Voices from the Gaps

Shahrnush Parsipur

> ***She heard a sound. At a place a little distance away, some men were being murdered. The men bent over the earth, their blood dampening the soil. Touba cried. The men's blood mixed with the woman's tears and penetrated deep into the earth. It penetrated to the depths of the thundering hurricane. A star sparked; the earth became pregnant. The earth was continuously pregnant. Always in the season of birth, it bore someone from every cell in its body—woman, man, old, young, short, tall.***
>
> — Touba and the Meaning of Night

Quick Facts

* Born in 1946
* Iranian novelist and short story writer; currently lives in the United States

Biography

Shahrnush Parsipur was born in Tehran, Iran, in 1946, the daughter of an attorney in the Justice Ministry. She expressed an interest in literature from an early age, and her liberal parents encouraged this interest by keeping her in school until graduation, after which she entered the University of Tehran to study sociology. While at the University, she published several short stories and articles in literary magazines throughout Iran. Among these short stories were "The Little Red Ball" and "Heat of the Year Zero."

This page was researched and submitted by Elizabeth Gloor, Eric Winter, Coral Moore , and Lacy Johansen on 12/20/06.

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Biography continued

During this time Parsipur married and had a child. She was forced to take night classes due to the restrictions placed on the few women admitted to the University. Parsipur became captivated by the topic of Chinese philosophy and I Ching. This marked a vital point in Parsipur's life, for mythology is a major theme present in many of her works, recurring in *Blue Logos*, *Touba*, and *Women Without Men*. Her first arrest also occurred during this time. Protesting the unjust execution of two of Tehran's poet's, Parsipur resigned from her position as the producer of Iranian National Television and Radio. She spent fifty-nine days in prison.

Upon receiving her bachelor's degree at the age of twenty-eight, Parsipur divorced her husband and went back to continue studies. After ten years of putting it on hold, she was now able to focus on her novel, *The Dog and the Long Winter*. This was a first-person narrative in which a young Iranian girl returns from the dead to tell the tragic story of her life. Following this piece was the novella *Trial Offers* and a collection of short stories called *Prismatic Clusters*. Traveling to Paris in 1976, Parsipur continued her studies of Chinese, Indian and Iranian mythology at the Sorbonne. In an interview with Golbarg Bashi, Parsipur claimed this was a time where she was in high spirits. From this period arose the erotic novel *Simple Affairs and the Spirit of the Tree*.

In 1980, Shahrnush Parsipur's desire to witness the Iranian revolution firsthand tempted her to return to Tehran. Soon after her return, she was arrested and thrown in prison for nearly five years. The circumstances of her arrest are unclear, as she was never formally charged with a crime. However, she maintains that her incarceration, in conjunction with that of her mother and brother, was due to her brother's involvement in political documenting. Parsipur provides greater detail of her prison experiences in her interview with Bashi. "During my second term in prison, many executions took place. Large groups of people were executed. Maybe six, seven thousand people were killed, which in addition to the executions that took place in 1988, the number exceeded to ten thousand deaths. These were exceedingly frightful years. The atmosphere of prison was terrorizing…"

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Finally, after over a decade of political pressure from the Iranian government and its Revolutionary Guard, Parsipur immigrated to the United States in the 1990s. After nine months of traveling in the US, she went to England. There, she had a mental breakdown and returned home to Iran for medical care. The following year, she went to Germany to launch the German translation of *Touba* and then returned to the US. Since arriving in the US, she has written *Shiva*, *The Proper Etiquette of Drinking Tea in the Presence of Wolf*, and *On the Wing of Wind*. She currently lives in California, and her bipolar disorder continues to hinder the work she wishes to do in America. Despite this, Parsipur recently received Brown University's International Writers Project Fellowship and has given lectures at UCLA. In spite of her tremendous popularity, all of her books are now banned in her native Iran.

Touba and the Meaning of Night

Shahrnush Parsipur's fourth novel, *Touba and the Meaning of Night*, tells the story of a woman, Touba, engrossed in her spiritual quest for the truth and unity with God. At the same time, the author intertwines Touba's story with the history of Iran. She does so through her experiences during the turbulent revolutionary changes Iran underwent in the 20th century. Although Parsipur tells the story of Touba's life through a third-person omniscient narrator, the words and thoughts of various characters are almost invariably perceived from Touba's perspective. At a time when a woman's role was often still very limited, Touba is confronted with constant change. From early on, she wants simply to search for meaning and deliverance, but she only sees it achieved as a gift from men and never as self-fulfillment.

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Touba and the Meaning of Night

One of the novel's most evocative events, Touba is burdened with a particularly horrible murder. While Cossack soldiers are marching through her town, Setareh, the niece of the Prince Feraydun Mirza's assistant, is raped, and the family's home destroyed. Setareh, her brother Ismael, and their simple-minded mother move into Touba's house. It is there that the uncle discovers that the girl is pregnant. In order to save the family's honor and protect the purity of the unborn child, Setareh's uncle kills her and mutilates her body in order to ensure the death of the child. Touba buries the body beneath the pomegranate tree in her courtyard. Years later, when the body of another young girl is buried with Setareh's remains, Touba contemplates the role that corpses play in her decaying household. She had carried the first body all these years, had cried for it on many occasions in the mosques and during sermons, and had protected the house's perimeters, not allowing an unfit eye to view the hidden grave. She had put aside her dream of searching for God in order to be able to adapt and turn the wheels of her fortune until the proper time arrived. Now they had placed a second corpse on her back and left the house.

Touba's house, on the one hand, resembles the four-walled space that was once equated with sedentary Earth. On the other hand, like the country it represents, it undergoes a turbulent history, traversed continually by different people and their stories, by ideas and developments that originate beyond its all-enclosing walls. The politics and ideologies are mysteriously empowered to penetrate the thick walls of Touba's house, and she fears that the walls and the lives they protect will crack at any moment. The complex relationships between the social and political structures of a country are woven into the structure of this novel and the actions of its characters. The novel laments the vanishing beauty of the past and at the same time it depicts the suffering, injustice, and oppression in the present.

Azar Nafisi, author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran,* says of Parsipur's female characters in *The Feminist Press*, "Like Parsipur herself, her protagonists are women whose rebellions are not merely political but existential, against a system that denies them individual dignity and stunts their potential for growth."

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Women Without Men

In her first English translation, Shahrnush Parsipur tells the story of five Iranian women and their complex relationships with reality, sexuality, and each other. Thirteen inter-weaving vignettes, *Women Without Men* the five women abandon their urban-Iranian society in favor of a female utopia in the gardens outside of Tehran. By dividing her novel into separate parts, Parsipur examines the underlying attitudes and ideologies imposed on her vastly different characters, giving depth to what could otherwise have been a hackneyed take on female subjugation and liberation in the non-Western world.

Parsipur's novel begins with Mahdokht, a former teacher visiting her brother's garden in Karaj, a city just outside of Tehran. After witnessing an illicit sexual encounter, Mahdokht decides that the burden of her virginity is too much to bear, and, declaring herself to be a tree, plants her feet in the ground. Just as Mahdokht transforms herself, Parsipur transforms the tree into a symbol for impossible femininity and virgin birth, as, through her own seed, Mahdokht is able to reproduce while maintaining her sexual purity.

Though Mahdokht finds peace through her transformative act, its unnaturalness shames her family, forcing her brother to abandon his garden. Mrs. Farrokhlaqa Sadraldivan Golchren, a widow from Tehran, purchases the property cheaply. As women begin to congregate at the site of Mahdokht's rebellion against conventional sexuality, the garden in Karaj becomes a sort of feminine utopia, a refuge for those fleeing the constraint of patriarchal Tehran.

Among the women seeking a home in Farrokhlaqa's garden are Munis and her ill-tempered friend Faizeh. After carefully guarding her virginity for thirty-eight years, Munis has discovered that she has been misled about the nature of her own body: "When she was eight years old, they had told her that God would never forgive a girl who lost her virginity. Now it had been three days and two nights since she had found out virginity is a hole, not a curtain. Something inside of her had broken. She was filled with a cold rage. She recalled how, when she was a child, she used to gaze longingly at the trees, wishing, that just once she could climb one. But she never had, out of fear for her virginity." (Parsipur 30) After discovering that her virginity is not an easily torn curtain, but rather a hole, Munis leaves Tehran with her traditionally-minded friend Faizeh, who has been protecting her own virginity in hope of marrying Munis's violently temperamental older brother. "'We decided to escape from the prison of family life,'" Parsipur's Munis declares. "We travel around and go on pilgrimages" (97). Shortly after embarking on the first of their pilgrimages, Faizeh and Munis are raped. Upset, they seek refuge in the garden.

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Women Without Men

Rounding out Parsipur's principal characters is Zarrinkolah, a woman of twenty-six, who, after years of prostitution, begins to see her clients as headless monsters. She flees to the garden in Karaj, where, upon her arrival, reality begins with the magical.

Parsipur's novel is compelling and emotionally driven, while her language is beautiful, if abstract. It has been suggested that the metaphoric elements of her story, as well as the colorful elements of mysticism, might trivialize the suffering of the women. However, Parsipur uses these elements with a mastery that enhances the story. Though life in the garden includes occasions of magic, as when a woman transforms herself into a tree, or gives birth to a flower, these incidents highlight the unusualness of the place itself — such a garden could never exist in reality, insists Kamaran Talattof, a scholar of Parsipur's work, which makes it all the more poignant when all of the women, whether conventionally or through transformation, leave. In contrast to the highly visual garden, reality seems mediocre and its inhabitants, ambivalent.

Not only can *Women Without Men* be read in terms of Parsipur's masterful use of abstraction and her powers of artistry, but also with respect to the frankness with which she discusses issues facing many Iranian women today. Kamaran Talattof, one of few scholars to address Parsipur's work in English, writes of the language of *Women Without Men*: "Despite the surrealistic imagery, the dialogue of the protagonists demonstrates their limited social space and grounds their situation in reality. In the novel, society's sexual morality surrounding female virginity shapes the feelings, aspirations, and internal conflicts of each of the women. Norms justifying violence against women and sympathizing with the violator are challenged. The author demystifies sexuality, virginity, and rape by speaking frankly about them." (3) Parsipur gives voice to her characters, allowing them—representative women from Iran-to articulate their thoughts on issues like virginity and rape in the patriarchal world of post-revolutionary Iran in a way that few authors have.

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Blue Logos

Parsipur's *Blue Logos* is a highly metaphorical narrative set in Tehran during the Iran-Iraq war. One of the main themes of this novel is liberation. Depicting this struggle is a lieutenant who is striving to find salvation within himself. The heroine of the story is a woman who visits the lieutenant nightly in order to direct him toward the salvation symbolized by her femininity. The lieutenant's liberation lies in realizing he possess a feminine side. The novel's focus is not merely on the lieutenant; rather it is on universally releasing the restraints on women and also striving for liberation. In a defining moment, the narrator proclaims, "You are the seeds of existence, hold your heads high, be proud of yourselves. The world must show defiance to you, as you must show defiance to the world" (161).

Abbas Milani's book, *Lost Wisdom: Rethinking Modernity in Iran*, focuses on analyzing Parsipur's *Blue Logos* in relation to modernity. Milani references Parsipur's writing style as one that requires active readers who interpret the text themselves using their own rational powers. Milani further claims, "Among Iranian writers today, Shahrnush Parsipur is one of the most prominent artists of this persuasion" (140). Milani emphasizes Parsipur's themes of the coexistence of reality and fantasy and the issues of femininity present in many of her works. To further stress this point, Milani asserts, "The world of Parsipur's novels has a texture all its own, and a few Iranian modern writers have expected as much suspension of disbelief from their writers as Parsipur . . . Her novels provide women with a new and deeper understanding of the feminine principle, and of the complexity of their relationship with men" (140-142). Through this analysis, Milani reveals *Blue Logos* was written during a phase in which Parsipur suffered multiple episodes of depression. Despite this hindrance, Milani commends Parsipur for attempting " . . . a task worthy of Athena herself." Milani indicates Parsipur's aspirations for *Blue Logos* are to reconnect Iranian society with its femininity and assist Iranian women in realizing the masculine sides of their psyche.

Unlike the typical modern writers of Iran who just interpret Western literature, Milani indicates that Parsipur goes about things her own way. She attempts to understand the world by her own means, intuition, and incorporation of practical concepts from Persian tradition. Her writing style is further enriched by the employment of a common structure or characteristic found in classical Persian literature, namely the existence of multiple genres in a single narrative. "Philosophical parables, poems, historical anecdotes, aphorisms, and words from Islamic Scriptures often come together to shape the classical narratives of Persian literature" (150).

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Blue Logos

Milani claims Parsipur's intuition is anything but ordinary. *Blue Logos*, Milani argues, contains allusions to the Marxist concepts of reification and fetishism and to Blumenberg's study of myth. Astoundingly, Parsipur was never aware of these concepts. As for her title, *Blue Logos*, Parsipur defines the color blue as the symbolism for liberation. Milani elaborates further stating blue is the color of feminine wisdom, the Virgin Mary and a metaphor for virginity, wholeness and purity. It also is the color of melancholy, angst, the ocean and sky and intuition. God's throne is blue in the Hebrew Bible, and the royal thrones of Persian mythology are also blue. The occurrence of multiple interpretations of elements in Parsipur's narratives is not rare. As Milani stated earlier, it is partially the responsibility of the readers to "use their own critical and rational faculties to deconstruct the elements of each narrative" (140). Reflecting upon the book, Milani refers to the "divine child" as the messenger of the liberation and responds, "*Blue Logos* aspires to be nothing short of the 'divine child,' born of perfect symmetry, in a deeply unharmonious world" (154).

"The Heat of the Year Zero"

"The Heat of the Year Zero" is the story of a young girl in pre-Revolution Iran. This story is told from the point of view of the girl, who is recounting the summer when she was sixteen. This story gives one the feeling of looking into the mind of the narrator, experiencing the summer in the way she remembers it. The thread that runs through this story is the heat. According to the introduction on Shahrnush Parsipur in the collection *A Voice of Their Own*, this story "was published as the unrest which led to the revolution of 1979 was picking up" (Lewis 41). The heat is an oppressive force that symbolizes the weight and fear suffered by people in an atmosphere of civil disquiet. This story also comments on male-female relationships. It explores the girl's relationship with her brother, showing how in a society that is designed to keep the genders separated, their close relationship is doomed.

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"The Men of Aramaea"

"The Men of Aramaea" tells of a woman and her lover who are kept apart by the world. The Arabic word aram can either be used to speak of the Aramaic civilization or it can mean "calm or tranquility"; thus the title can be understood to mean "The Calm Men." When the story begins, the protagonist's beloved is being held captive. She dreams of mystical ways to rescue him, but lacks the power to do anything but wait. Eventually he escapes and makes his way to Germany. The woman tries to follow him, but he keeps moving on without her. Eventually they meet up in Germany. When the heroine is finally with her love, she is truly happy and wants nothing else. He, however, wants to take her to America, and hatches a plot to smuggle her in a suitcase on an airplane. The ending of this story, not unlike the end of *Touba and the Meaning of Night,* is inspired by Parsipur's background in mysticism. The girl emerges from the suitcase, like a butterfly from a cocoon, as a beautiful and intangible being.

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