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SUVASHUN

SUVASHUN (*Suvašun* 1969, tr. M. R. Ghanoonparvar, *Savushun, A Novel About Modern Iran*, 1990; and Roxane Zand, *A Persian Requiem*, 1991, FIGURE 1), the most acclaimed novel of the prominent writer Simin Daneshvar (b. Shiraz, 1921, d. Tehran, 2012), and the first novel in Persian written by an Iranian female fiction writer.

Suvashun is set in Shiraz, in the last years of World War II, after the invasion by the Allied troops and the occupation of southern Iran by the British army. It chronicles, in 23 chapters, the life of a middle class landowning family in this period, when everyday life had been brought into turmoil by the presence of the occupying troops and the pressure they brought to bear on the economic and social fabrics of the society, with soaring food prices contributing to tension and strife in the local community.

The story is narrated through the eyes of Zari, a happily married woman whose behavior, as she struggles to protect her family, runs counter to that of the traditionally marginalized Persian woman (Sprachman, p. 347). Much of what is not directly experienced by Zari is recounted through accounts of social visits and other encounters between Zari and her friends and relatives (M. Mirṣādeqi, p. 152). The household also includes Zari's son, Ḵosrow, her twin daughters, and her sister-in-law.

The plot is set in motion when Zari's husband, Yusof, driven by patriotic fervor, and frustrated by the indecency of local opportunists and the harsh behavior of the occupying forces, refuses to sell his estates' crops either to the

foreign invaders, or to the Qašqāʾi tribal leaders, Malek Rostam and Malek Sohrāb, who are in the midst of a rebellion against the central government. A web of political intrigues and hostilities is created that leads to the novel's explosive and tragic end. Yusof "unwilling to submit to pressure from 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, when he is assassinated on a trip to his village. Zari, in defiance of orders issued by the local authorities, proceeds to hold a burial procession. The mourners, rapidly increasing in number, are soon dispersed by government troops called in to avoid a mass demonstration. Zari is forced to bury Yusof unceremoniously at night.

The dramatic depiction of Yusof's death and burial as the inescapable fate of an unyielding visionary hero trumped by the forces of injustice and deceit mirrors the metaphoric implications of the novel's title which alludes to an ancient ritual of mourning in Iran. The participants in the ancient ritual lament the betrayal and death of Siāvoš, a pre-Islamic legendary figure, who exhibits many features of a vegetation deity and from whose blood a plant grows (Meskub, p. 69-70). Siāvoš is murdered by the Turānian king Afrāsiāb (Naršaḵi, pp. 23-4; *Šāhnāma,* Moscow ed., 1968, Vol. 3, p. 152), the archenemy of the Iranian peoples, whose vileness is depicted in the suppression of waters, draining of rivers, and causing of famine and draught. The ritual, surviving in the folklore of the Fārs province (Daneshvar, p. 527; Meskub, p. 84), has been entangled over the centuries 'with too close resemblance in imagery and emotive underpinnings,' (Yarshater, 1979, p. 93) with the Shiʿa Muslim passion of Ḥosayn b. ʿAli, the Prophet Moḥammad's grandson, and the tragedy of his unjust demise at Karbalā. The recurrence in the novel of names and characters, such as Sudāba, Ḵosrow, and Rostam, all drawn from the legend of Siāvoš, and the ensuing spread of famine and draught after the Allied occupation of the region, leaves little ambiguity in the symbolic significance of the novel as the modern retelling of the ancient legend.

The martyrdom of Yusof, and the foretold destiny of his son, Ḵosrow, who, in the final pages of the novel, again reminiscent of his namesake in the legend, vows to take up his father's cause, follow his path, and avenge his death, acquires a prophetic tone when McMahon, an Irish poet and the family's friend, dedicates a poem to Yusof's memory and assures Zari that 'In your home, a tree shall grow, and others in your city and many throughout your country. And the wind shall carry the message from tree to tree and the trees

shall ask the wind, 'Did you see the dawn on your way?' (*Savushun: A novel About Modern Iran,* p. 378)

Suvashun, unlike classical fictions, in which the narrative space often extends beyond frontiers, shrinks this space to a small house. The house, however, is emblematic of the country itself, and its tale, enmeshed in the major events of Iran's contemporary history, turns the novel into a coded political and historical narrative (Golširi, p. 77; M. Mirṣādeqi, p. 152), engaging the reader in a constant shift from the microcosm of the family to the larger framework of the country. The novel exemplifies the work of a new generation of writers who, unlike the historical novelists of the preceding era, attend to the near past in order to shed light on the present (Yavari, p. 586).

Ensconced in the tradition of story telling in Iran, the novel, like most of Daneshvar's fictions, employs conventional narrative forms and follows a linear plot (Dāvarān, p. 159). The technique, described by Daneshvar herself as 'documentary-imaginative,' (Daneshvar, p. 425) resembles, as contended by some critics, that of the American novelist E. L. Doktorow (b.1931), particularly his treatment of contemporary history in his most celebrated novel *Ragtime* (1975, Golširi, p. 181; Esḥāqiān, p. 157). Some commentators have traced similarities between Zari and Daneshvar herself, who, like Zari, was educated at a British missionary school in Shiraz (Golširi, pp. 112-13). Parallels have also been drawn between Yusof and Daneshvar's husband, Jalāl Āl-e Aḥmad (1923-1969; q.v.), a literary figure and a notable critic of Western influence in Iran to whose memory the novel is dedicated. Hušang Golširi (1937-2000) sees *Suvashun* as an imaginative literary expression of *Ḡarbzadegi* (Plagued by the West) and *Dar ḵedmat va ḵiānat-e rowšanfekrān* (On the service and treason of intellectuals), two major works by Āl-e Aḥmad (Golširi, p. 80).

Daneshvar had already published two collections of short stories, *Ātaš- ḵāmuš* (Fire quenched, 1948), and *Šahri čon behešt* (A city like paradise, 1961), as well as essays on aesthetics and classical Persian literature, when she wrote *Suvashun*, but it was only with the publication of this novel that she achieved something of a celebrity status and established herself as a distinct literary voice. The metaphoric allusions of the novel struck a particularly sympathetic chord with contemporary political dissidents and intellectuals. The book was also a popular success. Many readers were absorbed by the novel's setting, language, and narrative techniques, and many more were enthralled by Daneshvar's portrayal of Zari, the novel's protagonist, who, in response to the turn of fortune, transforms from a housewife supporting her children and

family to a defiant woman capable of brave decisions, vowing to fight injustice and carrying on the struggle. Zari, as noted by some critics, unlike the inaccessible ethereal women of classical Persian literature, or the fallen women of the first Persian social novels, is portrayed in a more tangible manner; as a 'real' woman who exhibits an evolving character (Dāvarān, p. 141), and represents a pioneering attempt to probe the multifaceted aspects of women's lives, without ideological or sexual stereotyping (Milani, 1985, p. 328).

Some commentators, however, arguing that Daneshvar forces a patriarchal notion of revolution upon her fictional characters (Talattof, p. 97), disfavor her portrayal of Zari, as a passive, subservient personage (Eṣḥāqiān, p. 60; Dabbāši, pp. 65-118). As noted by one critic "beneath the straightforward and explicit description of Zari's innermost feelings there exists some deep emotion which has found no expression, as if some deep resentment wishes to surface and mock Zari's most sacred loyalties. But Daneshvar never dwells on this hidden and disturbing aspect of Zari" (Nafisi).

Most critics have praised the unadorned eloquence of *Suvashun*'s prose (J. Mirṣādeqi, p. 199; Mirʿābedini, p. 473; Milani, 1992, p. 191), occasionally colored by the use of Shirazi dialect and expressions (Golširi, pp. 192, 215). But her prose has also been criticized as too verbose, especially in the side stories that supplement the main plot and occasionally disrupt its continuity (Modarresi, p. 419; Mirʿābedini, p. 475). It is further argued that while the portrayal of Fotuḥi, as a pro-Soviet Marxist who not only remains unaware of the social realities and national interests of the country, but also fails to take care of his ill sister, effectively amounts to a critique of Marxism in Iran (Esḥāqiān, p. 42; Milāni, 1992, p. 252), some characters, such as the young shepherd and McMahon are reduced to stereotypes (Golširi, p. 103; Mirʿābedini, p. 474). The reductive portrayal of the British, as the quintessential agents of intrigue and conspiracy, is also a worn out cliché of the time (Golširi, p. 114; Ghanoonparvar, p. 65).

Some critics have seen implicit references in the final pages of the novel to the socio-political unrests that led to the fall of the popular government of Moḥammad Moṣaddeq in the early 1950s (see COUP D' ETATS OF 1332 Š. /1953; Golširi, p. 171; Ghanoonparvar, p. 69). It has been further suggested that the novel encapsulated the experience of a generation who struggled with social and historical forces that gave pre-revolutionary Iran its characteristic hopelessness and emerging depression (Spooner, p. 7). It highlighted the anti-Western sentiments, and intoned history's scary tune that would be later

heard in the Revolution of 1979 (Modarresi, p. 420). Reprinted over 20 times with a circulation of over half a million, *Suvashun* has enjoyed a sustained popularity since its publication almost forty years ago. The German translation of the novel, entitled *Drama der Trauer-Savushun*, and its Spanish translation by Joaquin Rodriguez, entitled Suvashun, appeared in 1997 and 2005, respectively. It has also been translated into French, Japanese, Russian, Chinese, and Turkish, among other languages.

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