

A Sociological Study of Iranian Women's Role in Fictional Literature in the Recent Two Decades

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Abstract: Fictional literature has experienced an increasing and stunning growth of women writers in the past two decades. In terms of quality and quantity, the increase was to the extent that nowadays women's names are mentioned sometimes even more than men's among the distinguished writers of contemporary Iranian literature. On the other hand, these authors have often chosen the novel as their main literary form. From the sociological view of novel and of critics such as George Lukacs, the growth of women in fiction writings make sense in the context of social and cultural developments of contemporary Iran, finding ways to pass the society toward modernity. In fact in this paper we assume that this unprecedented growth is due to the general conditions dominant over the intellectual and social environment of Iran and the transition of the society from traditional to a modern one; and among other important factors regarding modernity, in this paper individuality is considered as the main element whose formation and evolution through the history of modernity in Iran, has eventually led to a phenomenon we face today, i.e. the dramatic growth of female writers. In other words, individuality or female individuation is the factor that has moved its way in spite of various political, cultural and social changes, and brought along other results which led to the stunning emergence of women in writing.

Keywords: Fictional Literature, Female Writers, Modernity, Individualism, Sociological Study.

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Introduction

Persian Literature, like the literature of some other nations, consists of two categories, the classical and the modern literature. Each is divided in turn and from different perspectives into several periods. For example, in the point of view of a critic and writer named Mohammad-Ali Sepanloo, modern Persian Literature begins from the Constitutional period and encompasses four distinct periods until 1350 Persian date (1972 AD). (Sepanloo, 2007) Shafiee Kadkani, the famous contemporary poet and literary critic, divides this time into 3 main periods which covers the years until the Iranian Revolution in 1357 (1979 AD). (Shafiee Kadkani, 2002) But the point which is considerable, during this history and before regarding our subject, is the absence of the Persian speaking women in the field of literature especially in Persian prose. In other words the history of Iranian modern literature, like its classical literature, is completely dominated by male poets and writers, and except for a few figures that are mostly marginalized, there are no women. This also continues to happen until the 1370s Persian date (1990 AD) and it is only from the middle of this decade when we suddenly experience the strong presence of women writers especially in novel, to the extent that according to the statistics in 2000, over 1300 Persian speaking women writers have been registered. (Shafiq, 2005, p. 142) At the same time the number of magazines and press, released and published by women's management, have been confirmed as 104. Also in the statistics in 1996, 236 female managers were employed as publishers. (Rostami, 2001)

Given the foregoing, in the present study, it is attempted to examine the social and cultural context of this phenomenon and explain possible reasons of the growing presence of female writers especially in the area of prose and novel. Meanwhile the present study seeks to determine firstly why Iranian female writers turned to write in such a big volume during these 2 decades and secondly why they have chosen novel among other forms of literature. In response to the first question, we are going to have a look at the history of modern Iran and its literary development focusing on women's role and place. But answering this question, we can start our study from the 2nd question and then answer the other one, as we are going to use the sociology of novel and one of the most famous figures in literary and philosophical criticism in Europe, George Lukacs.

Novel, the Literary Form of the Modern World

As mentioned, Iranian women in contemporary literature especially in the recent two decades, have been

successful, mostly in the area of fiction and prose writing. Writers such as Zoya Pirzad, Fariba Vafi, Moniru Ravanpour, Farkhondeh Aqayi, Azar Nafisi, Shahrnoosh Parisipour, Goli Taraqi, Mahsa Moheb-Ali, Belqeys Soleymani, Mahboubeh Mirqadiri, Roohangiz Sharifianare included among the known figures in fictional literature who have won some important awards, and the works of some of them have been translated into foreign languages and welcomed by non-Persian readers. For instance, Moheb-Ali has won the Golshiri Foundation Award twice and her novel named 'Don't Worry' has been introduced as the best novel of 2007 in Iran.

Belqeys Soleymani has also won the significant award of Mehregan for her novel *Lady's last Game* and with another novel called 'Khalebazi' which introduced her as one of the most important figures of fictional literature in 1380s Persian date (the last decade). Pirzad and Vafi have also won several awards and are considered as major representatives of fictional literature in recent years of Iran. The rest were also successful mostly in novels as novel was the only suitable place where these women writers were able to discover their inner world and as a result, construct their own identity. In fact novel is a form, as the famous French writer and the writer of the novel 'The Counterfeiter', Andre Gide puts it: "that is the freest and the most unregulated one among all literary forms". (Haqshenas, 2003, p.59) On the other hand, women's access to novel in order to express their "selves" includes remarkable points from sociological point of view. In other words from critics' point of view like that of Lukacs, the Iranian society has changed in recent decades and provided the conditions for women to emerge mostly in the area of novel.

According to George Lukacs, the famous Marxist critic of the twentieth century from Hungary, every literary form (and in general any great form of art) is born from the necessity of expressing an essential content. (Pouyandeh, 2002, p.27). As a result, it is the content which determines its literary form and vice versa. Similarly, Lukacs considers novel as the dominant literary form which is the most appropriate form in the modern world. In other words, only novel is able to depict the conditions of the modern world. In 'Theory of Novel', which is considered as an innovative reflection upon the relationship between society and literary work in its

time; Lukacs repeatedly emphasizes that novel is a literary form which has replaced epic and drama, and is a reflection of the modern world (Lukacs, 2002) which is an enchanted world, full of anxiety where the traditional values of the society suffer crisis, and belief in them has been weakened or gone, and consequently its heroines are astonished and stunned. According to Lukacs's point of view in the modern world, moderation and harmony between human being and the universe, as is seen in the pre-modern world for example in epics, is destroyed and replaced by the struggle between the individual and society. In such a view, novel is also the translation of the everyday life in an individualistic society which is born out of the production for the market. (Pouyandeh, 2002, p.30)

The presence of the confused female characters, involved in big or unimportant concerns of daily life and also the woman who searches for her identity and individuality, is among the most basic features of the works of writers whose names are mentioned above. To explain this point of view, we can mention a few examples: the novel 'I will Turn off the Lights' by Pirzad (1380) simply portrays a housewife named Clarice who is involved in the problems and concerns of everyday life. The woman who lives with her husband and three children in Abadan identifies the problem that she has in her relationship with her husband while describing her daily life events. Therefore she gets into a serious challenge between herself and her surroundings and the reader faces a woman who has to balance between her personal feelings towards a strange man who is still charming though having lost his wife and having a teenage daughter, and her feelings as a mother with her duties towards her husband who is not a lover. This balance is of course fragile and the hidden anxiety in this woman's heart and all through the novel can be felt very well. But the significance and beauty of this work is actually hidden where the reader looks at her own surroundings and conditions as a housewife from a middle class Iranian woman's point of view, so her individuality and personal feelings attract attention very well. The clear feminine individuality and identity, which is depicted through a distinctly feminine view and based on personal experience of a woman, can also be seen in the works of the other female writers of this period. Fariba Vafi in 'My Bird' (the winner of the best novel of the year in 2002) portrays a woman's sexual life who is also engaged in difficulties of her life, children and routines. Similar to some modern heroines, she looks at love doubtfully and reviews her relation-

ships with her husband, family and children in her mind through a loud and anxious monologue. Her world is enchanted, empty of any excitement, 'decision and action' are playing the roles of a man and a woman who are standing close together who pretend to have solidarity with an excessive lack of interest". (Vafi, 2002, p.76) This phrase and its tone depict the modern atmosphere of the novel and the mentality of its writer. In 'Khalebazi', by Belqeyes Soleymani, the central role of the story still belongs to women. The main character, Golbanoo, like the other women in the novels of this period, fights to seize her own destiny and experiences a variety of issues from love to divorce on the way. The path this character goes through is the same change which is also evident in other female writers' short stories and novels: the search for individuality and reaching personal dignity through rethinking their situation and their surrounding world. This change finally causes the emergence of a severely individualistic character called Shadi in Moheb-Ali's work 'Don't Worry', who is misanthropic and has turned into addiction for unknown reasons. But unlike the works of the previous decades and especially those of the early women novelists who created such a character only to be condemned and sacrificed for ethics, it only mirrored the realities of today's Iranian society and especially the younger generation. In fact, it can be said that in this novel Moheb-Ali narrates the lives of people who have lost their identity and struggle in vain searching for nothing. In such a world the only thing that is real, is the everyday relationship between human beings and commodities, a relationship that is no longer based on old and traditional values such as altruism, compassion and love but built upon the new values, the product of modern and bourgeois society: values such as individualism, coercion, money and lust. This complex form of relationships and problematic characters, as Lukacs defines, is certainly able to emerge and be considered in the heart of novel. It is only through this format where the female writer can reveal her existence and massive experiences to the reader and take us deeply into her heroines' emotions and feelings. Of course, it does not mean that these writers no longer believe in old values, but they believe the values would be very difficult and impossible to achieve. Also it should be noted that most of the female characters of these stories are trapped in a limbo between tradition and modernity, and their identity remains mysterious and hidden. That is why they are still reluctant in the battle to win freedom and independence from men and realize their own individuality. Anyway the

present situation of female writers in recent years depicts that the development of their individuality and their understanding of the changes in the contemporary society in Iran are the changes whose fruit for women is the product of more than a century of efforts and hard works. Now to understand this transformation and the journey that led to the flourishing of individuality and women's fictional literature, we will continue briefly with the history of the evolution of women's literature in contemporary Iran.

History and Development of women's literature in fiction

Women's literature in Iran, i.e. the literature produced by women, does not enjoy a very long history. In fact women were not present in classical literature and most of the contemporary literature, except for the role of fictional and passive characters, and they used to only help men's creativity and productivity in poetry and thinking. It is only in few works such as *Veis and Ramin* by Fakhruddin As'ad Gorgani in the 5th century (11th AD) that we see an independent and strong presence of a woman like Veis, who puts a country into chaos in order to achieve her own wish and ultimately makes everyone agree with her. Or Shahrzad, the storyteller in 'Thousand and One Nights Tales', who tries to change the king's attitudes, the king who hates women and kills them and Shahrzad tries to save the lives of lot of them. It is interesting that in this masterpiece of the Eastern literature³, i.e. 'Thousand and One Nights Tales', women, like men, are the subject of love and sometimes in some place they propose their desirable man, or somewhere else they reject the man they do not love. But aside from these few works, in most of the Iranian literature including the remaining Eastern culture and literature, women writers did not enjoy a place except in the margin, for example in 'Thousand and One Nights Tales', we deal with men's misogyny and their exploitation in many cases (Tasviji, 2004). But this situation does not vary so much even when women write. They also speak of love, mysticism and other topics through men's outlook. The female's view and

3- Although the stories are from various areas in Asia and Africa, the names of the main characters and the soul of a considerable part of the stories are Persian. "This narrative, as well as some of the individual tales with which Sheherazade beguiles Shahriyah over 1001 nights, may have been drawn from an earlier collection known as *Hazar Afsana*, Persian for 'one thousand tales'. This collection has not survived, but many of the stories within the 1001 nights are thought to have Persian or Indian origins." <http://exhibitions.slv.vic.gov.au>

experience had not found its place in the Persian literature yet, until the modern era especially when the social and political events took place in the 19th century AD when women began their movements toward individuality, recycling their own identity and attitude to the world from an individual point of view which is not an imitation; a movement which is shown slowly and delayed in literature and according to the comment emphasized in this paper, only a few decades have passed from its realization.

The history of modernity and the rise of modern society in Iran are short lived phenomena in comparison with the West. All the historians and critics believe the starting point of this history was at the beginning of the 19th century when the Iranians confronted the new Western culture and civilization seriously. (Goudarzi, 2008, p.21). Due to this confrontation, a new era began in Iranian history in which after a while led to the great political, social and cultural movement called the Constitution which terminated the absolute ruling of Qajar kings and prepared for the rise of a modern government in the early 20th century. Therefore the constitutional movement and generally the entrance of new mentality (enlightenment) in Iran rooted in the developments of the 19th century and especially the gradual infiltration of the West in the country. (Abrahamian, 2012, p.74) The relationship with the West led to the emergence of institutions, ideas and modern careers and also the gradual formation of a new class in the Iranian society called the middle class which spread new and modern concepts of freedom, equality, human rights, and many other concepts such as women's rights and freedom, inspired by the European Enlightenment ideas. From this point of view, it has only been since the Constitutional Revolution onwards that the issue of women's freedom and improving their social and cultural situation in Iran were considered seriously. On the other hand, one of the main areas among the major factors of intellectual and cultural modernization of Iran since the Constitutional era was considered literature. Literature had a particularly important place in this intellectual and socio-political movement because the majority of works produced or translated in this historical period were literary rather than political and social sciences. (Azad Armak, 2005, p.220) Thus the group that took these modern notions into consideration more than any other intellectuals was the writers and poets. Besides intellectuals like Talbof, who emphasized on the necessity of considering women's rights and freedom in his speeches and papers,

there were many other writers and poets who considered this issue with more sensitivity. Bahar Lahooti, Iraj Mirza, Shahryar and others were among those who emphasized women's social and political roles, demanding more freedom for them implicitly. However, we should see what women actually did in that era.

Women's participation and role in the Constitutional movement is clear for everyone. Many historians have written in this regard and mentioned women's struggles for freedom in this period. (Abrahamian, 2012, pp.84-92). Even Iranologists like Ivanov, the Russian writer, also emphasized on this notion; Ivanov writes in an essay on the Constitutional Revolution in 1949: "On January 20th, 1907 (Dey 19th, 1285 Persian date) a meeting of women was held in Tehran in which 10 articles of women's demands including the establishment of girl's schools and adjustment in the rate of Mahr⁴ were adopted." (Ivanov, 1949, p.244) Thus, the first girl's school in Tehran and some other major cities such as Tabriz, Isfahan, and Mashhad were opened. Also, women began to establish women's centers and magazines that gradually led to the emergence of professional female writers. The word professional is used because before that time, we could find some women who began to write but we cannot say they consider writing as a modern career. Otherwise female writers can be found in the same era of the Qajar dynasty but they were all dependent on the king's court and the royal class, like Fakhraddin, Nasser-e-din Shah's sister who is sometimes referred to as one of the first Iranian women, writing fiction because she had an important role in writing the story of the Famous 'Amir Arsalan', one of the most famous Persian folk tales quoted by Nasser-e-din Shah's storyteller. (Farrokhzad, 2001) In other words, it was she, who wrote this story. After her, another woman who was again one of dependents of the king's court, this time Taj-o-Saltaneh (Nasser-e-din Shah's daughter) published her own diary in 1292 Persian date (1913 AD). Moreover, despite these two women's dependence on the king's court, the importance of their works cannot be ignored because the point that women of that era penned as story writers, is of great significance to understand the social and cultural transformations in Iran. (Balayi, 1998) In fact this point shows that women are moving toward freedom and expressing their feelings and thoughts. Furthermore the first sign of criticizing men's world and the violence against women can be seen in these women's works, for example in 'Taj-

4- Mahr is a mandatory payment by the groom to the bride at the time of marriage in Islam.

o-Saltaneh's memoirs'. (Etehadiyeh, 1992) However, until 1320 Persian date (1941 AD), the number of women writers was very few and we cannot talk about a literary movement founded by women yet. Some, like Christopher Balayi, the French literary critic and Iranologist, believe that up to that year not even a single female writer can be found. (Balayi, 1998) The only voice heard among women in poetry is that of Parvin Etesami which also sounds like the works of the classical poets such as Nasser Khosro or Saadi. In other words her poem, despite defending women's rights and freedom, lacks feminine features and experiences, the way that is later seen in the poems of Forough Farrokhzad. After this date, i.e. 1940 onwards, there was still no news of female writers but one figure named Simin Daneshvar who despite her ability and knowledge in writing (she is the first woman who published a collection of short stories in Iran) is dependent upon her husband's name, Jalal Al-e-Ahmad. However, women's participation in social and cultural fields and then writing is not as bold in these years and later on.

But at the interval of 1963 to 1977, coincided with the White Revolution and the cultural and social changes in the Iranian society, the first signs of women's serious presence in fiction writing can be seen. It should be noted that during these years, women's social situation involved a considerable evolution. Since then, women obtained the right to vote and could handle social positions. Another important event in these years was the adoption of family supporting law and as a result the limitation for men's right on divorce, polygamy and the issue of custody of children. Also due to this law, the age of marriage for girls increased to 15. (Abrahamian, 2012, pp. 245-246)

Among these figures and in addition to those like Daneshvar who became famous in this era, writers like Goli Taraqi, Mahshid Amirshahi, Mahin Bahrami, Qazale Alizadeh and Shahrnoosh Parsipour thrived. Actually the serious beginning of the Iranian women's fiction writing should be considered in this period, because in these writers' works we can see the reflections of women's experiences and personal circumstances. But in describing the works created between 1963-1979 (the Islamic Revolution), one point is worth to be noticed; that due to the "lack of women's personality independence who are bound in the impasse of their own demands, family and society's expectations and their identity which is defined only in relation to men, these works have an aspect of elegy." (Mirabedini, 2002, p. 408)

This factor along with other reasons marginalizes the works of this period again and makes them dependent on male novelists. It means that in naming great writers of this period, women's names are not often mentioned. It does not mean that the names mentioned are forgotten, but these writers would pursue their work more seriously than before and finally, it was in the last years of 1970s AD when they would confirm themselves in fiction writing. The years in 1970 AD are generally considered as important years in fiction writing and in women's literature field, because 'Soovashoon' was published. This big novel as told by the critics, opened a new chapter into the Persian novel (ibid), in addition to the clever and detailed representation of the Iranian life and tradition in a particular period, it was also an important leaning point for the other female writers, who entered the field of writing with more self - confidence since then. Again a year before, i.e. in 1968, the Iranian Center for Writers was founded and managed by Simin Daneshvar (the writer of 'Soovashoon') who had an important role in consolidating the authors and their rights to free thought and expression. Also in 1977, the Goethe Institute in Tehran held a program known as Ten Poetry Nights where once more Simin Daneshvar was the president and manager. In the same years, others such as Goli Taraqi and Shahrnoosh Parsipour took serious steps in fiction. The book 'Women without Men'(1989) is considered among the important works of women's literature in Iran in the 80s Persian date. In this work, Parsipour defends women's rights and femininity clearly and loudly. However this novel is extremely misunderstood and is still categorized as works in which women are fighting for their rights. The whole work is expressed by one male character at the beginning of the book who says: it is meaningless that a woman goes out, the house is for woman and outside is for man. (Parsipour, 1969) Hence there is no sign of the established identity and individuality and it considers describing female individuality and dignity without struggling and conflict. That is the same feature which is seen in novels of the 90s AD and especially the recent decade. From this perspective, it can be said that the works of those like Goli Taraqi and Shahrnoosh Parsipour include a feminist bias and are distanced technically and artistically from the works of the later writers such as Fariba Vafi and Zoya Pirzad.

However, we have to wait for the years after the Islamic Revolution to see the meaningful and broad participation of women in the field of writing. The Islamic

Revolution of Iran was indeed a unique opportunity for women to participate in the country's social and political developments broadly for the first time and to fight for the victory of the Revolution. Among the women who were mostly from the middle class or low class in society, many came out of the fences of house for the first time and participated in a political and social discourse. Then, the imposed war and its economic and psychological consequences inspired women's presence and actions in different ways and provided them with the society scene. In other words, the Revolution and the war created a situation in which women suddenly realized their specific historical and socio-political function. In simple words the result of this change was women's withdrawal from a passive position. Among the known figures who became famous after the war, we can mention Moniru Ravanipour who entered the field of fiction writing in Iran seriously with 'Kanizoo' (1988) but became famous with 'Nazli' (2002). At the same time, Farkhondeh Aqayi, was another one who started writing almost simultaneously with Ravanipour but she also had to wait until the 1990s to thrive and find her own style and write her best fictions, the periods in which she was considered among the successful writers in narrating female feelings and passions. In Aqayi's stories, woman "takes away all the masks and weapons she took in centuries to hide herself from her innerself, and bares out her tender and sensitive soul." (Moshtaq, 1999) But as noted, the best fictions of these two writers i.e. 'Nazli' by Ravanipour and 'Taught by Devil and Burnt' (2007) by Aqayi are the products of the recent decade, i.e. the years which we believe female writers' individuality and identity has eventually been formed and has been the source of numerous and unique literary works.

Yet the fruit of the important social and historical event mentioned, i.e. the Iranian Revolution and Iran-Iraq war, emerged in the field of literature and writing in the 1990s. These are the years when we face the stunning boom of fiction writing among Iranian women. It is in this decade when women's literature finds its form and identity and we face a wave of female writers who are not only brave enough in expressing their personal experiences but express these experiences in a more literary form and stronger language; this claim owes the many awards that are given to them since then. But it is worth mentioning the social and political conditions of this period and its impact on female writers' growth and thriving. At this time, which is coincided with the emergence of the Reformist Government in Iran, we face the

noticeable growth in the number of women at universities and various social and cultural institutions. For example, the number of girls entering universities relative to boys increased from 28% in 1357 to 37% in 1374 and 62% in 1381. (Panahi et al., 2010) This noticeable growth during these years and later on brought about more claims by women in all fields; social, political and economic spheres. Seeking and achieving financial independence, facing a multitude of social meanings and experiences and the decreasing impact of family institution and other factors⁵ compared to the plural and constantly changing external world, changed female writers' world and mentality more than before. In fact this simultaneous growth was the product of women's growth in knowledge and freedom and the stronger formation of individuality rather than before. This individuality and freedom can be seen well in the representational quality of these writers' works in recent years, the quality which is considered as a key component of modern culture. (Giddens, 1990) We can see the symptoms of rejecting the masculine dominant discourse and its values and at the same time exploring the feminine self but the important point to be emphasized here is that women do not consider themselves inferior to men any longer but considers themselves as human beings who do not differ from men. She is no longer frightened by patriarchal traditions and founds her relationship with the opposite sex upon human feelings and passions, and values the counterpart as much as she does herself. The example of this type of relationship can be seen in Pirzad's novel 'We get used to it' (2003). The main characters in this novel are two women called Shirin and Arezoo who have achieved independent identities and have full dominance over themselves and the surrounding conditions. This form of looking into the world and human beings and the narration scan be seen in many other women's works as the most famous ones mentioned in the introduction.

Conclusion

The final years of the 20th century onwards are considered as the Iranian female writers' thriving and dominance in the field of literature, especially that of fiction writing. This phenomenon can be known as the product of various reasons, and the most important one is the formation of women's identity and individuality and

5- It could also be the impact of globalization, communication & information technologies and the effect of individualism.

as a result, women's promotion to the position of active and informed ones. In fact, by looking at the history mentioned, three periods can be defined in women's literature developments especially in fiction writings in contemporary eras: the first period is the one when women get involved in writing autobiographies and memoirs but still male-oriented during the Constitutional Revolution and onwards. In this era, women are merely trying to achieve their basic rights such as education or choosing spouse. But denouncing women's moral hazards and advice to maintain modesty and shame are also included in this period. In the second period, it seems that we deal with a type of fiction in which the masculine world is treated harshly and often feministic. It is worth mentioning that the authors of this period have often left their homeland, as Shahrnoosh Parsipour is one of them. But the third period is the one in which we believe feminine individuality and dignity are formed and its representative authors have achieved a relative balance with the outside world. Among the famous writers of this period, Belqays Soleymani, Fariba Vafi and Zoya Pirzad can be mentioned. However, the review mentioned could be naturally the description of the common belief we hear every day and is the society's transition 'from tradition to modernity'. The Iranian's awakening and its society's step into modernity has a history of more than a hundred years. Simultaneously with this event, the requirements and consequences of modernity such as individualism entered the realm of Iranian works and thoughts. But this development did not grow with the same speed and form in all levels and over all classes. Due to various cultural and political reasons which are not dealt with in this paper and require another opportunity, women's growth in knowledge and their process of individualism were slower and more delayed than men's. Of course the obstacles these two groups faced were quite different in many cases but any way women's individuality and growth and consequently its reflection in the society in the form of fiction and novel, according to Lukacs as the relevant forms to modernity and also produced by modernity, was revealed only in the recent two decades and especially in the 21st century. Comparing the number and quality of the works during these years with those of the previous years is well indicative of this claim. Also the awards women won during these years are not comparable to those in the past.

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