



# Reading Simin Daneshvar's Savushun as a Feminist Novel

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Abstract: Savushun first modern Iranian novel written by a female Iranian feminist writer novelist Simin Daneshvar is a special literary work that goes beyond the limits of the period

it was written and aptly captures the milieu making it permanently useful. The novel considered the first novel in the Iranian literary canon is partly political and partly a clarion call of an emergent feminist movement. Savashun revolves around women trying to gain voice in a male-dominated society and concentrates on an emancipated woman's experience. Daneshvar thus through this work makes the Iranian women to have a voice to kick to. The technique is 'documentary imaginative' (Daneshvar, p.425) and similar to that of the American novelist E. L. Doktorow, specifically in how he treated the contemporary history in his most famous novel Ragtime (1975, Golsiri, p. 181; Eshaqian, p. 157). Savashun usually uses narrative forms and has a linear plot (Davaran, 159) and is dedicated to Daneshvar's husband Jalal Al Ahmad, a famous fiction writer, whose vigorous fight against the evil impact of western culture on Iran showed, with the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Iran a few years later, to have been prophetic.

Keywords: Daneshvar, Iranian women, Zari, Patriarchal Society, Reza Shah, Yousuf, Feminist.

## Introduction

Simin Daneshvar (1921-2012) an Iranian academic, fiction writer and translator is considered the voice and inspiration of Iranian women fighting for their rights particularly gender inequality and loss of human rights and emerged as a pioneer in Iranian female literary works and a heard voice for their rights from 1941 to 1979 and to the present times. She considered feminist matters human experiences that deserved equal attention as men. She was appointed the first chairperson of the Iranian Writers Union in 1968 at a time when intellectuals including feminists were brutally persecuted. Daneshvar's style both sensitive and imaginative contains cultural themes and metaphors which strikes a particularly sympathetic chord with contemporary political

dissidents and intellectuals. She uses imagery, poetics and background to criticize her country's instability and political uneasiness due to British colonialisation, which threatened nationalism in the country.

*Savushun* displays the social and historical forces that made pre-revolutionary Iran to be characteristically hopeless and desperate. According to a critic *Savashun* uses tactics to combat the censorship prevalent in Iran in time past and portrays the write up of a new generation of writers who worked on the recent past to capture the present (Yavari, p. 586). Rouhangiz Shiranpour in her review of *Women's Rights, Writing and Education in Iran* says that the novel portrays the experiences of women different and separate from those of men. She handles the inequality of women in the public and private spheres, not only through a feminist lens but also a human rights lens. Shiranpour supports this idea by acknowledging that the "fight for democracy is not distinct from women's fight" for their rights (Shiranpour, 1990). The tale caught in the main activities of Iran's contemporary history, makes it a coded political and historical story (Golsiri, p. 77; M. Mirsadeqi, p. 152), thus a steady movement from the microcosm of the family to the larger context of the country.

## Data Analysis

*Savushun* set in the Iranian city of Shiraz during the allied occupation of Iran during World War II displays the totality and spirit of the period using an unconventional female protagonist Zari, a young happily married woman and a mother whose behavior is contrary to the traditionally relegated Persian woman as she fights for the protection of her family (Sprachman, p. 347). Zari offers a rare view as an Iranian woman struggling to assert her own identity at a time of political and social unrest caused by occupational foreign powers. Though deeply rooted in her family responsibilities, she is an educated woman well aware of her potential

influence on those around her. Even as the occupying powers wreak havoc on her otherwise stable family, her awareness of the adverse effects of British occupation and her relentless urge to fight for her own way makes her one of the strongest women protagonists in Iranian literature. Zari's main interest is her family which includes her son, twin daughters and widowed sister in law and mostly her husband Yusof but she is also worried about her own constrained position as a woman in the patriarchal set up and the culture she is part of.

Zari portrayed by Daneshvar as an unconventional heroine is a 'real' woman and a developing character (Davaran, p. 141). She stands as a lead attempt to investigate the diverse areas of a woman's life, devoid of any ideological or sexual stereotyping (Milani, 1985, p. 328). She copes with her idealistic husband while struggling with her desire for traditional family life and her need for an individual identity. She continuously questions her position in the patriarchal set up and under male dominance. Zari tries to assert herself in her home, yet it is still a prison. Zari even feels it a prison when she thinks, "...in this summer of disease, famine, war and her own pregnancy... she was a prisoner in her house" (*Savashun*, 248). She is a loving wife who loves her husband even when he taunts her for the charity work she does, calling it 'rotten' and 'useless to the core'. She asks him hopelessly, "What should I do to satisfy you? What should I do to become courageous?" Yusof said laughing, "I can teach you. Your first lesson in courage is this: First, when you are afraid to do something, if you are in the right, do it in spite of your fear, my cute kitten!" "I am a human being," Zari said thoughtfully. "I'm not a cute kitten. Anyway, first lessons are given to people who are dead between the ears." Her world upturns when she loses him and she changes from a caring housewife and a loving mother to an aggressive woman with strong determination to fight against injustice, a fight started by him. Zari fights for the defense of those she loves but at the same time looks for solace emotional and socially.

Yusof though a wealthy land owner is highly patriotic. He dislikes the local opportunists supporting extreme exploitation of the local populace by the occupying allied forces. Yusof would not sell his estates' crops either to the foreign invaders or to the tribal leaders like Malek Rostam and Malek Sohrab at the cost of the peasants who take land on lease starvation. Hillman says: "not willing to succumb to pressure from the occupying forces and their Iranian supporters and being untraditional in his just treatment of peasants" (Hillman, p. 308). Yusof pays for his patriotism and emotions with his life. His brother, Khan Kaka tries his best to make Yusof concede and sell his harvest to the army or they will "take by force", but Yusof refuses to give in. He says: "It is not strange that the foreigners came here without invitation, Khan Kaka. What I hate is them instilling inferiority complex in all of you. In the twinkling of an eye, they make you all their business people, messengers, and interpreters. Can't one person resist them for them to say, well, there is one real man standing (Savushun, p. 32).

Yusof rebels against the occupiers while Zari does the domestic work traditionally assigned to women like mothering her three children, caring for the less privileged and attending to her husband. Zari's untold experience is retold through the accounts of her social visits and her meetings with friends and family members (M. Mirşadeqi, p. 152). She provides the patients with food in fulfilling a charity vow made to ease her labor pain. Daneshvar says: "For Khosrow's delivery, the excruciating pain made Zari to vow to provide homemade bread and dates to the mental patients". Zari enters the hospital because she is a kind woman and soon obviously feels isolated inside. After one of her visits, she asks Yusof, "Why is there so much suffering?" Yusof tries to dissuade Zari from leaving home by curtailing her work and says, "What is the use of all this charitable work? The whole thing is rotten from the core". "But no matter how hard she thought, she didn't know what she could do to fix things" (Savashun 122) The impact of

the political division invades her home so does the degrading patriarchal roles given to women.

Zari's perception is complicated and often metaphoric. She feels connected to the trees because they are the ones wasting, not the birds. The birds, like the men, can leave the garden anytime but the trees like women are deep rooted in the ground and affected by their environment just like Zari. The garden thus represents the collision of the outer and inner worlds of Zari leading to an imbalance in her self-identity. Zari would love to be more independent. She hates the uncountable questions which she has to answer continuously being a woman. She acutely feels the oppression of women under male domination or this gender-based oppression and even compares it to the oppression of Iranians living under allied occupation. Though her own family oppresses her more, she does not complain about it. Zari loves her family and culture so strongly that she even buys the harsh ideas of her husband but that does not stop her from questioning male dominance largely in private monologues. She feels that "the only brave thing that she could do was to not keep the others from being brave and let them—with their free hands and thoughts, with their tool of tools—do something" (*Savashun* 248).

Zari has no say in the discussions about the Iranian politics with male members of the family even though she desires to. It is not that her right as a citizen is snatched away but worse than that she is belittled as a person just because she is a woman, her opinion carries no weight. Her husband asks her to take care of the visitors, prepare the hookah and tea for them. While making the hookah for Yusof, she thinks within herself, "Coward or courageous, with her type of life and upbringing, it would be impossible for her to be involved in anything that would interrupt the normal flow of life" (*Savashun*, 203). Prokhovnik in her work says that although gender equality can be achieved by engaging women in

“formal political process” or “activity”, it cannot when the standards of the private/public separation have historically been defined by men. Zari unlike men folk does not like death and destruction. She tells Khosrow her son: “Yes dear. In your opinion and that of your father and teacher, I am a coward, a weakling. I am always afraid that something might happen to one of you. I can't bear the thought. But I too... when I was a girl, I, too, was brave in my own way” (*Savushun*, 141). She knows that, “the only daring thing expected of her is not to stop others from being daring, but to allow them to use their hands and thoughts, with their tool of tools—do something” (*Savushun*, p. 248).

Daneshvar's active story finally starts to change as Zari moves from fear to boldness and from detachment to engagement. Zari's acceptance of her role as a weak female ends with the novel's ending when her premonition about Yusof's death comes true and he is in fact assassinated. Yusof “unwilling to submit to pressure of the occupying forces and their Iranian supporters, and also untraditional in his just treatment of peasants,” (Hillmann, p. 308) pays for his idealistic sentiments with his life. Zari changes as in defiance of orders given by the local authorities, she holds a burial procession for him and even joins the protesters who want to avenge Yusof's death. The mourners are driven off by government troops called in to prevent a mass demonstration and Zari is forced to bury Yusof at night. Zari refuses to be cowed down and she refuses to mourn quietly. She becomes an outspoken supporter of her husband's ideology and of the cause which claimed his life. She goes about telling others that he died because he wanted to keep the contents of the silos for his own farmhands.

Zari's character strengthens after her husband's death. She finds her voice and confidence and at her husband's burial ceremony says: “They killed my husband unjustly. The least that can be done is to mourn him. Mourning is not forbidden,

you know. During his life, we were always afraid and tried to make him afraid. Now that he is dead, what are we afraid of anymore? I, for one, have gone beyond all that..." Her voice was trembling" (Savushun, 294). This marks Zari as a woman who is still attached to the family structure but far exceeds the role it gives to a woman. While her husband lived, she was scared but after his death she becomes a brave woman. She wishes to bring up her children "with love in a peaceful environment," but announces that she would "bring them up in hatred" (Savashun, p. 317).

## Conclusion

Zari is victorious at the end amidst the losses she suffers. She loses everything except her defiance and her eloquence. She is Zaynab, Hosein's sister, at the scene of the massacre in Karbala. After all, Zaynab herself voiced her protests even in captivity. Her conclusion is a sobering one. She says: "If only the world were in the hands of women, Zari thought. Women give birth. They are creators, and they know the value of their creation, the value of endurance, patience, monotony, and being unable to do anything for oneself. If the world were in the hands of women, how could there be wars? Perhaps because men have never been creators, they'll take any risk to create something" (Savashun, 204).

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