured by the Gardener with morning dew, but also with the human milk of Zarrinkolah. Though she wishes to merge with Nature, she needs the nourishment of human milk to reach fruition. Nature alone cannot provide her all the nutrition she needs. Also, the Kingdom of Nature is not completely free from the negativities that characterize the world of human beings. Thus, in the garden of Karadj, "the light green of the trees noiselessly *competed* with the dark green of the pool" (1) and "the blue of the sky *imposed itself*, like the verdict of a divine judge, on the green of the orchard" (2; emphasis added).

It should also be noted that in the middle of the idyllic setting of the garden, there stands the villa harbouring a vibrant social and domestic life of construction work, parties and the regular household chores. The life inside the villa is in no way different from life in any corner of the world in all its imperfections. Thus, in the heart of the spiritually uplifting world of Nature is sustained a life of material indulgence and opulence. Besides, though the novella champions a quest for spiritual fulfillment over material prosperity as already discussed, Fa'iza and Farrokhlaha's aspirations in life have been purely materialistic since the very outset. Fa'iza's sole obsession in life has been to marry Amir, which, she feels, "would vindicate her womanhood" (89). Farrokhlaha, on the other hand, aspired for fame and social mobility. Similarly, a worldly attitude of competitiveness and domination is perceived underlying Mahdokht's apparently non-materialistic aspiration. She desires to "grow leaves darker than algae" to "seriously challenge the water of the pool" and to "sprout

offshoots that would spread to the entire orchard and cover it so thickly that they would have to cut down all the cherry trees to make room for the Mahdokht tree" (8). Finally, it has to be noted that although the garden served as a peace haven to all the women, it is deserted by each of them in the end. After their sojourn in the Kingdom of Nature, Fa'iza, Farrokhlaqa, and Munis choose to return to their normal social life while Mahdokht and Zarrinkolah magically disappear.

Parsipur, who seems to recommend spiritual fulfillment over material pursuits, does not seem to be much disapproving of the choices made by Fa'iza and Farrokhlaqa though they have been largely inspired by selfish aims. About Fa'iza and Amir's conjugal life, she observes, "Life goes on for the two of them—not ideally, but not too badly either" (108). Her opinion of Farrokhlaqa and Merrikhi's marriage is, if anything, even more appreciative: "They have a fairly good relationship, not torrid by any means, but not frigid either" (112).

Interestingly enough, the spiritual fulfillment that is indicated to have been achieved by Mahdokht, Munis and Zarrinkolah is suggested through bodily changes. Mahdokht's transformation is graphically described by Parsipur through the gradual changes overtaking her body. The wealth of experience that Munis earns, makes her "fatigued and aged". Zarrinkolah's spiritual refinement is depicted through her body turning "increasingly translucent, like crystal, with light shining through her" (94). Therefore, the inner purification finds expression through externalcorporeal changes in the women. After all, it is the body that harbours the soul. Nevertheless, the changes are actually effected by the spirit to which the body responds.

The novel which prioritizes the spirit over the body is replete with carnal images. Mahdokht "hear[s] a struggle and heavy breathing, something feverish, hot and scorching—and sense[s] the smell of bodies" in the greenhouse, and discovers Fati with Yadollah, "panting, panting, panting" (6). Munis is told by her mother, "the hymen is a membrane that can rip open, even if a girl falls from a height", a misconception that is nullified by Fa'iza, "It's an orifice. It is constricted and it will expand as a result of penetration" (22). The images of Zarrinkolah prostrating naked to pray in the bathhouse and later of her "breasts swollen with milk" after the childbirth are no less evocative.

The actual and suggestive deaths usher a new beginning in the lives of Farrokhlaqa and Munis, respectively. The meek and gullible Munis transforms into a woman of strength, endowed with exceptional capabilities. The claustrophobic, silenced Farrokhlaqa discover a new purpose in life and becomes a self-assured, assertive and ambitious woman after her husband's death. Thus, the deaths, both real and metaphorical, are only instrumental in begetting a new life and self in the novel. But the birth of the new self is accomplished at the cost of the death of the former in both Munis and Farrokhlaqa.

With regard to the ideal/real binary, it has to be said that the ideal which the women aspired for are essentially connected to the real world. Thus, Mahdokht's wish to become a tree and to possess a thousand hands; Munis's desire to gain the light of wisdom and to have a world safe enough for a woman to travel alone; or Farrokhlaqa's reverie of her ideal lover, Fakhroddin, and her ambition to earn name and fame, are all visions of ideal lives rooted in reality. This is because it is impossible to conceive the ideal without taking the cue from the real world in which one operates. There can be no ideal without a real. Besides, the ideal is invariably associated with a desire, or even an effort, to convert it to the real, as testified by the women in the novel. The ideal is the vision of a perfect reality. In the novel, the women succeed, to a considerable extent, in realizing their notion of an ideal state of existence.

Again, though the ideal serves as an inspiration for the real to strive for, it hardly ever becomes identical with the real. Hence, Mahdokht could never grow "a thousand hands", Munis could never become as dazzling bright as Zarrinkolah, Farrokhlaqa fails to become a member of the parliament, and though Fa'iza succeeds in marrying Amir Khan, she could never win his true love. The ideal remains an unattainable distant dream for these women who had to remain contented with the second best alternatives in life.

Thus, a deconstructive reading of the novel explicates the fact that the text harbours about an equal share of evidences for and against its avowed ideological project. As we proceed through the text, the binary oppositions established by the author keep making and breaking themselves throughout the course of the narrative. We are repeatedly pushed from one ideological extreme to the other as the evidences supporting and defeating the ideological stand of the author keep jostling with each other like the "sweet and sour cherries" of the orchard, the "rustic and urban architecture" of the villa, and the "light green of the trees" and the "dark green of the pool". The essentially opposing ideas as also the contradiction underlying each idea validate the characteristic plurality and heterogeneity of the world we inhabit where there is no black or white, only shades of grey.

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