



# ČERĀĠHĀ RĀ MAN ĶĀMUŠ MIKONAM

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**ČERĀĠHĀ RĀ MAN ĶĀMUŠ MIKONAM** (I turn off the lights, Tehran, 2001), the first and most acclaimed novel by Zoya Pirzad (Zoyā Pirzād, b. Abadan, 1952), and the second to be penned by an Iranian-Armenian writer, after Ālice Ārezumāniān's *Hama az yek* (*All from one*, Tehran, 1963).

Set in the 1960s in the then-cosmopolitan southern Iranian city of Abadan (see [ĀBĀDĀN](#)), *Čerāġhā rā man ħāmuš mikonam* is narrated from the point of view of Claris (Clāris), a thirty-something stay-at-home mother of a teenage boy and twin girls. Her husband, Artush (Ārtuš), who works for the National Oil Company (see [OIL INDUSTRY](#)), harbors left-leaning ideals and is involved with the dissident movement that was part of the period's political landscape.

The family socializes for the most part with members of the city's Armenian community, taking their lead from Claris' mother and sister, Alice (Ālice). The latter is married to Jupe Hansen, a Dutch resident of Abadan. The only Muslim character is Claris' friend and women's rights activist, Ms. Nur-Allāhi (lit. "light of God"), who succeeds toward the end of the novel in involving Claris in that movement.

In contrast to the backdrop of a rapidly urbanizing city, much of the story takes place in private spheres, particularly in kitchens, and revolves around Claris' uneventful daily life as she struggles to keep the peace between



members of her family and ensure that there's a meal on the table to everybody's taste (Na'imi, pp. 79-85). The book's title is taken from a phrase Claris repeats every night at the end of her daily chores and before falling asleep, which alludes to social, cultural and religious restraints that turn off the lights on the private lives of women in Iran, an eclipsed sphere that operates for the most part under a shroud of secrecy (Gheytanchi, p. 182).

Unlike many contemporary literary works that highlight change in the public sphere, Pirzad's novels are often preoccupied with society's marginalized voices, reminding its readers that change in a society is preceded by change in the private lives of its citizens.

The appearance of an aristocratic Armenian family (Elmirā Simoniān, her son Emile, and her granddaughter, Emily) in the neighborhood sets the plot of the narrative into motion and brings an aura of mystery to the novel. Claris falls in love with Emile, a handsome man with green eyes, and is torn by dual loyalties and conflicting emotions. Pirzad skillfully deploys the techniques of interior monologue to delve into the inner thoughts of Claris, whose *do var-e dehn* (two sides of the mind) are ensnared in an uncomfortable coexistence. This use of an internal monologue enables the author to convey a range of emotions and dilemmas beyond the possibilities of a direct narrative account.

One day, to Claris' surprise, Elmira, who has a tumultuous relationship with her son and granddaughter, invites Claris to her house to talk about her life. Elmira shares with Claris pictures from her youth, and recounts with anger and bitterness how her suitor, whom she did not love, and her father fell in love with each other's wealth, how she was married off, and how, in a sudden turn of fortune, she fell in love with a handsome man in Paris, a passionate love hidden from the public and especially from Elmira's father. "He came after me everywhere, India, England, France and back to India. When my husband died, I thought we would get married. I thought I am the happiest woman on the earth.....A few months later, he died too. We were in Paris. I buried him in Père Lachaise" (*Āerāĝhā*, p. 184). As Elmira continues her tale, she shows Claris another of her pictures, this time in black clothing, standing near a grave, holding on to a little boy also dressed in black. When Claris inquires about the color of her lover's eyes, Elmira, standing in the dark hallway, replies, "His eyes were green; the same color as his son's eyes" (*Āerāĝhā*, p. 185).

On one stormy day, dramatized by a massive plague of locusts in the city, after



careful deliberations on her role as mother and wife, Claris meets with Emile, only to hear of his frivolous affection for another woman. At night, Claris turns off the lights and returns to bed with her husband.

The publication of *Āerāĝhā rā man kāmūš mikonam*, a multi-layered narrative with simple, flawless sentences (Eslāmi, 10; Pāyandeh, p. 31), earned the author, who had previously published two well-received collections of short stories (*Ṭāʾm-e gas-e kormālu*, 1997, and *Yek ruz mānda be ʿEid-e Pāk*, 1999), immense popularity. It was celebrated as a literary landmark in modern Persian fiction, and as a masterpiece that employs the full potential of dialogue as a narrative technique (Emāmi, p. 71). It was selected as novel of the year by the Pekā Institute in 2001, and by the Golširi Foundation in the same year; in 2002, it was selected as the best book in the category of literature by the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance, and also as the recipient of the Yāldā Literary Award (*Zanān*, February 2002, No. 96, p. 75). The book was also a popular success. According to statistics released by the Data Bank of Kāna-ye Ketāb in 2006, it ranked second in a list of the three bestselling novels of the previous fourteen years. It is interesting to note that the other two books on that list—*Dālān-e Behešt* (2005), by Nāzi Šafavi, and *Bāmdād-e komār* (1995; see *BĀMDĀD-e KOMĀR*) by Fattāna Ḥājseydjavādi—were also written by female novelists and dealt with the lives of women. This should be viewed as part of a more general trend of the increasing volume of novels written by women in post-revolutionary Iran. “The number of women who have published novels has reached 370. That is 13 times as many as a decade ago and is about equal to the number of men today” (Fathi).

Critics, mostly writing in Iran, were quick to point to the book as a tale of “chaste attraction” (Puraḥmadi, p. 6), and a novel with a moral lesson, based on “a kind of middle-aged woman’s inner monologue at the outset of a cold season in her life when she feels a yearning for [empathetic] love” (Ṭālebi-Nejād, p. 8). It should be noted, however, that the female characters of the novel do not easily fit into a cast of fixed images with uniform voices, devoid of contradiction and ambiguity, and professing ideological platitudes, religious or otherwise. Avoiding tedious moralizing and unnecessary elaboration, the novel cultivates inner conflicts and complexities that surround the modern urban woman as a private ‘self’, nuanced by the multiple levels of personal, social, and moral ‘reality’ surrounding and emanating from that self (Yāvāri, p. 68).

Polyvalence marks Pirzad’s novel. The use of Armenian and English words



prevalent in Abadan in the 1960s, the presentation of a plurality of voices, together with Claris' engagement with the two sides of her mind, equally audible throughout the narrative, all serve to turn the novel into a successful rendition of heteroglossia in Bakhtinian terms, allowing it to appeal to readers from a variety of backgrounds and tastes. Notable also is Pirzad's impressive fusion of various Armenian dialects, effortlessly interwoven with Persian, thus made accessible for the Persian-speaking reader. As one critic holds, "Pirzad's handling of Persian and her focus on Armenian-Iranians whose sense of belonging to the nation exceeds the parameters of language and religion calls for an expansion of the concept of nation" (Rahimieh, p. 33).

In *I turn off the lights*, Pirzad employs the same signature technique for which her short stories are celebrated. By inserting parallel tales in the novel, she not only heaps layers onto the already complex structure of the narrative, but also draws out a host of traits and characteristics shared by women of different ethno-religious backgrounds (Qahremān, 2003). It is interesting to note, however, that the subplot involving Elmira's love affair, so essential to the development of the story's main plot, is conspicuously absent from critiques of this novel, whether written by literary critics in Iran or abroad.

The German translation of the novel by Susanne Baghestani, entitled *Die Lichter lösche ich* (Frankfurt 2006), has also received considerable praise from German literary circles.

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