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## Daneshvar's Fictitious Real Women: The Portrayal of Female Characters in Persian Modern Short Stories

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### ABSTRACT

From the classic Persian epics and sonnets to modern short stories and novels, women characters have always been present. Their portrayals, however, depicts a high range of diversity. The classic female characters, as the ideal objects of desire were later accompanied by those accessible ones, who were believed, are capable of destroying men's lives. These exquisitely beautiful women could act in two distinct ways; they were holy virgins or evil destructors. Both drain men out of their lives, whether by love or by lust. Although later on in modern short stories, male authors involved superstitious and passive women as well they mainly faithfully preserved the classic categorization. It took centuries for the literary works to hold the mirror to the reality of women in Iranian society due to the long held social norm that women should be bigerded in the mystery of domestic life. Simin Daneshvar risking her social reputation courageously and comfortably unleashed the ordinary Iranian woman from the chains of unfair and unreal binary Madonna/whore classification and provided them the opportunity to be seen as they are. The kaleidoscopic character prism of women is depicted and analysed in this research paper. Moreover, examining female characters unravels the new face of Iranian men, characters beyond patriarchal expectations. Men are not an exception in the realistic view point of Daneshvar to the characterization of her characters.

**Keywords:** *Daneshvar, Persian Epics, Sonnets, Female Characters, Modern Short Story*

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### 1. Introduction

Simin Daneshvar was the first woman Persian writer who, arguably, gave a voice to Iranian women and talked about their deprived rights and sufferings. Before the emergence of her world-famous novel, *Suvashun*, Daneshvar's two collections of short stories, *Extinguished Fire*, and *A City like Paradise* were totally neglected and her abilities as a competent writer were marginalized for falling under the shadow of her husband, Jalal Al-e Ahmad (Golshiri, 2013). Nevertheless, after publishing *Suvashun*, Daneshvar could establish herself as a highly accomplished writer and could draw critics' attention to her short stories which undeniably played a significant role in leading Persian literature to its modern form. Undoubtedly, Daneshvar, in her short stories, has masterly depicted the real life condition of her fellow country women, as well as their constant struggles to survive in their male-dominated society. It can be claimed that liberating women from the dichotomous classifications which could

never transcend the binary opposition of Madonna / Whore was Daneshvar's overriding concern. The present paper focuses on how Daneshvar's created female characters can offer a more realistic picture of Iranian women and depict their valiant attempts at abjuring the definitions and responsibilities attributed to them by their inequitable society, compared to the classic categories of female characters of her contemporary male writers.

In order to have a deeper and broader understanding of Daneshvar's role in presenting a more accurate picture of Iranian women, we should know about the position of women in Persian short stories written before Daneshvar. To achieve this goal, the researchers will succinctly discuss the attitudes of four well-known Iranian male authors toward women: Jamalzadeh, the pioneer of Persian short story; Hedayat, the founder of modernist Persian literature; Chuback, a pioneer who daringly portrayed the instinctive desires of women, and Al-e Ahmad, Daneshvar's husband.

The genre of short story started in 1921 in Iran by the publication of Jamalzadeh's first collection of short stories, *Yeki Bud va Yeki Nabud* (Once Upon a Time). Arguably, Jamalzadeh's works held more sociopolitical values than literary merits (Katuzian, 2013). Jamalzadeh's women are loyal, obedient and dependent housewives. These hardworking women neither in the family nor in society play any significant role, and are referred to as "zaifeh" (weak) and "nagheshlaghl" (feeble-minded). They are devoid of any social or political understanding, and indiscernible without their connection to the male world. It can be claimed that Jamalzadeh was more loyal to the Western monolithic descriptions of Iranian women and depicted women as nonentities, most of whom were immensely religious and superstitious. (Alavi & Saeedi, 2010) His degrading attitude to women is most evident in his short story, *Bil-e Dig, Bil-e Choghondar*.

Hedayat, who gave an auspicious start to modern Persian literature, assigned a role to his female characters beyond the domestic world of Jamalzadeh's women. Hedayat's women are sexually seductive objects, capable of possessing men and swallowing their entire existence like a whirlpool. (Mardanikarani, 2006-2007) According to Hosseinzadeh (2004), Hedayat classifies women into two groups: the ideal woman and the fatal one. The ideal woman is a distinctively exquisite woman whose timeless presence is reflected only in art. She stinks like a dead body and brings people to death; she is like a solid object, devoid of any emotion or feeling and is incapable of making a speech. In brief, the ideal woman is on one hand associated with angelic beauty and on the other hand, is associated with death and the embodiment of a corpse. The fatal woman belongs to no specific social class and any woman can turn into a fatal one, if she desires. She has an unsavory reputation for ruining the life of every man who is involved with her; she has great destructive abilities and talents; and her only means to communicate with the outer world is her mouth and sexual organs. The fatal woman is a perfidious woman who uses all her talents and charms to whet the appetite of men for sex and destroys them through their sexual fancies and desires. Indeed, these categories are more fathomable and tangible in *Buf-e Kur* (The Blind Owl), Hedayat's erudite world-known work. He, in all his works, regards the psychological complexity of women's

layered character; however, he importantly focuses on the negative aspects of women including their unfaithfulness and their ability to ruin men's lives through their beauty and graceful movements (Badiefar, 2008).

Nonetheless, Chubak portrays a more realistic picture of woman's nature, comparing to his male peers. In a religious traditional society where women were expected to oppress their sexual instincts, he openly narrates the eagerness of young women to satisfy their sexual desires against social norms. Despite other authors, Chubak's attitude towards these women is different. He does not criticize their non-conformist attitude and his characters are allowed to follow their natural desires, like men. However, as he was a naturalist, scarcely allowed his characters either male or female to live a pleasant happy life, his created women could never attain the satisfaction they longed for, and had to give up to men in order to partly get the sexual gratification they desired. (Peyvand, 2005) They had no choice but either to marry a man who has already a couple of wives, like what Ozra wants to do in *Nafti* (Oilman) or to accept the punishments that the male-dominated world has determined, like Khadijeh's penalty for her love affair in *Tavileh* (Stable).

Jalal Al-e Ahmad, Daneshvar's husband, rarely assigns an active role to his female characters and almost all of them are sexually, financially, and emotionally dependent on their husbands. In most of his works, we encounter miserable, superstitious, and religious women who are, often, in a secreted competition with each other in order to get the attention of their husbands. In his works, women never object to polygyny, though they feel jealous toward each other. In short, Al-e Ahmad's obedient women never try to achieve their desired love-life nor seek to satisfy their sexual instincts.

Whether an object of desire, seductive, prostitute, angel or a naïve one in search of a husband, these female characters are all the representations of only a range of real women in Iranian society. As mentioned above, in the works of these four authors there is a single central cord connecting all the similar female characters to one another in the works of a single author. However, in Daneshvar's short stories we encounter a wide versatile range of female characters that are both similar to and different from the female characters created by the other



modern short story writers. Milani (1992), in her book, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers*, argues that, “in Daneshvar’s writing, women are not portrayed as mere [Daneshvar’s] writing we encounter a wide range of women characters, from traditional to modern, educated to illiterate, rich to poor, beautiful to ugly.” In the following section, first I will present my reading of her female characters mostly based on their educational, social and financial stance. Then, we will compare and contrast them with the female characters of the above mentioned writers. It should be emphasized that this paper does not attempt to classify Daneshvar’s female characters, however its purpose is to show the realistic attitude of the author towards her fictional female characters.

## 2. Analysis and Discussion

One of the most important stories of Daneshvar, which shares the most with the works of male authors, is *Mardi Ke Barnagash* (The Man Who Never Came Back). This story narrates the life of a woman who takes the heavy responsibility of leading the life of her two sons all by herself, after finding out that her husband has deserted her. As an obedient woman, who has always been expected to run the household, she is totally unqualified for the new situation. There is no way out of this nightmare, but to find the husband. The story offers the same picture of a passive dependent woman that all the male authors had previously depicted. Moreover, critics believe this story depicts a strong similarity to Hedayat’s *Zani Ke Mardash Ra Ghom Kard* (The Woman Who Lost Her Husband). (Amirshahi, 1993) Both stories show how women are financially and sexually dependent on their husbands and can never live in the absence of their supportive males. In spite of the similarities that these two stories bear, the differences in their narrative techniques and the mien and demeanor of their protagonists are of paramount significance. Daneshvar’s story apparently shows traces of modern narrative techniques; she ends her story by directly addressing her readers, asking them to suggest her what to do with this miserable woman! This, in fact, highlights the painful situation of a woman, left by her husband for no good reason, in search of a way to survive. The woman, the society and finally the writer do not know what to do with a mother’s life without her man. Eventually, the writer brought the woman’s husband back to the story, without offering any

logical reason for his disappearance, since she does not want her created character to live in misery for the rest of her life as a homeless mother or a prostitute, who left her kids in the corner of the street to be adopted by the rich. The author’s deliberate interference with the story distinguishes her female character from the protagonist of *Zani ke Mardash ra Gom Kard* (The Woman Who Lost Her Husband). Hedayat’s Zarrin Kollah internally gets a perverse satisfaction from getting whipped by her husband and there is no sign of honest conjugal loyalty; her weakness has its roots in her nature and her instinctive desires. Nevertheless, Daneshvar’s Mohtaram is bewildered because of the society’s rendering her powerless and weak. She prefers to silently tolerate her husband’s whips than the bitter blames of the society. Even the writer agrees with her and she does not know how to alleviate her created female character’s sufferings in such a traditional society without bringing her husband back. It should not be ignored that Daneshvar, in this story has rightly rendered how children impose inevitable restrictions on their mother’s life, while Hedayat had ignored this aspect of the lives of his women characters. His women are so imaginary that they seem to be non-human, the character of *Buf-e-Koor* to name as the most outstanding one. If Daneshvar’s Mohtaram did not have any children, she would find a way out easier. She did not have to struggle with the possible future life of her abandoned kids or suffer the possible ‘scarlet letters’ imprinted on their destiny. This is totally in line with one of the true and undeniable aspects of an Iranian mother struggling to gain social independence. The social norms have always persuaded women of any social class and intellectual level to sacrifice their individual being for the good of their children by keeping the marriage knot firmly tied.

Passive dependent women can be found in Daneshvar’s other stories such as *Shahri Chon Behesht* (A City Like Paradise), *Bibi Shahrbanou*, *Anis*, and *Sutra*, as well. However, it should be noted that Daneshvar’s female characters, like the real women of society, were by no means inherently passive; they were just the constructs of their male-dominated society in which they could exercise no power or influence either on their family or their society. (Modiri, 2010)

In *Shahri Chon Behesht* -A City Like Paradise- Daneshvar deftly shows the

psychological layers of a nanny, Mehrangiz. Through stream of consciousness, she takes the reader to witness the depth of the misery and sufferings of a lower class woman, with no control or power over her own life, who inevitably has to serve and survive. Through the agony of Mehrangiz, a devoted nanny, she depicts the life of two classes of dependent women, in relation to men and in relation to one another. The poor, who work and live in the house of the wealthy families, sold out their entire lives, due to a family debt, or poverty after divorce or death of the husband or the father. The rich, the mothers, wives, daughters and sisters of the masters, who surrender, unquestionably to their men, practiced their oppressed frustration over the women working for them. The masters of the house could freely harass the maids and nannies, in that era, with no fear of jurisdiction. The wives, on the other hand, could not act against their husbands' will, but took revenge on the poor maids and nannies, who by any chance might be more beautiful or younger than them. Mehrangiz typifies one of the many victims. She serves all her life to a family, brings up their children, spending her love and affection, but finally, unable to carry out her duties as a maid, she is left homeless and empty handed. She has to pay for the lustful desires of her master. Women, like Mehrangiz, are being mistreated by both the members of the opposite sex and the members of their own sex. This bitter fact led to the plight of this group of women who were socially, sexually and economically repressed. This story, from psychological point of view, shares a lot with Hedayat's narratives. The psychological portrait of women drawn by Daneshvar is a distinctive two faceted one; we do not see her women only from the outside but from the inside as well. As a woman she masterly directs us, through the plot, to the stance of these women to their sufferings and miseries.

Even the so-called powerful women, the man's wife, mother or daughter, who can both emotionally and physically afflict the nanny with pain and make her weep in bitter reproach, can exert no power on any of their male family members. They are totally dependent on their husbands, and after their death, on their sons and can never lead life on their own. The hatred and grudge that men create among women destroy their unity and allow no sympathy. Also, it should never be neglected that the author has shown how men, through destroying the sense of unity among women and giving them no

opportunity to ponder over their position, rarely let women experience a sense of full subjectivity or endeavor to discover their identity, women's strife to attract the attention of men by clearing the rivals off the way, should not be ignored. Daneshvar, through her specific narrative techniques, has successfully shown how women constantly get rejected by both people of the opposite sex and of their own sex in a society biased toward men. Arguably, Daneshvar emphasized the excruciating pain inflicted on women of lower classes by both genders whereas Hedayat placed heavier emphasis on the destructive capabilities of women from a masculine perspective.

Aware of the real attitude of women in society, Daneshvar, does not ignore those women who strongly sympathize, those who are able to dedicate their instinctual desires and worldly wishes for the sake of their dignity and pride. *Bibi Shahrbanu* portrays two women of this type, a mother and daughter. Maryam is making a pilgrimage to Bibi Shahrbanou's shrine with her mother and her brother. Through the statements and words exchanged between the family members, readers get to know that their father is one of those dominant, controlling ones, and all the family members has to be immensely obedient to him. He is so distanced from his family that they were scared of his reaction upon knowing about their mother's blindness and they even tried to hide her illness. During the journey her mother insists that she should be obeisant to her brother's will and act as he orders. Despite this desired passivity, Maryam, like any other young girl in her society, feels the transformations in her soul and the related desires. What makes this pilgrimage significant for Maryam is the fact that this trip is the starting point of knowing about her sexual desires and instincts. For the first time, she desires to be touched and feels intense feelings of pleasure at pressing the baby of one of the travelers to her breast. During the journey, she feels she has fallen in love with a young traveler and wishes to marry him. At the end, her wish is fulfilled and the man's mother asks Maryam's mother to marry her daughter off to her son. When she tells that his son has already married a woman but he is determined to have a second one as his first wife is unable to bear any child for him, she confronts Maryam's mother's disagreement. She does not want her daughter to be any man's second wife and wants to preserve her daughter's dignity. Both mother and



daughter sympathize at the end and Maryam decides to take a better care of her kind-hearted mother. Despite her bad experience of a cruel father and her emotions toward the son of a wealthy family, young Maryam refuses their proposal because of two women; the first one is her blind mother and the second, she herself. The female characters of this story are analogous to Chuback's women characters in dissenting from the idea of polygony. For instance, Chuback's *Nafti* (Oilman) portrays a girl who never disapproves of becoming the fourth wife of an oilman although she sexually desires him.

*Anis* is the story of a young girl who marries several times as she is emotionally, sexually, and financially dependent on men. She is also one of the women looking for a way to satisfy her sexual instincts. To gain this satisfaction, Anis marries several men with different beliefs and demeanor; consequently, she has to meet the demands of her men in every aspect. For instance, at some point of her life, she decides to attend the religious ceremonies and gain money through *rozeh khani* -Roze khani means reciting poems in the memory of the martyrs and making people moan and groan to purify their soul and keep those memories alive. She had learnt this job from her husband though she did not believe in it. Anis is the representative of many financially dependent women who are subjected to the ideas, interests and beliefs of men. To earn some money and achieve the satisfaction they desire, they had to give up to men and do whatever they did not believe in. In this story, the author has also shown the disappointment of women in getting the sexual gratification they yearn for in their conjugal lives.

*Sutra* is about a man who, for earning enough money to buy a ship of his own, sells his wife and his daughter and turns them into prostitutes. This vividly implies that women are undoubtedly as the objects of property that can be sold and bought. They are the victims in the hands of their owners void of any will to take action. The entire society ratifies men in leading their mischievous acts.

Disloyalty of women and their destructive roles in men's lives were popular issues among male authors as mentioned earlier. Daneshavr has also, in her writings, referred to unfaithful women, as they do exist in society, who put the morals of their male-dominated society into question. We can find these women in *Zani Mian- e*

*Mardha* -A Woman Among Men-, *Dar Bazar-e Vakil* -At the Bazaar of Vakil-, *Tasadof* -Accident- and *Souratkhaneh* - Playhouse. It should be emphasized that though these women were disloyal wives, they could exert either a positive or a negative influence on their family and were not as passive and powerless as the previously mentioned women.

*Zani mian-e Mardha* -A Woman Among Men- is about a doctor's wife whose name is never told to the readers. Maybe the author tried to show that any woman may turn into a femme fatale. This woman is extremely beautiful and never pays heed to the morals, she sleeps with any man she desires, and never cares about her child. Arguably, she could be considered an example of 'New Woman'. Her husband knows about her love affairs and has decided to kill her; however, he could never hurt her as he is actually in under the spell of his wife's beauty. It should be noted that Daneshvar never assigned any stigma to this woman in spite of the fact that she had shown how a woman can ruin men's lives just through the power of her beauty. The woman of this story can be compared to the women of Hedayat's *Buf- e Kour* -The Blind Owl.

*Dar Bazar-e Vakil* -At the Bazaar of Vakil- is also about the fate of a nanny as another doubly repressed woman. This nanny, however, is not totally a victim in her biased society and is different from the nanny in *Shahri Chon behesht* -A City Like Paradise. The protagonist of the story, Marmar, is a coquette who employs her charm to attract the attention of men and fulfill her desires. The whole story takes place at the bazaar of Vakil and we see Marmar as a flirtatious woman on whom the male-dominated society can impose no restriction. She relates the story of her life to one of the sellers at the bazaar who seemingly had some feelings toward her. She recounts how she could draw the attention of the son of a neighbor to her gorgeous body that he pretended to make his family let him marry her. She states that after her marriage, she noticed she was not welcomed by her in-laws; and finally her husband's family persuaded him to divorce her and marry another woman. Then, rejected by her former husband, Marmar has got a job as a nanny and can make ends meet. At the bazaar, she is so entertained by flirting with the seller that she forgets her responsibility in attending the kid, whose parents employed her to take care of her. In

this story, we clearly see how masterly Daneshvar has shown the shattered unity of women besides their deprivation of thinking about their identity or satisfying their desires. The end of the story also vividly depicts the fears and loneliness of little girls who will obviously constitute the future women of the younger generation. The little girl is afraid of the men around her, finds no sympathy among women, and is even left alone by her peers. When Marmar leaves the child behind and gets busy flirting with her lover, no one gives a sincere attempt to get the child to her family. Besides, one of the important issues discussed in this story is the author's reference to women's strict hijab forms at that time, the little girl could not find her nanny as she found all women similar to one another in their black chadors and with their faces covered. Women were not distinguished from each other for the very same dressing that they shared.

*Tasadof* (Accident) is about a woman who shows no understanding of her family's financial difficulties. She casts covetous eyes on her neighbors' possessions and vigorously demands her husband to provide her all the same facilities. Though she has no skill in driving, she coerces her husband into buying a car, and finally, after several accidents she ruins the car completely. At the end, she petitions for divorce and leaves her children in order to start a new life with a policeman. In this story, the author criticizes some of the Iranian women's attitudes and disposition. She disparages their unfaithfulness, dependence, and lack of understanding. It is of crucial importance to note that in this story Daneshvar has pictured a mother whose life is seldom restricted by her children. Daneshvar has been able to rid her fellow country women from the generalized categorization proposed by men regarding gender stereotypes; different women show different attitudes toward their children. Unlike *Mardi ke Barnagash*t -The Man Who Never Came back-, the major female character of this story is by no means an affectionate mother and no constraint is imposed on her by her children.

*Souratkhan*e -The Playhouse- is a significant story that has attracted copious critical acclaim. The protagonist of the story is a gifted actress who has decided not to marry in order to be able to continue her profession. Although acting was not socially an acceptable profession for a woman, in the circle of her friends and co-actors she did not feel the shame. Siyah -black- even

showed some brotherly love to her whereas he felt some emotions beyond that too. she is an independent woman performing her favorite profession. Her strength empowers her to stand against the social norms. Daneshvar once again reminds us of the limitations of a woman. She is pregnant, by one of her fans! She has to get rid of this child, but due to her financial problems she has to earn through another relationship, like what she did a few times. A socially strong and self-supported woman is also the victim in her encounter with men. She is the one who takes the harm and she has to manage it by herself at any price.

### 3. Conclusion

Arguably, Simin was the first Iranian modern author courageous enough to unveil the real face of everyday Iranian woman. In traditional societies, women are not considered as normal human beings- in the eyes of men particularly those who never found an opportunity to be in close contact with them-who have everyday needs and demands and live the life of an ordinary person like men do. That is, in my opinion, one of the main reasons for the authors to assign the so called categorical roles to them and the readers never expected to see any different picture. In a male dominant society women evaluate themselves based on the interests and ideas of men. In a Lacanian term they look at themselves through the eye of other- a man. Most of them even do not dare think otherwise due to the fear of being rejected by both men and women. On the other hand, fiction was supposed to be the playground of the masculine thoughts, ideals and idols!

None of the above mentioned justifications, however, can cover the social reality of women's lives. Regardless of the artificial and limited picture of women in fiction and the restricting social taboos, Daneshvar holds the mirror to the kaleidoscopic range of women in Iranian society, where they lead their everyday lives in a variety of real roles struggling to survive as a woman. Women in Daneshvar's fiction are portrayed as mothers exerting to earn a living and save their children and as self-sustained educated women who do not surrender to the male-made standards of beauty and decency. Some others deprive themselves of love and sexual satisfaction to fight polygony. Life is real with men and women experiencing its various situations which are undoubtedly much more than the two positions offered by the other short story writers mentioned earlier.



In her first collection of short stories, influenced by Jamalzadeh and others, Daneshvar's female characters were faithful to the traditional categorization of women rather than the reality of Iranian women. But, as she proceeds in her career, the lifelike believable women emerge in her writing. Portraying the real women in fiction does not only unleash women from the binary chain of Madonna/whore opposition, but it also provides an ordinary and true picture of men. In other words, a male member of a society where, there are only prostitutes or devoted obedient women, will inevitably has to take the role of a pervert or a demanding and controlling man. In a real picture, though they take the role of devoted husbands, kind fathers and responsible members of society.

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