

Subversive Travels: Shahrnush Parsipur's *Women Without Men*

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Abstract

The paper analyses Shahrnush Parsipur's much-acclaimed novella, *Women Without Men*, with a focus on one of its most prominent motifs, that of the journey, undertaken in different ways and widely differing contexts by its five women protagonists. The novella has received much critical acclaim from around the world despite its having been banned in Iran, and the author herself being forced into political exile after its publication. A good deal of critical attention has converged around the journey motif in this novella, seeing it as a form of protest in the contexts of various forms of female subjugation within an entrenched patriarchy. While taking stock of these perspectives as valid and relevant to a larger understanding of this remarkable novella, the paper seeks to argue that physical mobility alone does not entirely denote the travel / journey motif. The analysis attempts to establish that through the individual life stories of the five women protagonists, there are other forms of 'travel' that they pursue in order to articulate their protest against the specific gender subjugations faced by each.

Keywords: Subversive travel, gender subjugation, transcendence, journey, protest.

Soon after the 1989 publication of *Women Without Men* in her native Iran, Shahrnush Parsipur was arrested and jailed for her frank and defiant portrayal of women's sexuality. The book was banned in Iran and the author has had to live in political exile in the USA since. Despite these setbacks, the novella has been translated into several languages including English. This paper accesses the English translation by Faridoun Farrokh, published in India in 2015, by Women Unlimited, an associate of Kali for Women. The novella tells the protest stories of five women protagonists, each from a very different background and each facing varying forms of societal oppression, stemming from an entrenched patriarchal system of control. The narratives are simultaneously starkly realistic and transcendental in a unique combination of events. The setting for the novella is post World War II Iran, with only three indirect passing references to the 1953 CIA-led coup, causing a political turmoil which had a lasting impact on the lives of Iranian women. Many of the rights that women had fought for and gained in the Pahlavi regime were subsequently revoked in the 1979 Cultural Revolution,

which also marked a return to fundamentalism. In her article “The Utopia that Never Was”, Sharareh Frouzesh comments:

“It should be noted that these references to the ’53 coup seem rather misplaced in the context of the novella. The story centers on constraints on women’s mobility - an issue which strikes at the heart of the ’79 revolution, when despite women’s large-scale participation in the revolution, women in fact lost many of the rights they received under the Pahlavi regime and were faced with more restrictions in terms of physical and social mobility [1]. It seems clear that the reference in the novella to the coup is a metalepsis for the revolution, one which explicitly *connects* them and does so with regard to women’s mobility in particular ” (n.pag.).

In alignment with Frouzesh’s observations, it could be argued that whatever be the context of political turmoil in Iran, the ultimate impact is almost always gendered in its repercussions, with male power over women’s lives being further consolidated. In the context of this novella, it really hardly matters whether it was the 1953 coup, or the 1979 Revolution that forms the background to the always-already constrained lived lives of the five women protagonists, especially in relation to their social and physical mobility. It should also be noted that each woman’s positioning within the patriarchal framework of control is individual and different, particularly with reference to social and physical mobility. Mahdokht, Faiza and Munis are unwed virgins who face the most constricting norms when it comes to questions of individual agency in thought and physical movement. These norms, implicitly understood by the women in the novel, indeed internalised by them, are constructed within Islamic patriarchy to exercise control over women’s lives, minds and bodies prior to marriage. Using the age-old rhetoric of female ‘chastity’ and ‘purity’, these norms dictate that women shall not trespass outside the domain of the domestic sphere, which is seen as their socially ‘proper’ space and place. Any movements beyond these socially prescribed boundaries (which are at once both social and geographical) will, according to these norms implied in the novel, have to be sanctioned by male authority and male presence.

According to a published document of the Islamic Propagation Office (Riyadh), such a dictum restricting women’s mobility is religiously sanctioned as follows: “... It is not permitted for the woman who believes in Allah and the Last Day to travel one day’s distance without the presence of a mahram ... When a woman travels without a mahram, this encourages corrupt people to prey on her because of her weakness; at the very least, her honour will be harmed” (Al- Munajjid 24).

This traditional piece of patriarchal wisdom does several things at once: it constructs all women as physically and mentally weak and unable to defend their bodily safety, and links this construct to the possibility of sexual predation, which in turn is inextricably tied to the idea of female honour and chastity and, more problematically, to the idea of religious faith. Importantly, it characterises the female body (wandering or still) as a source of moral corruption in itself. Within this framework, Mahdokht, Faiza and Munis are particularly

bound by its dicta, since as unmarried women they pose a threat to the existing order of male hegemony which rests on absolute control of female sexuality through and within marriage. Farrokhlaqa, a now-widowed survivor of more than three decades of marital rape, and Zarrinkolah, a prostitute, are no less constricted, but are sexually controlled and oppressed within their particular circumstances. Each woman responds to her particular situation with individual forms of protest and resistance, which range from the ordinary/ common to the extraordinary surreal/ magical.

Mahdokht is one of the most complex characters in the novella. She quits her teaching position to escape the lewd advances of a male colleague and moves to live with her brother's family at the latter's behest. As the critic Frouzesh points out, this physical act of mobility is perfectly in keeping with the social norms by which Mahdokht feels herself to be bound, despite the sexual conflict she experiences. Mahdokht's wish to become a tree and subsequent wish-sublimation when she transforms into a "human-tree" ((Parsipur, 78) have been interpreted by Frouzesh as an act of agency whereby she preserves her virginity (untouched by male desire), ironically by retiring into her brother's garden, a private and domestic domain guarded by male authority. In this context, the argument could be extended further to forward the idea that Mahdokht's willed transformation into another non-human life form can also be read as an act of travel/protest, whereby she moves away from the human world altogether and assumes the identity of a tree. This idea of magically possible mobility from the real/human world to the unreal/ non-human realm, constitutes, in my argument, another form of travel- imaginary, which also suggests that it is only as a "human-tree" in a garden that Mahdokht would be treated as a precious life, something that as an unmarried (human) female she could never expect in her society.

Munis, seen by many critics as the central character in the novella, has a different form of resistance to her life-constraints, which are largely shaped by her brother Amir Khan's patriarchal custodianship of her virginity as his unmarried sister. She is mostly confined to the house. She gains a sexual knowledge from a conversation with Faiza, which disrupts all her presuppositions about her own body. Her first act of resistance is to die, (either by accident or suicide is not clear in the novella) by falling from the roof of her brother's house. But she doesn't stay dead; instead as a 'living-dead' woman, she wanders the streets of Tehran alone for a whole month before returning home. Her conservative brother is so aghast at her social 'transgression' that he first beats her brutally and then kills her, in a socially tacitly sanctioned bid to save the family 'honour', which had been compromised by her 'shameless' wanderings. After this second death, she is hastily buried in the garden by her brother (and incidentally her friend Faiza) to conceal the violent murder. After her brother's marriage to a girl of his choice, (and not to Faiza, who had wished to marry him), Munis emerges from the grave as herself, asking Faiza for food and water as she was starving. What becomes evident is that after emerging from a third death, she can now read people's minds, and transform her appearance and being to a non-human one suggesting supernatural powers.

In her non-human self, she is enabled to tell her brother some home-truths which she could never have done in her first human previous life/self as his sister; she leaves with Faiza to find a new life. Here, it could be argued that Munis travels from the living human world to an unreal world of the dead, and then back again to the real world, having acquired through three deaths an in-between identity which empowers her in new ways to negotiate the dimly unchanged world of the living human present. This transcendental mobility which enables her to access and articulate truths about her real life is, in my view, as much a form of travel-as-protest, as it is a form of social rebellion against entrenched practices of gender oppression.

Neither her newly-acquired bodily self-knowledge about female anatomy nor her ability to read minds helps Munis, however, in the subsequent brutal rape she endures while travelling on foot to Karadj with Faiza unaccompanied by a mahram. Faiza too is raped; both realise that in the real world, nothing has changed where women's perceived transgressions are routinely punished by a male authority that sanctifies violent crimes against women as justice. While both are devastated physically and emotionally from the rape, Munis still has the spirit to philosophise that the crime was "a force that wanted to confront me with a sample of the troubles I was to face in my journey" (Parsipur 84). When asked by Farrokhlaqa if she wished to stay in her house in Karadj, Munis accepts with the comment:

"Unfortunately it is still not a time for a woman to travel by herself. She must either become invisible, or stay cooped up in a house. My problem is that I can no longer remain housebound, but I have to, because I am a woman. Perhaps I can make a little progress at a time. But then I will have to be stuck in a house for a while. Maybe this is the only way I can see the world, at a snail's pace." (Parsipur, 85-86)

In the words of Frouzesh, Munis has acquired a new strength:

"... recognizes that to forge a new path to greater freedom, a woman faces the dangers and brutality of the world—that, indeed, a woman cannot hope to travel beyond her allotted place without being rendered vulnerable to the brutality of the patriarchal order and its regimes of discipline. Munis in death-life has the sight: She sees that though the laws that guide female mobility may be without foundation, their transgression is always bound with a price" (n.pag.)

Faiza's leaving her house to brave the chaotic streets of political turbulence cannot simply be read as an act of female rebellion towards emancipation from patriarchal power, since she was going to her friend Munis's house to pursue Munis's brother Amir Khan as a potential husband. Of all the five women, Faiza is the one who has most internalised and accepted the laws of male authority which control women. She offers moral support to an Amir Khan who reveals that he had just killed his own sister, echoing the male justification that family honour was at stake when a woman like Munis wandered the streets at random. Frouzesh comments in her article that Faiza's attempts at transgression are ironical since they

were made only towards securing a normatively prescribed and therefore legitimate, male-centred domestic space for herself (n. pag).

Zarrokhlaqa Golchehreh's unhappy and humdrum married life reveals the extent of physical constraint she endures with her husband even within the home, as she "looked forward to his absence so she could move around freely. With him in the house, she felt restricted and claustrophobic – a need to confine herself to a corner to avoid contact. In the thirty two years of their marriage she had learned to be inactive when her husband was home" (Parsipur 48). She dreams about another man she had known, thus travelling into a fantasy world to escape the sordid choke-hold of the all-too-real present. Frouzesh aptly observes however that "It is significant that her fantasies circulate around social norms, that Farrokhlaqa's fantasies allow her no other avenue but from the house of one man to the house of another" (n.pag.) Golchehreh's accidental killing leaves Zarrokhlaqa a free woman, because as a wealthy widow she still carries the protection of her dead husband's name. This freedom enables her to travel to Karadj, buy a house and pursue her social ambitions.

Zarrinkolah's position as a prostitute subject to her pimp's rules, render her an always-already transgressive figure, as far as patriarchal laws reach. She often talks of running away from the brothel where she has worked and lived since childhood, but knows that she can leave it only to go into another such brothel. Her moment of rebellion comes in the form of suddenly seeing all her male customers as headless, and this nightmare, hardly more frightening than her real life, ultimately makes her leave the brothel and end up with the other women in Karadj in Farrokhlaqa's house. Incidentally, on her way to Karadj she meets a male character named the Kind Gardener, who unknowingly acts as her mahram, as far as her physical journey is concerned. It could be argued that in her impossibly oppressed state, from which there was no lawful escape in real life, she finds refuge in visualising the 'faceless' actors of her oppression as headless. Like Farrokhlaqa, she too moves into a realm of fantasy in her mind to counter the physical and mental oppression of her real world. Frouzesh is of the opinion that Zarrinkolah's fantasy has the effect of rendering her oppressors identityless (n.pag.); an extension of this argument could be that her movement towards a fantastic world of headless men can be construed as a form of protest through mind-travel, creating for herself a space that cannot be policed by patriarchal/state ideology. The Kind Gardener only understands her as insane, but nevertheless accompanies her without further mishap to Karadj.

It is arguable that the 'transgressions' of Faiza and Farrokhlaqa are still within a more or less socially sanctioned space in relation to the physical and mental spheres of their individual lives; neither woman envisages herself living without a man. Faiza ultimately becomes the second wife of Amir Khan; Farrokhlaqa weds a second time a man who respects her in a traditional way. Even Zarrinkolah (whose earlier career as a prostitute precluded marriage), marries Kind Gardener. Mahdokht and Munis carve out alternative spaces for themselves through mind-travel that at least temporarily emancipates them from patriarchal

control; Mahdokht the human-tree bursts into seeds which scatter in the wind, while Munis, after seven years of mystic travel as a whirlwind gaining knowledge of the human world (in a way she never could have as a human female in her real world) becomes a “simple schoolteacher” (Parsipur 110). This complex interface of the real with the unreal in the lives of these women also reflects, firstly, that for them there is no complete and total escape from patriarchal oppression in the real world; secondly, that such emancipation as these forms of mind-travel offer are temporary reprieves, recognising the challenges that lie ahead of women who resist being subjugated. In addition to their real-life actual physical travel, which are overt forms of protest and resistance to patriarchal oppression through conscious ‘transgression’, it is possible to read the other extraordinary coping strategies of these women as creative forms of mind-travel that lead them to access and inhabit, albeit temporarily, alternative spaces that are beyond the control of oppressive forces and which effectively subvert the construct and practice of male guardianship.

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