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"Parsipur is a courageous, talented woman,
and above all, a great writer."
—Marjane Satrapi, author of *Persepolis*



SHAHRNUSH PARSIPUR

A NOVEL OF MODERN IRAN

Translated from the Persian by Kamran Talatoff and Jocelyn Sharlet
AFTERWORD BY PERSIS M. KARIM

Women Without Men: A Novel of Modern Iran

Shahnush Parsipur , Kamran Talatoff (Translator) , Jocelyn Sharlet (Translator) , Persis M. Karim
(Afterword)

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Women Without Men: A Novel of Modern Iran Shahnush Parsipur , Kamran Talatof (Translator) , Jocelyn Sharlet (Translator) , Persis M. Karim (Afterword)

Shortly after the 1989 publication of *Women Without Men* in her native Iran, Shahnush Parsipur was arrested and jailed for her frank and defiant portrayal of women's sexuality. Now banned in Iran, this small masterpiece was eventually translated into several languages and introduces U.S. readers to the work of a brilliant Persian writer. With a tone that is stark, and bold, *Women Without Men* creates an evocative allegory of life for contemporary Iranian women. In the interwoven destinies of five women, simple situations such as walking down a road or leaving the house become, in the tumult of post-WWII Iran, horrific and defiant as women escape the narrow confines of family and society only to face daunting new challenges.

Now in political exile, *Shahnush Parsipur* lives in the Bay Area. She is the author of several short story collections including *Touba* and the *Meaning of Night*.

Women Without Men: A Novel of Modern Iran Details

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From Reader Review Women Without Men: A Novel of Modern Iran for online ebook

Nariman says

Leila Dehghan says

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Mohammad says

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Chris says

For the past few years, I have traveled to Washington DC and stayed a few days just to visit the museums. Plus, I live in Philly, so it's like a two hour train trip. I've learned that the smaller Smithsonian tends to have the more interesting exhibits. I discovered a love for Whistler's etchings at the Freer, and at the Hirshorn, I discovered that I do like some modern art and video installations. It was at the Hirshorn last summer that I heard of this book.

Last summer, the museum had a major exhibit of Shirin Neshat's work, and if you are like I was at the time, you are going who. She is Iranian and is known for her photography and videos. If the show is anywhere near you, I highly recommend you go. Neshat's art is powerful and beautiful. At one point in the show, there was a clip and significant verbiage about Neshat's film adaptation of this novel. The book itself was not in the bookstore, so when I finally sat down to read it, it was with so trepidation that it would not live up to the hype in my head.

It does.

When one reads *Women without Men*, it is easy to understand why Parsipur is living in exile. It is a feminist book that will anger many conservatives, in particular conservative men in power, angry. Yet, for all the short space that it inhibits it is a work of sheer brilliance. I cannot thank Neshat and the Hirshorn enough for introducing me to this book.

Women Without Men, despite its title, does in fact have men in it, and not all the men are bad. To call the book anti-male would be incorrect. Parsipur relates the lives of different women from different levels of society who came together briefly in a garden before going their separate ways. Each of the women, from the prostitute to the high society wife, has been constricted in some way by society. One of the brilliant aspects of the novel is that not all the women are likable.

Perhaps the most accessible, and most challenging to power structure, is Munis who changes the most and becomes one of the fulcrums that the other women turn around (Mahdokht is the other. It is no surprise that these two women go though the most and the least changes). Her reaction upon learning something is just so human, even in this tale of magical realism. What happens to Munis and her eventual fate in many ways is the heart of the novel (and no surprise that part of the arc was the clip from the film shown in the Neshat exhibit). The fates of the women are in part dictated by the society in which they live as well as the roles forced upon them by that society. In many ways, the book references the Garden of Eden, but almost as a place of renewal and peace.

It's a beautiful novel.

Robert says

Interesant?, m? bucur c? am avut ocazia de a o citi!

Ahmad Sharabiani says

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Yasmin says

Kavita says

I can't claim to say I really understood anything in this book. Five women, whose lives intersect, are drawn together and crazy, crazy things happen to them.

Mahdokht is dissatisfied with her life and wants to do more with it. Then she catches the maid having sex with the gardener, which disgusts her. And then, she becomes a tree. The tree is fed with breast milk and finally burst into seeds and scatters.

Fai'za is slightly more sensible and remains human. But that's about it. She lusts after her friend's brother, Amir. Said brother kills friend and she helps him hush it up. In the end, she marries the brother and becomes his concubine.

Munis is Amir's sister. She dies and then returns to life and then is murdered by her brother. She then returns to life and can read people's minds. She becomes a whirlwind for seven years and finally becomes a schoolteacher.

Zarrinkolah is a prostitute who sees headless men everywhere. She marries the gardener and then glows with light and gives birth to a flower. Then she and the gardener go up in a puff of smoke.

Farrokhlaqa is the most understandable of all the characters. She becomes a widow, wants more out of life, tries her hand at different things and finally marries a powerful man and the two achieve things together.

Then, there is the gardener (a man) who helps these women.

Don't ask me what it all meant. I can only assume the author was on drugs. Can't even understand why this book got banned in the first place. Maybe they don't want women becoming trees or going up in smoke or whatever.

Nata says

O c?r?ulie scris? scurt ?i la subiect. F?r? descrieri tumultoase, f?r? alte detalii care ar îngreuna cumva lectura acestei c?r?i. Cinci femei care nu mai vor s? îndure sistemul patriarhal al societ?ii ?n care î?i duc traiul. Cinci femei care pleac? din familiile lor ?i se stabilesc ?ntr-o cas?. Fiecare cu povestea ei de via??, fiecare cu metehnele ei.

O carte care îmbin? cu succes realismul magic cu probleme femeilor musulmane.

M? a?teptam la ceva mai coerent ?i laconic, dar ?i ce am citit a fost bine.

Jimmy says

I read a review that claimed that this is not a feminist novel. If it were a feminist novel, the characters would not rely on men, they would assert themselves powerfully at all times, and their lives would be better for it.

Umm, newsflash. A novel can be feminist without all its characters being feminists, strong women, and perfect all the time. That would be unrealistic and boring. Let's first understand that feminism is realism, i.e. realistic portrayal of women, including women who are not feminists, including women who are anti-feminists. And these are realistic women, despite the amount of magical realism, surrealism, and straight-up fantasy that also creeps in. In fact, it's the grim reality of their situation that makes these flights of fancy so powerful.

This patriarchal system is all there is for the Iranian women in this novel, it is all they've ever known. For them to become full fledged feminists as we know it in the west would be unrealistic. But to see them oppressing each other, keeping each other in check, this was heartbreakingly real. You get a sense of the true ubiquity of this system. Simply having one's own will, being able to dream, to want something for oneself however tiny, say to turn into a tree, or to move away and start a community becomes a courageously feminist act.

I did not love everything about this novel, the writing was uneven, and some of the fantasy elements seemed a bit too random for me... but I thought it was unique and interesting, and I definitely enjoyed reading it.

A comparison of translations:

Translation by Kamran Talatof and Jocelyn Sharlet:

This translation was strangely veiled, like it was trying not to say things straight out. This made it much harder to understand. The rhythm of the sentences was shorter than the other translation. No footnotes. Introduction by Kamran Talatof: one of the most rubbish introductions to a book I've ever read. Including synopsis of entire plot. It reads like a high school book report plagiarised from wikipedia, including some details of the author's life and works, some very obvious interpretations of this book.

Excerpt:

Mahdokht's heart stopped. The girl, Fatemeh, at fifteen like a worldly woman, was at the end of the greenhouse with Yadallah, the gardener. With his bald head and oozing eyes, it was difficult to look at him.

The world around her went dark, and her legs began to tremble. She involuntarily clutched the edge of a table. But she could not take her eyes off them. She looked and looked until they saw her. The guy had begun to whimper. He wanted to escape but he couldn't. He was mindlessly beating the girl. The girl extended her hand toward Mahdokht. Mahdokht ran out of the greenhouse. She didn't know what to do. She headed for the pool in a daze, and wanted to throw up. She washed her hands and sat on the bench.

"What can I do?"

Translation by Faridoun Farrokh:

This translation was more straight forward. There were footnotes. Foreword by the filmmaker Shirin Neshat. Afterword by the author explaining where she got inspiration for each one of the characters.

Excerpt:

Her heart missed a beat. The servant girl, Fati, fifteen years old, but more resembling a streetwalker, lay at the far end of the greenhouse with Yadollah, the gardener, with a bald head and repulsive, red-rimmed eyes, panting, panting, panting.

Mahdokht, near collapse and reaching for a shelf to steady herself, could not take her eyes off the scene. The man was the first to notice her. He let out a squeal and tried to disentangle himself from the embrace of the girl by hitting her in the face with one hand and reaching with the other for Mahdokht, who rushed out of the greenhouse and wandered aimlessly in the courtyard, fraught with nausea. She hurried to the pool, dipped her hands in the water, washing them compulsively. She then sat on the edge of the bedstead.

"What shall I do?"

Paquita Maria Sanchez says

Oh great, I get to be a book club naysayer for the third time out of three, on the second book in a row that I voted for out of ten total potentials. I'm averaging 2.666 on club-related ratings here, which incidentally makes me happy because 666, but primarily makes me feel like Asshole McChoosy-pants. I hope the candidates I put forward all end up middling-to-sucky, or I'm sure going to look like a real taste snob. I swear I am not blindly obstinate. I double-swear I like books. Much.

The truth is that I was just really disappointed, so harshness in the face of that disappointment is a definite possibility. High hopes, I had. We were attacking the sexual politics of theocracies! We were building an egalitarian world between worlds where fates converged and reformed into some mushroom-trippy Utopia! We were imbuing pressing social issues with reshaping flecks of surrealistic imagery! We were overzealously throwing around exclamation points! And yeah, all of those things are true (except the !'s, that was just me), but it was so heavy-handed in all regards that it didn't work in almost any regard. For me.

Basically, this is like magical realism play-doh mixed with feminist screed play-doh, but not well enough to make a new and interesting color; more like when you lazily just mush the contents of the different tubs together and knead them, meh, a little bit, then suddenly get bored and go have a sandwich, dropping the half-reformed glob on the ground to dry out and get eaten by some kid with pica. Wow, I took that way too far, much like this book does with all its metaphors. Next thing you know my play-doh comparison will turn into a tree, and I'll have to get pregnant so I can feed it my breastmilk. Don't ask.

Worse, it reads like it was translated by Ben Stein's larynx. *They went to the gar-den. It was a lo-ve-ly gar-den. In the gar-den there was a gar-de-ner who gard-ened. Ran-dom mys-ti-cal crea-ture.* Everything is so matter-of-fact, so explain-y that the reading voice in my head involuntarily ran itself through a vocoder and slapped on some off-kilter beat. And I should not be hearing electronica in my head when I am contemplating terrible things like forceful religious indoctrination, socioeconomic oppression, and sexual violence/servitude.

I feel bad saying all this because it was phenomenally brave of Shahrnush Parsipur to even write, let alone publish this book in Iran in the first place, but book report honesty is the best policy. I think. I hope. I could chalk a lot of my complaints up to translation issues, and some of the more mystical imagery in this would make for very lovely paintings or eency-weency picture-book parables. Tacked all together, though, it just doesn't hold. I would very much like to see the film based on it, though, and if anyone else has, please do tell. Maybe we'll watch it at book club. In which I am the worst member ever.

Adriana says

"Caut? întunericul, începutul, adâncurile. Când vei ajunge în adâncul adâncurilor, vei găsi lumina în toat? strălucirea ei, în propriile mâini, alturi de tine. Asta înseamnă să devii om."

Kirstine says

Shahrnush Parsipur was - is - persecuted in Iran, where she's from, for this book (among other things). Partly because she dares talk about, you know, sex, virginity, female sexuality. Topics that are not to be mentioned

ever.

‘Women Without Men’ does reference the title of the Hemingway work ‘Men Without Women’. I haven’t read the latter, but in the afterword to this book, it says it’s a book where ultimately a life without women isn’t particularly satisfying. The same (but in reverse) is the case of ‘Women Without Men’, in a way.

It consists of five stories of five vastly different women, who nonetheless have a lot in common. They’re all confined by their family and society to a very narrow way of life. They all have very little freedom of movement or thought, and each strive, in their own way, to break their captivity and be free to pursue a different way of life.

The separate storylines converge in the end and the women meet at a single house they help build and maintain together. In the house there’s also a gardener (incidentally a man, but of the somewhat invisible kind), who tends the garden where one of the women has planted herself in an attempt to become a tree.

It’s a mixture of harsh reality and magical-realism. The magical elements present themselves without much ado and add depth and great character to the novel. The odd, fantastical elements are very poignant and quite stunning.

The house they all live in and the life they share together may seem utopic, but it’s not the case at all. Having escaped the confines of their former position, whatever it was, and the men and norms that kept them trapped, they work steadily towards a new way of life. However, it’s not a life in female isolation; the solution is not an all-woman utopia.

What these women need, what Parsipur tries to convey, is that they need this utopian space to learn to be free. It’s not the final stop. It’s where they unlearn all the restrictions that’s been put on them, and reflect on what they desire to get out of life.

For some it means transcending the human body, to transform into nature and start anew, to some it means returning to life almost as it was before, but all of them with a new spiritual freedom. It’s not, in the end, a feasible project to live without men, nor is it possible. Women without men is rather women without the narrow idea of what a woman can and should be, an empty place she can shape as her own, where she can find herself.

It’s an odd novel, because it moves in so many ways, and the ending may seem somewhat disappointing or anticlimactic, but there’s a strength to it, an insistence that women are allowed to become their own people, to talk about sex and virginity and politics. Each character present a different story, each needing the same and separate things, each getting their own ending, and the result is a complex, strange and wondrous novel.

It’s very different from the video installing – the art piece based on the book – that I’ve seen. In the videos the women never meet, each story remains separate, and there are alterations to each of them, but both novel and film are very powerful means of telling such a story. I recommend the book, but I also recommend the art installation, should you ever come across it. It’s a lot harsher, but very rewarding.

Original review:

Holy shit.

I've seen the film(s) based on this book. It was an art installation at Aros, the museum in my city (Aarhus

Museum of Art). I had no idea it was a book first.

I thought the title sounded familiar and this is why. It was an incredibly moving experience to see it. The different stories were split onto three huge screens in a dark, black room, so you got to watch them in random order. They were harsh, but beautiful. I hope it's still there.

peiman-mir5 rezakhani says

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Saman Kashi says

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