

Assessment of Women's Social Role During the Iranian Revolution of 1979 Based on Narrative Stories

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Abstract

The storybook collection of "Siasanboo" was published in 1989. The subject is about three decades of an individual's life divided into two periods, before and after the revolution. The southern Iranian woman's role and position are easily traceable through this book. It seems that new discourses and social changes cause changes in women's functional roles too. This study examines Iranian women's roles in a society under varied conditions to explain their social, political, cultural and financial functions. Theories of sociology are applied to explain these roles. An analysis of the events, dialogues and characters in these stories showed that social changes in Iran have positively promoted women's above-mentioned functional roles.

Key words: Social functions; Iran's Islamic revolution; "Siasanboo" stories; Social changes

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INTRODUCTION

Fiction is a branch of literature that in comparison with other literary genres has a stronger bond with political-social elements and intellectual and ideological developments. It can give a true feedback on any political, social and cultural changes, which are highly reflected in stories and poems. Revolutions, political changes, wars and other social changes are more reflected in works of literature rather than social discourses. Actually, it is poets and novelists who are pioneers in analyzing new discourses. The roles that members of a society play, revealed by characters in stories, clarifies the overall atmosphere of that society and its dominant discourse in a specific era.

1. THE PROBLEM STATEMENT

Iranian women have a significant role in their society as they constitute half of the population. Accurate examination of these roles contributes to a better understanding of Iranian society and its dominant discourses before and after the revolution. An overall glance shows that the storybook collection "Siasanboo" (1989) by Mohammad Reza Safdari, the southern Iranian writer, has the potential to help review the social functions of women in the course of revolution. It includes the following stories: *Siasanboo, Akoosiya, Aloo, Umbrellas and Raincoat, Kermanshah alley, Red handle knife, Black Color and Two passers-by.* These stories have not been organized based on the exact date of writing; however, sincea central main character is present in all stories, they were arranged based on temporal events in his life.

The entire collection is a narration of three decades in the life of a character named "Hasanoo". The events take place in Abadan in the fiftieth, simultaneous with the Oil Nationalization Movement, and the story ends with the death of the narrator's uncle, while he is in conflict with the British to save his mother's life.

It appears that

each story looks at some angles of the author's childhood in the feverish South, experiencing the threshold of an industrial-social revolution. As the stories are similar in emotional and social atmosphere, they turn into a long narrative about associativepolitical conflicts between labors living in cottages and their

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Western employers and interdependencies. (Abedini, 1990, p.136)

Women are not excluded from this story of perseverance, resistance and conflict in the south, as if the "Siasanboo" characters have just appeared to informs about the sufferings the women of this region have gone through and the potential talents and merits that these women possess! These women are soft and tender like pure water and rough and resistant like mountain" (Dastgheib, 1990, p.129). This article aims to find answers to this question: What changes have been made to the women's social roles before and after revolution in Iran with respect to cultural, economic and political changes? This collection suits our purpose because it deals with the duality of the atmosphere, point of view, and functional roles of the characters before and after revolution.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There are numerous historical studies and works on women's issues and their role in the Iranian Revolution (1997) and in other public movements before and after this great event in the South of Iran: (a) The book "*From Lorde war to Simin Epic*" by Seyed Ghasem Yahosseini; he has written about the southern women's struggling with colonial and authoritarian oppression and promotion of women's status after the domination of the revolutionary discourse. (b) The book "*Change of Attitude Towards Women as Affected by the Islamic Revolution*" by Narges Nikkhah Qamsari. (c) The article "*Women and Theocracy in Iran*" by YahyaFoozi; he has evaluated the impact of political and social consequences of the Islamic revolutionary discourse on the status of women.

3. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Since no work is available on the examination of changes in the status of women in fiction, especially in narratives of the South, analysis of such fictions on women after the Islamic revolution contributes to understanding this issue.

4. DISCUSSION

A wide range of studies in the Humanities have long been conducted on women's conditions of life and legal status in different societies. Several schools of thought and provocative movements have also been raised mostly in the form of feminism which was directed towards literature, often by women themselves. Both male and female activists and writers had a key role in the occurrence of certain movements since the Constitutional Revolution (1905-11). But the sovereignty of religious discourse in the years close to Islamic revolution and afterwards has created new insights about women and their social presence which would be discussed in this article.

4.1 Examination of Women's Functionin the Pre-Revolutionary Period in "Siasanboo" Collection of Stories

In the past, Iranian women's place according to the traditional system was not so desirable. As Yahosseini points out, "the population under our study should be exactly described as 'patriarchal' in terms of social structure. In the Iranian family, men were regarded as the absolute ruler whose commands had to be implemented unconditionally" (2008, p.125). In general, there was no positive attitudes towards women and girls in a way that families were not satisfied with the newborn girls but often sad; on the contrary, the house was joyful at a son's birth. Several factors including

religious beliefs, the need for promotion of the rural economy in a primitive agriculture society, poverty, the need for men to take part in wars and ethnic disputes, father's desire for immortality by continuation of his lineage in son, etc. determined this patriarchy. (Ahmad Rishahri, 2001, p.463)

A survey on stories show that several factors directed women's functions before the Revolution:

4.2 Impact of Economic Conditions on Women's Functional Roles

Economic conditions influence the function and behavior of members in a society, especially women. In fact the economic conditions in any society form many of roles and behaviors of the members. As stated by Marxist theories, the economy is the foundation of society and problems of modern life originate from real and materialist tendencies rooted in capitalism. The current study, which takes a sociological look at pre and postrevolutionary fiction, shows that many pre-revolutionary functions and behaviors are directly or indirectly shaped by economic factors.

Before Revolution, severe economic poverty dominated the Southern society of Iran, particularly in rural communities. This situation was far more difficult for women who had to take care of their children without any male supporter. The plight of southern women in those days is well depicted in the stories of this collection:

4.2.1 Women's Employment

One of the main issues raised in these stories is women's labor and routine tasks. Women had to do household chores on their own. However, as Sarookhani says:

There are basic differences between woman's labor and woman's employment and they should not be treated as the same concepts. Whereas the former has existed in every society throughout the history of mankind, the latter has been rather a new phenomenon. Woman does more domestic manual tasks in rural, tribal and nomadic communities where the family is both the production unit and consumer unit, thereby their working would be naturally significant. There is no specific schedule or wage for this type of work which starts from early in the morning to late at night. On the contrary, woman's employment requires discipline with specific payment only available to herself. While the former is domestic and the money earned from domestic products made by women is given to their men, the latter is done outside and the income is allocated to the woman herself. (2009, p.201)

Safdari makes this literary point about rural women's labor: "A toddler walks with its mother while she is selling the beans, cooked at last night, in the streets early in the morning." (1989, p.9)

4.2.2 Women's Economic Dependence

Regarding the traditional pre-revolutionary southern life in fiction, another issue is excess dependence of women on male family members, i.e. husband, son and sometimes son-in-law. Besides, possessing livestock like dairy farm cattle, horses, camels, donkeys, etc. was vital to the family economy. Women were so much interested in farm animals as if they were family members. The animals could be an economic support for women, sometimes as a substitution for the male supporters. The following literary extracts point this out: "She had to take care of the cattle like her own eyes. The cow was the pillar of the house". "Let the cat (unhealthy food) not be in the manger and cause the cow to die! Shame on you, if you neglect! Take care of the cattle like your life; otherwise, both will perish." (Ibid., p.152). That night, grandfather's cow was sick. "Oh, the Lonely Imam Reza! This is all we have," Grandmother said. "The cow had severe stomachache. Grandma was sitting in the hallway and looking at the barn. She was worried about the cow" (Ibid.).

Since men and boys had a central role in the family economy, women tried hard to keep them at home and prevent them from joining the military service due to maternal affection, hardships during military service and economic desperation:

...A black-skinned woman came near the square. Guard with a rifle stopped her. The woman kept a letter in her hands. She wanted to give it to the other woman perhaps she could do something not to send her son to the military service. The guard pushed her away. The woman looked at him and suddenly ran away. The guard chased her. The woman was running when the man put his feet on her Chador[long veil] and she fell down.... (Ibid., p.93)

With respect to these fictional stories, in such economic conditions, the women are severely afraid of losing their husbands and living alone; this anxiety caused them to avoid any individual and institutional struggles with oppressive powers. They preferred to live under oppression with the presence of their husbands as the shelter of the family than gaining honor with husband's martyrdom. In general, hard social and economic conditions for women made them discourage their men from taking part in any political campaign against oppressive powers.

"Akko stood upright and looked consciously at the woman." All right, what did Sheikh Jabber do? / The

woman read his look: "He could do nothing. He is looking for you and Seed Ali when"/ "Let's go and make up for evil..., we will help him.... Jaberhas always been a big help to us.... Above all, the foreigners have killed many of us, haven't they?"/ The woman who was just settled down said in fear: "Don't waste your time and energy. It makes them no difference to kill a person or drink water." (Ibid., p.24).

4.3 Impact of Social Conditions on Women's Function

The literature of each period undoubtedly reflects the social conditions of that particular era: "The ancient sources such as *Mahabharata* and *Five Stories* by Indian Pipe, *Shahname*and *Kelilehva Demneh* are all enriched with relationships at both individual and social levels; they at test to the entanglement of literature and social life" (Ershad, 2002, p.9).

In fact, changes in social conditions of any society can change to the function of its members; and women are no exception. As various studies show, women's functionality is often affected by social conditions.

4.3.1 Insecurity and Sexual Harassment

Stories about women in the pre-revolutionary period inform us about women's status under unpleasant conditions, i.e. sexual harassment by men. Therefore, "Sometimes, a realistic literary text is more informative than a historical text. It provides useful facts about people's life at/in a certain time and place" (Ibid., p.15).

"... Mother is compelled to go away from the café and walk somewhere else. But where? The vultures are everywhere. It is the period of knife and dagger, the period of rascals and drunken foreigners." (Safdari, 1989, p.9).

Women are raped by Western soldiers and authoritarians as indicated by many of the fictions of this period. At times, southern men were brutally killed by western colonizers when they endeavored to protect their women from being raped and defend them. Some examples are given in *Siansanboo*:

And this [sexual harassment] is gone for a few more nights when foreigners rush into the shed all at once. They are four and all drunk. Your uncle sticks his neck out and peeks through the darkness of the night.... Then they get to behind the shed; no sooner the mother comes out to run away than a fat western man grabs her wrist and twists it. Alsenootakes a step forward to rescue mother but the fat man puts his foot behind the former's and they both are knocked down. (Ibid., pp.10-11)

4.3.2 Women's Passivity and Quietism

Under certain social conditions when many men do not dare to defend their honor, women mostly feel they cannot do anything. They watch the situation and do nothing to change their condition. In many scenes of the story, we observe women who are standing aside and watching things happen; the most they do is shedding tears out of grief to sympathize with other women: "Women get up and men put their heads down without looking at each other. A mother presses her child against her breasts and milks it or pretends to be doing this; her hands are still shaking...." (Ibid., p.13)

In the stories about pre-revolutionary southern life, women do not participate in campaigns against western oppression. Poverty and insecurity caused women not to have the courage to fight. If there was any idea or thought about campaign, it did not turn into action. Women sufficed to weep and sorrow when their husbands were killed in a battle. Perhaps the only ability they had in this plight been to express feelings and sympathize with other women: a narrator says: "I did not cry, I could never cry, but my mother was the master of weeping. She once told me how the foreigners killed my uncle and father-in-law or how my father drowned in the sea" (Ibid., p.152, 78).

4.3.3 Remarriage of Widows

Another issue is remarriage of widows depicted through such a fiction. To find a man who would secure their life and support their family, widows would remarry; it was more a marriage of convenience: "What does a woman want except a shelter? A man who supports her and does not let the drunks and libertine foreigners touch her" (Safdari, 1989, p.21).

Women of this period and region believed in their fatalism, that is, misery and dark fate, which is often reflected in their language in fiction: "He knocked the door. Aunt Kimiya opened it. When he looked at Aloo'seyes, he realized that Maryam is dead. She hit her forehead and said: "Oh hard times! Till when?"... Kimiya, with a wrinkled face which had once been tawny and attractive in her youth, was going forward and muttering: "It was our bad fortune that we did not enjoy life" (Ibid., p.79, 95).

4.3.4 Prostitution

Unstable economic and social conditions in this period caused some women to sell their bodies for money and work as prostitutes. Some of them were forced to work in brothels and were not satisfied with this lifestyle:

Sahar was still sobbing and a surge of sorrow was stuck in her bosom like thorn. Her shoulder was folded down and she was trembling. It was not for her face and eyes to swear and yell at others like other women in the castle. (Ibid., p.111)

The prostitutes were known as and called "Khanoom," in the southern community; thus, using this word was abominable to chaste and modest women and was considered an insult. In contrast, the post-revolutionary southern community does not consider this word an insult; it signifies respect and means charismatic "lady" instead. Therefore, it is understandable why this word is not used in its previous sense; it is because the viewpoints about women have changed and their status has improved compared to the past.

Aloo said: "She will be offended if you call her *Khanoom*, say: Aunt! Let's go home."/ I said: "why it is offensive? The Captain's wife is also called *Khanoom*."....

/ She said: "The lewd and unchaste women are called '*Khanoom*' in Abadan". / She said: "Is it the same in Bushehr?" (Ibid., p.56)

The pre-revolutionary fictions, rooted in the Persian literature of the past, at times focused on women's appearance and their relationship with men, i.e. description of hair and moles on the body. There is a difference between this fiction and the post-revolutionary one regarding the depiction of women's body language:

The water of what sea will not go down if the hands of a tawny and thin woman rubs the sunburned shoulders of Black Akoo? It is better if the woman is tall with long hair up to the knees! Is she a widow woman? If so, there is no reason to worry. (Ibid., p.21)

4.4 Examination of Post-Revolutionary Function of Women in the "Siasanboo" Storybook Collection

This section reviews the women's function after revolution in "Siasanboo" to make a comparison between the two periods.

4.4.1 Economic Conditions

As already said, the pre-revolutionary heterogeneous economic conditions had significant impact on women's function. With the appearance of revolution, new functions were defined for women. Despite the emergence of some low-brow movements toward modernism, in particular in cities, assertion of women's rights, and formation of feministic associations in the pre-revolutionary period, they still had a long way to take their own rights. After the revolution, women's living conditions gradually improved. Perhaps the economic situation was more favorable. Although their domestic role as wife and mother was the same as before, their tasks were modified and there was no severe oppression on them as before, drawing on the afore-mentioned fiction: "Mother was sitting next to the faucet under the small and green date palm tree in our house and was washing the tumbler-shaped glasses." (Ibid., p.144).

The revolution offered new opportunities for women to get new experience for participation in economic, cultural, political and social activities. They began to work in public places. The brothels were closed and women became aware of the dangers of such corruption in society. Many prostitutes quit their sex work and chose a healthy job or activity instead; for example, "Sahar" in the story "*The Umbrella and the Raincoat*" not only left brothel in the chaos of revolution but also took part in one revolutionary association and was martyred for its cause.

4.4.2 Social Conditions

After the Islamic Revolution and the Imposed War (Iraq-Iran), there occurred fundamental changes in the economic, political, cultural and social infrastructure of the country. "The Revolution was accompanied with fundamental changes in economy and politics as well as

in values and norms of society, which created new social activities for women." (Nikkhah Ghamsari, 2011, p.22).

The traditional pre-revolutionary discourse did not allow effective social roles for women or even a positive attitude towards them, but the new discourses of the Islamic Revolution created better positions for women. Such feedback is shown in the stories related to this period.

The sexist view about women with their public passivity changed gradually as they began to believe in living up to their potential and changing the society for the better. For example, women's active participation in campaigns, rallies and protests at the outbreak of the revolution originated from the new discourses led by Imam Khomeini who urged women to help promote new values. The campaigns were not exclusive to Tehran but included all towns and small villages, e.g. "The Blusher women's demonstrations against the Pahlavi regime in 1978" (Mozafarizade, 2008, p.155). Fundamental spiritual changes in female' attitudes, e.g. "Sahar" in her eagerness to fight against the Shah in the story *"The Umbrella and The Raincoat,"* are indicated in fiction.

In the post-revolutionary fiction, despite the fact that women are full of motherly feelings and suffer from the absence of their husbands and sons, they voluntarily send them to war for an ultimately divine sacred purpose:

His wife was nervous. She said: Go! Find one of his friends and tell him DeyKhedr wants to see you. Go to Borazjan. He has an intimate friend over there ... Go find him wherever he is. He will not ignore if you tell him that this is his mother's message. (Safdari, p.182, 192)

4.4.3 Social-Political Conditions

Post-revolutionary conditions like the outbreak of war and political and social changes, the emergence of novel discourses, public awareness, etc. changed values and norms, and, as a result, views about women. Women's self-esteem and confidence increased: they took political and social activities and resolved to promote their status.

A new mental space was created for women and new teachings had a significant effect on their life. As Niki Kadipoints out in her book *Roots of the Iranian Revolution*: "Another important group involved in the Iranian Revolution was ladies, whose rate of participation varied based on their worldview, class and ideologies". "The participation was so dramatic like never seen before...." (Kadi, 1990, p.364)

This new position is reflected in the post-revolutionary stories, i.e. in Siasanboo collection. It is a new aspect not comparable to nor observed in the pre-revolutionary fiction:

Just three months ago, Sahar and I were mixed up with the people in the same street. It was one day before the Black Friday. We came out of the castle; when Sahar saw the insurgents, she put my books under her arm and pulled me to the group with a raising clenched fist and grabbed a newspaper from a man. (Safdari, 1989, p.106, 117)

The women took part in revolutionary campaigns in various ways; the works on revolution indicate this:

In the 1979 Revolution, millions of Iranian women happily walked from behind the walls of their home to the public open spaces. They were active in several forms. Some would collect and broadcast the news or distribute pamphlets. Others would shelter the attacked or wounded political activists or runaway soldiers. Many of them actively engaged in rallies and protests in the streets and some went so far that they helped entrenching against the police; even some took up arms for underground battles as members of the guerrilla movement. (Hafeziyan, 2001, p.160)

This presence goes so far that many women were martyred at the beginning of the revolution. The issue of martyrdom and the application of the word martyr for the killed revolutionary women was an upheaval in the Iranian cultural politics. It was years that there was not any significant references to women's martyrdom in Persian literature and mysticism, mostly written by men who commented on women rather sexually. Though was common in Iranian popular and official culture to use the phrase "courageous as a male lion" for a brave woman, the term "lion woman" was coined after the revolution.

... It shows a crowded room... I look at the walls and photos, all colorful... and I see a girl or woman with her entrails out and her eyes were lost in her burnt skin. The skull is empty and her brain is scattered on her neck. I only know her shirt, Sahar's cream-colored shirt burned in the flesh of her chest.... (Safdari, 1989, pp.118-119)

In fact, women have benefited more from intellectual growth and gained this courage to join revolutionary activities along with men. They are resolved to win for the revolution's cause and try any possible way. As Hafeziyan remarks, "women were available and present in any space of this revolution just as much as men." (2001, p.184)

4.4.4 Cultural Conditions

Cultural context of each society is a result of dominant discourses which influences women's function. When the revolutionary discourse won over other available discourses it created certain cultural conditions for women, a condition which was already accepted by women through their extensive presence in the revolutionary campaigns. For example, they accepted Hijab as a symbol of opposition to the Pahlavi Regime:

Finally, the veil "Hijab" was changed into a political instrument to oppose Pahlavi regime; it was a symbol of opposition to Pahlavi values. Ms. Bitrijconcludes, based on her studies in Shiraz during the revolution, that veil was used by the majority of women even those who had no religious beliefs to oppose the Shah's regime. (Nikkhah Ghamsari, 2011, p.228)

CONCLUSION

After examining the "Siasanboo" stories about two pre and post-revolutionary conditions in Iran, we conclude that women had a significant development regarding the social, political, cultural, and even economic aspects after the revolution. Comparing women's function within the two periods, the basic infrastructure of the Iranian society had an upheaval after the Islamic Revolution.

Reduction in poverty by establishment of helpful institutions, women's employment, etc. improved women's welfare and economic status.

The pre-revolution stories depicted the plight of women working in/outside home under unpleasant conditions without rights. In many cases, they did manly tasks alongside their husbands and children while they had no right to have their own wage, which belonged to the man of the family. They were also highly dependent on their husbands, sons and accessories such as cattle and sheep. This situation changed in the stories after revolution. They were focused on subjects like women's employment, independence and public economic activities. Economic prostitution faded away which shows the cultural evolution besides economic progress. Like many other countries, Iran has been affected by some trends and movements in feminism, which is constantly seeking equal or parallel rights and opportunities for women to take various positions.

Changes in women's function and status are also important. The pre-revolutionary works of fiction indicate negative attitudes towards women of Iran. It was because women were always ignored and considered to be inferior to and weaker than men. They were in many places pushed to the margins and humiliated by men. Beside, women themselves had low levels of self-esteem and confidence in their abilities. Also, in these stories, insult, rape and sexual harassment, insecurity, belief in fatalism, forced marriage and passivity in social processes are common subjects. On the contrary, a majority of women in the post-revolutionary period are proud of martyred women and are in the awe of martyrs' mothers, wives, daughters and sisters. Women's belief in their political and social capability becomes obvious when they campaign alongside men. In contrast to the pre-revolutionary period, they encourage their husbands and children to go to the battlefield and defense their homeland which shows the impact of new discourse on social life.

Culture is an important characteristic of every society which often changes simultaneously with other dimensions. In post-revolution period, specific attention is paid to the concepts of modesty, chastity, and Hijab. Therefore, a new topic is added to fictional stories. It appears that in the pre-revolutionary period women were more seriously concerned with economic issues. In general, women were drawn from margin into the field through the Revolution and quit passivity. The new conditions may have partly resulted from global changes, yet most of them come from the revolutionary ideologies and discourses themselves. There are still numerous traditional societies in today's world that have not been able to remove the burden of social and cultural chaos of women despite all movements and associations defending the rights of women.

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