

**The “Boom” in Prose Writing by Iranian Women
Authors in the 1990s Within the Context of the
Situation of Women in Contemporary Iran**

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<u>TABLE OF CONTENT</u>	Page
INTRODUCTION	2
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND	2
EMANCIPATION IN LITERATURE	8
COMMITTED LITERATURE	9
POLITICAL SITUATION IN I.R.	10
THE PRESS	15
POST-REVOLUTIONARY LITERATURE	18
FEMINIST LITERATURE	20
CONCLUSION	25
BIBLIOGRAPHY	26

INTRODUCTION

It may be asserted that the Iranian political and ideological discourses have always had an influential effect on the Iranian literary development, regardless of the gender of its literary artists. Therefore discussion regarding literature’s change and developments due to political upheaval amongst women authors should be made within the context of the actual country’s political situation as well as facts in present and past history. In this essay a history of Iranian women’s social and literary developments as well as their struggle for emancipation will be discussed. This is done firstly, in order to give an evident picture of their restrictions and progresses, which are matters that go hand in hand with discovering the reasons behind women’s flourishing in prose writing in post-Khomeini Iran. Secondly, a presentation of the historical background is necessary to consider, for a better understanding of the present developments in women’s literature. Thus, I believe it is useful to take a deeper look at Iran’s historical background where these literary developments are in-rooted.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The political situation in Iran has always brought ideological discourses, which in turn has created different and specific episodes in literature¹. One can discuss the episodes of Iranian women’s literature in looking at Iran’s recent history, giving an account of their status in the past century in Iran. As far as we know, the Iranian women have had an inferior economic and social status compared to Iranian men for centuries.

In her survey on Iranian women’s history, Massoume Price writes that women’s documented struggle for emancipation starts in the 19th century, where Quratu’l-‘Ayn, a master in Persian, Arabic and Islamic literature managed to reach high excellence in theology². In 1828, she met Seyyed Kâzem Rashti and his Successor Seyyed Mohammad Bab, the founders of the Babi movement in Iraq, where she had gone to further her religious studies. She eventually ended in the

¹ On the concept of episodes in literature, see Kamran Talattof, “Iranian women’s literature: from pre-revolutionary social discourse to post-revolutionary feminism”, in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 29 (1997). pp.531-558.

² Massoume Price, “A brief history of women's movements in Iran from 1850 – 2000”, www.zan.org.

top leadership of the Babi movement. Quratu'l-'Ayn's presence often without a veil in public gatherings angered many people, even those amongst the Babis. In 1852, after the massive persecution of the Babis, she was executed for her radical views and her fight for women's rights. Later in the early twentieth century a few educated women from the upper-class got themselves involved in pursuing women's issues, an issue never discussed publicly in the prior history of Iran and it wasn't until the effect of the Constitutional Revolution in 1905-11 that many of its leaders genuinely became interested in increasing women's rights. "In the late 1900's women had a very strong presence in the constitutional struggle and the subsequent revolution...Progressive newspapers...published articles by men and women writers demanding constitutional and gender rights...After the constitution was granted in August 1906, women became involved in both boycotting the import of foreign goods and raising funds for the establishment of the first National Bank...With the victory of revolution they expected equal opportunities and gender rights. None was granted in the constitution. The electoral law of September 1906 had expressly barred women from the political process, and the appeal to the newly formed Majlis for institutional support received hostile response. They were told that the women's education and training should be restricted to raising children, home economics and preserving the honour of the family...Family laws remained within the domain of Shari'a with no change."³

In 1910, the journal *Dânes* (Knowledge) entered the public debate on the 'woman question'. *Dânes* "a journal written for and mostly by women under the editorship of Dr.Kahhâl"⁴, began its publication in Tehran. It was the first journal published by a woman in Iran. It dealt with matters such as the status of women, health and childcare. Soon more journals edited by women would come to existence, journals such as *Jahân-e Zanân* and *Shekufeh* in 1912 and 1913. *Nâme*-ye *Bânûvân* and *Jahân-e Zanân* women journals were printed in 1920. The rather open discussions about women's basic rights resulted in the establishment of 9 women's societies and 63 girls' schools in Tehran with close to 2500 students by 1913 and...the International Women's Day was celebrated for the first time in Rasht in 1915.⁵ However, the real attention to women's issues, which resulted in the change of law, occurred during the reign of Reza Khan, later called Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1921-1941).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Franklin Lewis & Farzin Yazdanfar, "Iranian women, the short story and the revolution of 1979", in idem (ed. & transl.), *In A Voice Of Their Own: a collection of stories written by Iranian women since the revolution of 1979* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda 1996), p. XI.

In January 7th, 1936 Reza Shah “decreed the abolition of the veil and made modern education available to women on a mass scale”⁶. Emancipation of women was officially born then. On that day, at the (men’s) Teacher Training College (now the Faculty of Education of Tehran University) all female teachers of the capital had been invited to attend without their veils together with the wives of the ministers and generals. Reza Shah standing next to his unveiled wife and daughters delivered a historic speech, reading:

“Ladies, know that this is a great day, use the opportunities which are now yours to help the country advance”⁷.

“In 1938 the first women inside Iran, a group of twelve were admitted to the University of Tehran, which had itself been founded three years prior,”⁸ and by then fourteen women’s magazines were discussing rights, education and veiling. Letters were sent to Majlis; equal rights and emancipation were demanded.⁹ Although Reza Shah’s reforms were applauded and encouraged by these women and other educated and upper class Iranians, many men as well as the clergy found them intolerable. According to Ahmad Kasravi¹⁰, they compared the reforms to allowing alcoholic drinks and spreading prostitution. “Even some of the liberal-minded constitutionalist could not bring themselves to allow women to go unveiled or to take part in social activities.”¹¹ The law of the abrogation of the veil would come to end at the start of Mohammad Reza Shah’s reign in 1941 as it had imprisoned many women in their own homes for the whole five years of its existence. Many religious and traditional women were either not permitted by their male guardians to leave their houses without the veil or they were too ashamed and afraid to do so on their own free will.

⁵ Massoume Price, “A brief history of women’s movements in Iran from 1850 – 2000”, www.zan.org.

⁶ Asghar Fathi, (ed.), *Women and the family in Iran*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1985), p. 7.

⁷ Badr ol-Moluk Bamdad, *From Darkness into Light: Women’s Emancipation in Iran*. Translated by F.R.C. Bagely. (Hicksville, NY.: Exposition-University, 1977), p. 96. Cited in Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words: the emerging voices of Iranian women writers* (London: I.B.Tauris, 1992), p. 35.

⁸ Franklin Lewis & Farzin Yazdanfar, *In A Voice Of Their Own*, p. XI.

⁹ Massoume Price, “A brief history of women’s movements in Iran from 1850 – 2000”, www.zan.org

¹⁰ For further reading see Carol Regan, “Ahmad Kasravi’s Views On The Role Of Women In Iranian Society As Expressed In *Our Sisters And Daughters*”, in Asghar Fathi (ed.), *Women and the family in Iran*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1985), pp. 60-75.

¹¹ Hasan Javadi, “Women in Persian Literature: An Exploratory Study”, in Asghar Fathi (ed.), *Women and the family in Iran* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1985), p. 51.

“After Reza Shah's fall, independent organizations were formed. Safiyeh Firouz in 1942 formed the National Women's Society and the newly formed Council of Iranian Women in 1944 strongly criticized polygamy. Tudeh Party's Women's league was the best organized in this period. The society was later changed to Organization of Progressive Women and in 1951 unsuccessfully lobbied for electoral rights. Mossadegh's fall put an end to independent organizations.”¹²

More attention to women's rights was given during the reign of Reza Shah's son, Mohammad Reza Shah (r. 1941-1979). One of the developments was women's right to vote and to be elected in 1962 and the legislation of the Family Protection Law in 1967 and its amendment 1975. Also in 1966, the Women's Organisation of Iran (WOI) was established. WOI was in charge of matters regarding women's health, literacy, education, law, social welfare and international affairs. The WOI was under the control and presidency of women of the imperial court who had little experience or contact with women's real life issues. However, these aristocratic women in the WOI “were genuinely interested in the problem of women's subordination and had been campaigning for women's rights since the 1940s.”¹³ Mahnâz Afkhâmi, the secretary of the WOI became the first female minister in the history of Iran. She was given the post of Minister of Women's Affairs in 1975, the same year as free abortion was legislated in Iran. Parvin Paidar reports in her book *‘Women in the era of modernisation: Women and the political process in twentieth-century Iran’* that in 1978 the WOI “had 349 branches, 113 Centers and covered 55 other organizations dealing with women's welfare and health. The last registrar indicates that in 1977 alone, over a million women used the services. Most centers were trashed after the revolution.”¹⁴

The Iranian State during the Pahlavi dynasty was desperately trying to build an image of impressiveness to the international community, especially to the West. However, the general male view on women was far away of that in developed western countries. The Shah tried to give an impression of his belief in the participation of women in society but in an interview with the female Italian journalist, Oriana Fallaci in 1976, he gave a different impression. He was actually caught saying:

¹² Massoume Price, “A brief history of women's movements in Iran from 1850 – 2000”, www.zan.org.

¹³ Parvin Paidar, *Women in the era of modernisation: Women and the political process in twentieth-century Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) (Cambridge Middle East Studies; 1), p. 150.

¹⁴ Massoume Price, “A brief history of women's movements in Iran from 1850 – 2000”, www.zan.org.

“I only respect women as long as they are beautiful, feminine and moderately clever...You (women) are equal in the eyes of the law but not, excuse my saying so, in ability...You’ve never produced a Michelangelo or a Bach. You’ve never even produced a great chef...You’ve produced nothing great, nothing!”¹⁵

However, the Shah and his father more symbolically than in reality opened opportunities for women in diverse areas of social life, opportunities, which had legally never been given to women before. Noshin Ahmadi feminist activist in Iran states that, “During the Shah’s rule there was a certain appeal to watching Farah (the queen) stand by his side, in public, uncovered. It smelt like freedom, even though it wasn’t, the Shah was hardly enlightened.”¹⁶ The ‘freedoms’ his State introduced for women in Iran, were somewhat only accessible to the upper-middle class and educated urban Iranian woman who had access to law and patriarchal power.

But one can say that whatever the motives behind the policies for women’s empowerment during the Pahlavi dynasty have been, their impact were beneficial for many urban and an exceptionally few rural Iranian women. Parvin Paidar claims that these policies “gave woman a longer pre-marriage life and hence increased the possibility of education and employment, they gave women some choice in the type of marriage they entered into or remained in, they gave women some control over their bodies. Furthermore, the existence and rights of unmarried pregnant women were for the first time acknowledged because of the provision of free abortion.”¹⁷ They also meant that in the 1960s and 1970s more and more women entered the state-run schools and universities. Thus, as Valentine Moghadam reports, literacy rate among the female urban inhabitants rose from 8% in 1956 up to 55% in 1976, thus surpassing the men’s literacy growth by 0.7%. As men’s literacy in the urban areas had increased from 22.4% in 1956 to 68.7% in 1976¹⁸. This rate meant that “by 1978, 33% of university students were female with 2 million in the workforce. 190,000 were professionals with university degrees. There were 333 women in the local councils, 22 in Majlis and 2 in the Senate.”¹⁹

¹⁵ Cited in Parvin Paidar, *Women in the era of modernisation*, p. 156.

¹⁶ Interview with Nooshin Ahmadi, writer, feminist activist & the editor of ‘*Jens-e Dovvom*’ journal, March 2000, www.badjens.homepage.com.

¹⁷ Parvin Paidar, *Women in the era of modernisation*, p. 156.

¹⁸ Valentine M. Moghadam, “Gender inequality in the Islamic Republic of Iran: a sociodemography”, in Myron Weiner and Ali Banuazizi (eds.), *The Politics of social transformation in Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan* (Syracuse N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1994) (Contemporary issues in Middle East), p. 398.

¹⁹ Massoume Price, “A brief history of women’s movements in Iran from 1850 – 2000”, www.zan.org.

In spite of the positive effects of the Pahlavi's policies and the legislation that led to the Family Protection Law, the man was still regarded as the head of the household. It was still the man's natural right to effortlessly divorce his wife. Paidar suggests, “a man still had the right to demand sexual intercourse from his wife and lawfully force her to comply...together with countless other male privileges.”²⁰ Also the prevention of women wearing the veil or the *châdor*²¹ at working places and in universities kept many women from religious and traditional families from participating more or even at all in the society. Since the *châdor* was regarded as an opposition against the Pahlavi State which promoted the western image of women. The *châdor* was also seen as a symbol of ignorance and the Dark Age of Islamization.

The modernisation of the Iranian society and Iranian women during the Pahlavis did not result in any feminist prose writings nor did it bring democracy or the social developments it tried to ruthlessly imitate from western countries. The very countries that represented power and advancement to Iran. Thus, Paidar notes that “the illusion that state modernisation and women's emancipation were necessary corollaries were shattered because of the contradictory and unfulfilled promises of westernisation.”²² Towards the end of the 1970s Iranians had had enough of years of political suppression, dictatorship, the every day battle against high inflation, shortage of necessary foodstuff, a acute housing shortage and high urban and rural unemployment despite Iran's great wealth and profitable oil exports at the time. The socially and politically aware Iranians or the anti-establishment who had tried to give voice to the frustration and humiliation suffered by particularly the lower-classes and people from the rural areas, were persecuted, jailed, tortured and even executed. Thus, in a joint fight by Islamists, leftists and millions of individuals not linked to any specific political party, the Shah was overthrown from power in February 1979. This fight was pursued and strengthened by millions of Iranian women who participated in it, demanding freedom from over a thousand year of ‘captivity’ under different names and shapes. However, Ayatollah Khomeini and his clerical associates who had acted as spiritual supporters and a source of inspiration for the people during the time before the revolution, after the people's victory immediately took control and turned Iran into a totalitarian religious State. In this way, women's chances of emancipation were significantly weakened. The Pahlavis did somehow clear the path for

²⁰ Parvin Paidar, *Women in the era of modernisation*, p. 157.

²¹ The black Islamic head-to-toe wrap, most common in Iran.

²² Parvin Paidar, *Women in the era of modernisation*, p. 167.

women’s emancipation but Iranian women now had to clear it up all over again and face the major obstacle, reinforced Islamic law and culture.

EMANCIPATION IN LITERATURE

When discussing women’s participation and fight for emancipation in Iran’s contemporary history, one finds the earliest references in literature. As it was easier for women to manifest their struggle and their feelings of discontent by writing about women’s unjust situations rather than shouting it out loud in the public, where it would have most probably met hostility. In the late 19th century one finds Bibi Khânom Astarâbâdi who served the Royal women, teaching them literature and religion. She was a talented poet and wrote a satirical book entitled “*The Vices of Men*” in 1887. She wrote the book as an answer to the derogatory popular book called “*The Education of Women*”, written by an anonymous fanatical cleric, advising his male readers to take harsh and medieval methods when ‘disciplining’ their women. In her book, Bibi Khânom sarcastically gets back at this cleric with a witty wordplay, answering every issue raised by him. Hasan Javadi notes that Bibi Khânom “concludes that the book, more than being a *Nasihât-nameh* (Book of Advise), is a *Fazihat-nameh* (Book of Malice), and says that such men as the author are not *rejal* (men), but rather *rajjal* (roughnecks).”²³

Later in the 1920s, Princess Tâj-os Saltaneh, the daughter of Nâser od-Din Shah, (r. 1848-1896) wrote the first prose narrative in the history of Iranian women’s writing. Tâj-os Saltaneh knew of the women movements in Europe, she was educated and a true avant-garde expressing her radical visions of women’s liberation, “social reforms, fighting corruption...and she was even critical of the shortcomings of her father.”²⁴ In her writing, she mentions the inadequate state of women in Iran and condemns religion and the veil, seeing it as a symbol of captivity. She writes about how she rather wishes to be dead than wearing the ‘horrible’ black veil. Her autobiography was never published during her own lifetime but gives us a precious insight in the Iranian women’s struggle for freedom. Also in 1927, Homâ a leading publisher, poet and speaker, she wrote constantly about

²³ Hasan Javadi, “Women in Persian Literature: An Exploratory Study”, p. 56.

²⁴ Ibid.

women's issues and was one of the first organisers of a major demonstration by women outside the Majles demanding equal rights²⁵.

In the 1930s other female literary artists emerged and poetesses such as Parvin E'tesâmi and Forugh Farrokhzâd for the first time gave voices to Iranian women's unheard story of pain, frustration as well as lust. They were pioneers expressing women's inner thoughts and the injustice made towards them, something that had never done before.

Parvin E'tesâmi: *No one like women, lived in dark for centuries;
No one like her was sacrificed on the alter of hypocrisies.*²⁶

Forugh Farrokhzâd: *Beside a body, tremendous and dazed, I sinned, I voluptuously sinned,...I
whispered the tale of love in his ears,...I want you, O mad lover of mine,...in the soft bed, my body
shivered drunk on his breast...*²⁷

COMMITTED LITERATURE

Prose literature in the years prior to the 1950s was still not as common as the style of poetry among female literary artists in Iran. Prose writings would come to emerge in women's literature around the same time as the notion of literary commitment was established in Iran.

From around the 1950s, the role of every 'serious' author, man or woman in Iran became socio-political. It was the socially and politically conscious writers who felt a responsibility to show the problems of the society and even proffering solutions to its change or at least letting some light in the existing agonising conditions. It was this feeling of responsibility that started the new episode of literary commitment (*ta'ahod-e adabi*) in the creative writings in Iran. The first formal demonstration of literary commitment occurred in 1946, in the first congress of Iranian writers, at which different writers and literary experts talked about the literary artist's responsibility and duty to lead the people in their fight towards injustice in society. It was as of then that the role of writers became socio-political in Iran.

²⁵ Massoume Price, "A brief history of women's movements in Iran from 1850 – 2000", www.zan.org.

²⁶ Parvin E'tesami: *Divan* [Collected Poems]. 1935. (Reprint. Tehran: Fardin, 1974), p. 153. Cited in Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words*, p. 121.

²⁷ Forugh Farrokhzâd, *Divar* [Wall]. 1956. (Reprint. Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1971), p. 13. Cited in Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words*, p. 142.

In 1968, Simin Dâneshtar, Iran's first female prose writer and a leading literary artist, together with her husband Jalâl Âl-e Ahmad and other prominent 'committed' writers founded the Writers' Association in Iran and became one of its executive members. In her book, *Veils and Words*, Farzaneh Milani writes that Dâneshtar was also “a signatory to all open letters written by the association in defence of writers' professional rights and of protection of freedom of expression.”²⁸ The Association of Iranian Writers was resolved to oppose State censorship and to boycott the Imperial court's control over literature, a independent source which the State had tried to bring under its own control. Thus, in the late 1960s the notion and the question of literary commitment became a special focus of attention. The committed writers were inspired by the ideas of the leaders of the Constitutional Revolution and the leftist movements. This important era in socio-political commitment in literature lasted until the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. In this way, literature in Iran from the 1950s until 1979 was continuously a literature of social protest and critics towards socio-political injustices and religious institutions. The committed authors saw themselves as “...the sensitive spirits, even the antennas of the society”²⁹. The majority of women prose writers in that era wrote committed literature but rather than writing about gender inequality, they wrote of social inequality, the strongly suppressed political atmosphere or just wrote enlightening and idealistic stories. Women's specific problems were not highlighted as their own but were mostly there as a symbol or a sign of the infected society.

Pre-Revolutionary female writers of prose literature as well as their male colleagues portrayed women in their stories very often as victims, using “the worn out images of women”³⁰. The women in their stories were often there only serving as metaphors for Iran's social and political inadequate situation. Thus, women's writing was not fundamentally different from men's with regards to socio-political issues. The authors of such 'committed' stories in this way showed their disapproval of the injustices in Pahlavi's Iran without exposing themselves to threats, possible arrest by the authorities and imprisonment. Later on in this essay some of the post-revolutionary works of female prose writers of the era of literary commitment will be examined.

²⁸ Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words*, p. 184.

²⁹ Mohammad R. Ghanoonparvar, *Prophets of Doom, Literature As A Socio-Political Phenomenon In Modern Iran*, (Lanham, MD, University Press of America. 1984), p. IX.

³⁰ Franklin Lewis & Farzin Yazdanfar, *In A Voice Of Their Own*. p. XVII.

POLITICAL SITUATION IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC

By the late 1970s the number of Iranian woman writers had increased in a striking manner. This trend would come to grow even more, subsequent to the Revolution in 1979. Following the total Islamization of the Iranian society by Ayatollah Khomeini and his clerical associates, the beneficial Family Protection Law and the improved individual liberties implemented during the reign of the Pahlavi dynasty were suspended. Re-enforcing polygamy, strongly promoting gender segregation together with imposing harsh divorce conditions for women as well as the enforcement of mandatory veiling in public places, were some of the changes to the law. The Iranian women were restricted from travelling without the permission of their male guardian, from using methods of birth control, and from being judges, lawyers or jury-members among many other limitations.

The mandatory public veiling was one of the first issues called upon by the clerics, as early as, one month following the revolution. In this way, instigating the anger of many women who strongly opposed to it, seeing it as a violation against their human rights. These women marched in protest through the streets of many major cities in Iran, chanting slogans such as *‘Long live freedom, mandatory veiling is the death shroud of our freedom’* and *‘Women must be freed from captivity’*. At the same time, male fundamentalists answered these women with yelling slogans like *‘Unveiling propagates prostitution’* and *‘Wear a scarf on your head or get a cuff on the head’*.³¹

Kamran Talatoff reports that the women’s demonstrations and rallies “met violent repression from government agents and fundamentalist groups and resulted in injury and arrest. Women were in the end deprived of their freedom of dress.”³² Ever since then, “women perceived to be wearing too much make-up or not properly covering their hair and body in public have been periodically arrested, fired from their jobs, or otherwise threatened in the streets,...co-educational schooling has been abolished.”³³

Parvin Paidar claims that all the intellectual and educated women who had already become weary of the implementations of Islamic law in Iran, in the very beginning of the revolution, had predicted that if they would lose their freedom of dress, things would worsen for women’s rights all

³¹ Cited in Kamran Talatoff, “Iranian women’s literature: from pre-revolutionary social discourse to post-revolutionary feminism”, p. 542.

³² Kamran Talatoff, “Iranian women’s literature: from pre-revolutionary social discourse to post-revolutionary feminism”, p. 542.

together. However, their greatest ally at the time, the leftist groups kept away and even condemned the protests made by these women. They did this knowing that they had attracted many female members during the Shah’s regime on the basis of their liberal and democratic views on women’s rights and equal opportunities. These groups with their many female members did not object to the actions of the ruling Islamists as they were more concerned with the ‘liberation of the masses’. They believed that Iranian women were victims of Iran’s bourgeois imitation of the west and that the women who during the Shah’s rule “benefited from modernisation were considered accomplices in this imperialistic conspiracy. While lower-class women were portrayed as victims of the regime’s oppression, affluent women were condemned as sex-objects, accomplices of the Shah and oppressors of the lower-class women.”³⁴ They therefore did not take the issue of mandatory veiling as an anti-democratic action at the time. One can even suggest that the leftist groups agreed with Ayatollah Khomeini’s notion of women as housebound mothers and wives. As they thought that “to ensure the continuance of the struggle of the masses, housework, reproduction and the rearing of children are necessity”³⁵ for women and those women who are concerned with their personal liberties and career are bourgeois. Within the leftist groups women were put down accepting subordinate positions, a strong woman was considered a masculine woman and wearing high-heels and lipstick were seen as imperialistic. Disciplinary methods against sexual laxity were encouraged together with facing great humiliation only if a woman within these leftist groups had committed the ‘crime’. However male members were exempted from any disciplinary actions taken against them if they had committed the exact same ‘sin’.³⁶

Thus, the leftist groups did not proffer emancipation for Iranian women and they were somehow a part of Iran’s patriarchal society. The leftist groups were soon banned together with all the other political parties in any case and their “members arrested and the mass executions of the 1980s put an end to all independent political activities. Despite, Maryam Firouz an executive member of the Tudeh Party praising Imam Khomeini and calling him the most important supporter of women's rights in our history.”³⁷

³³ Franklin Lewis & Farzin Yazdanfar, *In A Voice Of Their Own*, p. XIII.

³⁴ Parvin Paidar, *Women in the era of modernisation*, p. 171.

³⁵ Confederation of Iranian Students Abroad 1976, p. 6. Cited in Parvin Paidar, *Women and the era of Modernisation*, p. 172 .

³⁶ See Parvin Paidar, *Women and the era of Modernisation*, p. 172.

³⁷ Massoume Price, “A brief history of women's movements in Iran from 1850 – 2000”, www.zan.org

Meanwhile as the Islamic Republic, “promoted early marriage, dismissed employment of young mothers and lauded raising children (committed Muslims)”³⁸, it did not deny women education, limited and ‘appropriate’ employment opportunities, the right to vote and to run for parliament, although the number of women MPs has only reached fourteen³⁹ out of the two hundred seats in the parliament today. But even the small number of women MPs are definitely making a difference, as since March this year (2000) four newly elected women MPs have started to challenge the chador as required garb in Iran. They are doing this by questioning the need to wear the chador, which has been the standard garb for female MPs since the 1979 revolution.⁴⁰ Thus, opening ‘taboo’ discussions in high political level.

After the 1979 Revolution, women who were already a part of the Iranian work force from the past were allowed to maintain their jobs, provided they had not been politically active other than in the Islamic movements or had not held high governmental posts or none-appropriate jobs⁴¹. Other women who had been held back in Shah’s regime due to their veil and their social background were now visible in the society and since the past decade very mobile in working places in Urban Iran. Massoume Price states that “segregation of sexes legitimized the entry of millions of lower class girls from traditional families and rural areas into the public life and the education system. The segregation required training of women to serve the female only policies. Thousands were employed in the security forces and morality corps and others to impose strict Islamic codes. For many this was the first time they had fully entered public life and received wages with pensions at the end.”⁴² Thus, Iranian women in the work force today are from diverse social backgrounds.

One can now come across women - albeit still a lot fewer than men - in the parliament, universities, hospitals, factories and offices. Today’s Iranian women might be veiled but they have found their own way of progressing past all the limitations and obstacles put in order to hinder them in the name of Islam. Thus, the emergence of women who are making use of the Islamic legal system to accommodate women’s aspirations for freedom has become subsequently very common in Iran. Women have started to literally beat the Islamic Regime with its own weapons, attacking the traditional habits and challenging their chauvinistic views, especially in their writing, as more and

³⁸ Valentine M. Moghadam, “Gender inequality in the Islamic Republic of Iran: a sociodemography”, p. 394.

³⁹ Interview with Mahin Sanati, feminist activist, March 2000, www.badjens.homepage.com.

⁴⁰ Ham-Mihan daily newspaper, Tehran, 2000-03-09. Cited in www.zan.org.

⁴¹ E.g. singers, dancers, police officers, pilots, judges.

more women are able to read and write now. Valentine Moghadam states that in 1986, the literacy rate for women was 65.4% in the urban areas and 36.3% in the rural.⁴³ This rate has grown even more since this statistic as “in 1998, 52% of the students entering universities were female and the worsening economic situation has forced millions of women to enter the workforce.”⁴⁴

One suggest that Iranian women have always had to evolve around all kinds of discrimination and prejudice. While the leftist groups called feminists bourgeois, the Shah in 1976 said that women somehow lack ability and many clerics in today’s Iran also come up with shocking comments. Parvin Paidar notes that clerics such as Ali Akbar Hâshemi Rafsanjâni, an MP in the Majles during his presidency in 1988 stated that:

“A man’s brain is larger. Women mature too fast. The breathing power of men’s lungs is greater and women’s heartbeats are faster...men heed reasoning and logic, whereas most women tend to be emotional...courage and daring are stronger in men.”⁴⁵

Despite the Islamic Republic’s hindering and controlling measures against women, women have managed to progress very fast at the same time as facing thousands of obstacles. During the clerics’ regime their limitations and the discriminatory cultural norms have become sacrosanct, yet women have flourished and emerged as active participants in different aspects of the Iranian society. Maybe one can call it the global modernisation effect of the 20th century and suggest that Iranian women would have progressed as much as today or even more if the Shah’s secular authoritarian state had remained. Perhaps their active participation in today’s Iran is to a certain extent an protest against the clerics’ regime but one cannot ignore the fact that the unification of secular and religious women in their struggle for emancipation, has promoted and created a more forceful and effective involvement of women in the society. One can also without any doubt say that the retrogressive steps taken by the Islamic government in Iran to create a Muslim society by using methods and rules of early Islamic Arabia and women’s suppression since then has released a massive political and ideological force among women from different backgrounds.

⁴² Massoume Price, “A brief history of women’s movements in Iran from 1850 – 2000”, www.zan.org.

⁴³ Valentine M. Moghadam, “Gender inequality in the Islamic Republic of Iran: a sociodemography”, p. 399.

⁴⁴ Massoume Price, “A brief history of women’s movements in Iran from 1850 – 2000”, www.zan.org.

⁴⁵ Washington Post, 21 Dec. 1988. Cited in Parvin Paidar, *Women and the era of Modernisation*,

Nevertheless, one of the biggest areas in which women have succeeded in Iran’s religious state is in the literary scene, a scene which has always hold a privileged position in Iran throughout its long history. Women have undoubtedly used the concept of ‘the pen to be mightier than the sword’ fully. Mahin Sanati, a long time feminist activist and the founder of the National Association in Support of Children’s Rights in Iran, is one of those many women who promote women’s writing, saying:

“...if there are no books about women, how can we learn about ourselves?”⁴⁶

The presence of the liberal cleric Mohammad Khâtami, now the president of the Islamic Republic, in the Ministry of Islamic Guidance in the early 1990s has also helped “pave the way for a less restricted press. Hundreds of books about feminist issues were and are published including radical feminist books and biographies.”⁴⁷

Mohammad Khâtami won the 1997 presidential elections by charming the Iranian nation, especially the youth and the women, promising them all emancipation. In May 1998, on the first anniversary of his election victory, he said in a speech delivered to the students of Tehran University:

“The destiny of the religion's social prestige today and tomorrow will depend on our interpretation of the religion in a manner which would not contradict freedom, whenever in history a religion has faced freedom, it has been the religion which has sustained damage...when we speak of freedom we mean the freedom of the opposition. It is no freedom if only the people who agree with those in power and with their ways and means are free.”⁴⁸

President Khâtami has however been unsuccessful in delivering his promises of emancipation by being constantly undermined and stopped by the dominant conservative Supreme Leader and Guardian Council. Nevertheless, he has certainly helped pave the way for a more open and free press in Iran.

THE PRESS

p. 190 .

⁴⁶ Interview with Mahin Sanati, March 2000, www.badjens.homepage.com.

⁴⁷ Massoume Price, “A brief history of women's movements in Iran from 1850 – 2000”, www.zan.org.

⁴⁸ Cited in www.persia.org/khatami/.

From this point on in the essay, we shall be focusing on women’s developments in prose literature and in brief the press within the context of the situation of women in post-Khomeini Iran. Talatoff suggests that after the implementation of the mandatory Islamic veil, “female activists began to publish articles and reports on women’s rights and struggle over mandatory veiling immediately following the suppression of their demonstrations. They criticised not only the political establishment, the Islamists, and the left by which they were once influenced. Feminist writers criticised men who stood by silently as women’s rights were restricted, as well as men who actively promoted the new limitations.”⁴⁹ In her extensive study, Ziba Mir-Hosseini notes that all these journals and articles were soon banned and it was not until the 1990s that a greater “feminist concern safeguarding women’s rights in the Islamic Republic”⁵⁰ emerged. Religiously oriented women started challenging restrictive laws within the Islamic tradition itself, doing this with the support and contributions from secular women such as the brilliant feminist activist and lawyer, Mehrangiz Kâr.

The *Zanân*⁵¹ Magazine initially brought up these concerned issues of women’s rights in 1994, two years after it’s first publication. *Zanân* Magazine being managed and edited by women, is the Islamic version of the *Zan-e-Ruz*, a popular pre-Revolutionary women’s magazine in Iran. In *Zanân* magazine women’s legal and social rights are discussed. The unequal gender law’s of the *Shari’a* (Islamic Canon Jurisprudence) are reinterpreted. This has been done in a bold and serious attempt to pursue women’s equal position in every aspect of the Iranian society. In its publicised articles *Zanân* tries to “introduce notions such as legitimacy of women’s choices and their demands for equal treatment at home and in society.”⁵²

Zanân audaciously brings up questions such as:

- *According to what grounds is the man head of the family?*
- *Does such a headship imply his absolute rule?*

⁴⁹ Kamran Talatoff, “Iranian women’s literature: from pre-revolutionary social discourse to post-revolutionary feminism”, p. 543.

⁵⁰ Ziba Mir Hosseini, “Stretching The Limits: A Feminist Reading Of The *Shari’a* In Post-Khomeini Iran”, in Yamani, Mai (ed.), *Feminism and Islam: legal and literary perspectives* (Reading: Ithaca Press for the centre of Islamic and Middle Eastern Law, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1996), p. 286.

⁵¹ All references from the *Zanân* magazine are cited in Ziba Mir Hosseini, “Stretching The Limits: A Feminist Reading Of The *Shari’a* In Post-Khomeini Iran”, pp. 292-316.

⁵² Ziba Mir Hosseini, “Stretching The Limits: A Feminist Reading Of The *Shari’a* In Post-Khomeini Iran”, p. 293.

- *Should a woman be beaten if she is unwilling or not ready physiologically and physically to fulfil her husband's (sexual) wishes?*

It answers the questions with liberal interpretations of the Shari'a Fiqh⁵³ and wide range of legal textbooks. With novelty and great expertise *Zanân* writes:

"...this headship does not imply that a man has absolute and despotic rule in the family according to which the wife is required to slavishly follow him...A woman is not her husband's mere subordinate but his partner, companion and aide."

Zanân cleverly chooses even male authors in its attempt to open doors for women's empowerment. Thus, capturing even the conservatives' attention in these discussions. In other articles it discusses radical notions of women's total emancipation, using authors such as Yâdegâr Âzadi, a male cleric in Qom who argues for women's right to be judges. Âzadi writes:

"Probing the reasons put forward by those Islamic jurists who deny women the right to be a judge, proves that their offensive on woman focuses on her incapacity and inability. It is the question of women's gender shortcomings and men's natural superiority. They regard men as powerful beings and women as weak and worthless. It is of course evident to us that such perceptions arise from centuries of confinement, living behind closed doors, in inner quarters, 'andarun', of homes separated from the society...Nevertheless, to prove women's inadequacy they have brought up their arguments."

The work of Mohsen Sa'idzâdeh another liberal cleric teaching in Qom is reviewed in *Zanân* magazine. Sa'idzadeh writes:

"It is time to ameliorate men's level of awareness in society, to make them understand that the criterion for good conjugal relationship is no longer domination...Indeed we do not have any strata in this country more oppressed and sacrificing than women...It is not evident why, instead of being realistic, some of our religious leaders resort to fanciful, and sometimes distorted, justifications."

⁵³ Islamic law.

Why do they not want to accept women’s God-given and intrinsic demands, which are in no way threatening to society?”

Zanân starts a challenging and unique feminist reading of Islamic legal texts in Iran. Suggesting the change of law to the Islamic Republic. Thus, opening a new episode in Iranian women’s struggle for emancipation in writing, supporting women to debate over these issues and encouraging them to write about them. Some changes have been made since the debates in support of women’s rights in the *Zanân* magazine, although their success rate has proved to be exceptionally low. For example, “women can function as judges but do not have the title. Marriage dowry (Mehriye) is indexed and linked to inflation. Women are given more grounds for initiating divorce and since 1997, a prenuptial document to be signed at the time of marriage was approved. The object was to give women the rights they lacked in the Shari’a. The future husband forfeits his rights to polygamy and unconditional divorce. Women can initiate divorce, divide assets and have joint custody of children and child support. However, the practice so far has failed and most men will not sign the contract and so far no fundamental changes,”⁵⁴ have been made to the law.

POST-REVOLUTIONARY LITERATURE

One can say that the mandatory Islamic veil and subsequently Iran’s total Islamization by the clerics’ religious regime in 1979 has brought a new perspective for the Iranian women’s expression and thereafter the start of their ever-more active participation in Iran’s literary scene. Due to the overall change in Iran’s socio-political structure since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, a new episode of feminist writing in women’s literature has emerged. Talatoff suggests that “ironically, the emergence of these unprecedented literary works by women is associated with the Islamization of the country through the ‘cultural revolution’ that directly undermined women’s freedoms.”⁵⁵

Since the 1980s many books about and by Iranian women has been written in Iran and abroad, the number of publications, unprecedented in the prior history of Iranian women’s literature. Shahrnush

⁵⁴ Massoume Price, “A brief history of women’s movements in Iran from 1850 – 2000”, www.zan.org.

⁵⁵ Kamran Talatoff, “Iranian women’s literature: from pre-revolutionary social discourse to post-revolutionary feminism”, p. 541.

Pârsipur, a famous contemporary female prose writer claims that the reason for women’s ever-growing writing in Iran is because, writing has become a ‘historic imperative’ for women since the revolution. In an interview with *Donyâ-ye Sokhan* an Iranian literary journal taken place in 1988 Pârsipur says:

*“If twenty years ago, you would have asked me why I write, I would have probably answered, I write because I want to be famous; I have something to say; I want to be someone; or I protest without even knowing why. Today, however, at the age of forty-one, forty-two, I can say I write because the course of events has suddenly pushed my generation in the crosscurrent of events. It seems as if writing now is a historic imperative.”*⁵⁶

In today’s Iran, the majority of female prose writers are concerned with women’s genuine life issues, Farzaneh Milani thus suggests that “the revolution has created a rush of new writers with widely divergent social and economic backgrounds,...women have never shown such a desire to go public with their personal tales.”⁵⁷ The women’s stories deal with personal and social matters, in these stories “women are seeking independence and autonomy, raising their voices, telling their stories,...even those who portray themselves as victims of society-conforming, enduring, and suffering-are ultimately victorious, since they succeed in pleading their case and making their stories heard.”⁵⁸ Some of these women authors blame Islam for Iran’s gender segregated culture and the reason behind women’s suppression, whereas others consider Islam as their salvation and protection from the bewitching manipulation of the west. But interestingly, whatever the writers’ ideologies are, they have the Iranian women’s emancipation in mind and are united in this cause, arguing for it from different perspectives.

Manny Shirâzi, a post-revolutionary female author is one of those authors who holds Islam responsible for women’s captivity as well as for Iran’s problems. In her novel ‘Javâdy Alley’ written in exile, she gives voice to her true feelings about the political situation in Iran:

⁵⁶ Cited in Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words*, p. 199.

⁵⁷ Farzaneh Milani, “Shehrezad Unveiled: post-revolutionary Iranian writers”, in Paknazar Sullivan, Soraya (ed. & transl.), *Stories by Iranian women since the revolution* (Austin, Texas: The University of Texas, 1991). p. 7.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

*"But in the land of the sun...there is no love, no passion, no nakedness nor smiles, human touch nor contact, nor human relationships; but only Islam, its laws and legislation, its binding rules and the controls which chain us, which chain us always to death, punishment, lashes, and stonings, to black coverings for women and men's violence against women; and to the perpetuation of that violence."*⁵⁹

Another favourite theme in women's post-revolutionary prose literature is the veil. The veil has found a very significant place in their literature, it has become a symbol of improvement for some and a retrogressive step for others, its meaning is a personal interpretation of what Islam and the Islamic Republic has meant for Iran. Many women in Iran see the mandatory veil as the very sign of humiliation and oppression while some see it as a mean to desegregate and a ticket to the outside world (public places). Veiled women authors such as Zahrâ Rahnâvard who were not recognised in pre-Revolutionary Iran but have now become comprehensible to Iranian readers. The mandatory veiling has given authors like Rahnâvard empowerment. Rahnâvard, in her writing debates that Islam has not only required women to conform to modest dress and behaviour but also the men. Sousân Âzadi an exiled female author is one of those many Iranian women who has a negative attitude towards the veil, in her writing she portrays the veil as a 'mobile prison'. In a personal story she writes:

*"As I pulled the chador over me, I felt a heaviness descending over me. I was hidden and in hiding. There was nothing left of Sousan Azadi. I felt like an animal of the light suddenly trapped in a cave. I was just another faceless Moslem woman carrying a whole inner world hidden inside the chador."*⁶⁰

FEMINIST LITERATURE

Iranian women's writing has always appeared under disadvantageous times and in every stage of history has been influenced by the political realities surrounding them. Female writers of prose literature such as Goli Taraqqi, Simin Dâneshtar, Shahrnush Pârsipur, and Moniru Ravânipur are

⁵⁹ Cited in Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words*, p. 234.

⁶⁰ Sousan Azadi, with Angela Ferrante, *Out of Iran*. (London: Futura, 1987), p. 223. Cited in Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words*, p. 44.

some of the famous contemporary Iranian authors who have emerged during the past century and given the women of Iran a voice which have never been heard before. They have done this despite censorship, and have sold large numbers of books aside the acute paper shortages in the 1980s and Iran’s disastrous economic situation.

Famous pre-Revolutionary authors like Simin Dâneshtar, have started to publish and write remarkably more than in the Pahlavi era. Dâneshtar was the first Iranian woman to reclaim “the verbal space denied to women in Persian prose.”⁶¹ She was born in Shirâz in 1921, publishing her first collection of short stories *Âtash-e khâmesh* (Fire Quenched) in 1947, she gained tremendous success with her novel *Savushun* (Mourners of Siyâvash) published in 1969, the first novel ever written by an Iranian woman. *Savushun* became a best seller for over two decades, selling about 400,000 copies by 1984 as well as being reprinted fifteen times. Farzaneh Milani states, “unrivaled in Iran, it has been translated into English, French, Russian, Japanese, Uzbek, Polish and Turkish. Dâneshtar is not only Iran’s first novelist but one of the country’s leading writers. For over forty years, she has been a key figure in the unfolding of modern Persian literature.”⁶² However, Dâneshtar in her pre-Revolutionary writings did not manage to convincingly portray women with all their emotional and physical attributes, she wasn’t a feminist nor did she write feminist stories, no prose writer did at that time. Like all other ‘serious’ writers in the era of the Pahlavi Regime, she was a part of the committed literary scene, writing mainly of Iran’s political and social problems. However, in her post-Revolutionary works she has abandoned her past forms and themes and has started to write personal stories from a feminist point of view. Her new themes are the ill treatment of women by men, the inadequate situation of women in the Iranian society and also her strong condemnation of old fashioned ‘arranged marriages’. Talatoff suggests that, “Dâneshtar has revised some of her former works in the years after the revolution further indicating a shift in her literary approach.”⁶³ In her post-Revolutionary works, Dâneshtar “depicts a male-dominated, male-centered society in which women are oppressed,...but they are active agents who work their way around prevailing norms to maximize what power they have”.⁶⁴ Thus, Dâneshtar becomes one of the many female prose writers who have become influenced and touched by the change of Iran’s

⁶¹ Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words*, p. 184.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 183.

⁶³ Kamran Talatoff, “Iranian women’s literature: from pre-revolutionary social discourse to post-revolutionary feminism”, p. 550.

⁶⁴ Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words*, p. 186.

socio-political structure after the revolution. Subsequently, compelled to write about it, trying to proffer solutions and expressing her condemnation.

Furthermore, Shahrnush Pârsipur a well-known contemporary female writer of prose literature born in Tehrân in 1946, with a Shirâzi family background, she started her writing career in the Shah’s regime but became celebrated in the 1980s following the publications of her popular feminist stories. She writes both in Iran and abroad. She spent four years in prison following the publication of a translation called *Zanân-e român nevis* (women novel-writers), in 1984. In 1990, she published *Zanân bedûn-e Mardân* (Women Without Men) which became very controversial and in the mid-1990s banned by the Islamic Republic. Some criticised it heavily, one critic wrote: “This book is written with total disregard for moral considerations and utter shamelessness [Bisharmi].”⁶⁵ Others complained that her only talent is her shamelessness to say things others are too ashamed to say. In *Zanân bedûn-e Mardân*, a story of several women in which the “characters speak of women’s sexual oppression throughout history, express their acceptance of their sexuality, ridicule chastity, and articulate resistance to the male-dominated culture.”⁶⁶ In this novel, Pârsipur is radical when she challenges the “traditional notions about virginity,”⁶⁷ doing this through the protagonists’ narrative and dialogues. In a section of the novel, Munis and Fâ‘ezeh, two of the women in the story have a discussion about virginity:

“Virginity is a curtain, my mother says, if a girl jumps down from a height he’ll damage her virginity. It’s a curtain, it can be torn.

-What are you talking about. It’s a hole. However, it’s narrow, and then becomes wide.”

Munis, a twenty-eight year-old woman, had always thought that virginity was a curtain. As a child she had been forbidden to climb trees and freely play around as it could result in damaging the family’s honour if the ‘curtain would fall’. In *Zanân bedûn-e Mardân*, Pârsipur “shows critically how the normative sexual morality surrounding female virginity shapes the feelings, aspirations, and internal conflicts of women. It disputes those norms which usually justify violence against

⁶⁵ Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words*, p. 53.

⁶⁶ Kamran Talattof, “Iranian women’s literature: from pre-revolutionary social discourse to post-revolutionary feminism”, p. 544.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 545.

women and often lead to a sympathetic view of the violator. Parsipour demystifies sexuality, virginity, and rape by speaking frankly about them."⁶⁸ Thus, she "challenges the state ideology bringing to force the agony of living under an institutionalised form of male supremacy."⁶⁹

Moniru Ravânipur a prominent post-Revolutionary female prose writer, she started publishing her stories after the revolution. She was born in the village Jofreh in 1954 and was brought up in Shirâz. She established herself as one of Iran's best contemporary writers following the publication of her first novel, *Ahl-e gharq* (The People of Gharq). "This novel, like most of Ravânipur's writing, takes as its subject the rituals, customs and traditions of the villagers of the coastal region of the Persian Gulf and the small town in southern Iran."⁷⁰ In her writing, Ravânipur focuses on women's unequal status in the society and the reasons behind it, criticising male domination in Iran. Talatoff suggests that, "promoting the image of the women who 'shout' their suffering, Ravanipour adheres to a feminist notion of literature which pleads that women should be portrayed not as helpless victims but rather, as rebels. Addressing women's oppression and struggle, she delves into the issues of gender relations."⁷¹ Her main theme is that of all oppressed Iranian women, regardless of their social status. In the story *Kanizu* (The Slave), she portrays a young girl's life in her own native environment. Ravânipur with her Southern [junubi] experience and background gives *Kanizu*, the main character a truthful image. In her story, *Kanizu* is forced to marry a old and appalling man in spite of her strong refusal. The man rapes her as it is his marital right to sleep with his wife whenever he desires. In this story "the horrific encounters of child brides, are exemplified. The experience of *Kanizu*,...is made analogous to the situation of a goldfish chased by a shark."⁷² Ravânipur is diverse in her descriptions, using different types of characters in her stories. Thus, she gives a true picture and voice to women's unjust lives in both rural and urban areas. Her work has become so popular that it "has forced the literary establishment to recognise the importance of her work."⁷³

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 545.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 547.

⁷⁰ Franklin Lewis & Farzin Yazdanfar, *In A Voice Of Their Own*, p. 50.

⁷¹ Kamran Talatoff, "Iranian women's literature: from pre-revolutionary social discourse to post-revolutionary feminism", p. 547.

⁷² Ibid., p. 548.

⁷³ Kamran Talatoff, "Iranian women's literature: from pre-revolutionary social discourse to post-revolutionary feminism", p. 549.

Goli Taraqqi, is another pre-Revolutionary female prose writer who depicts women with authenticity. Born in 1939, she started her writing career in the 1960s and published her first collection of short stories entitled *Man ham Che Guevara hastam* (I too am Che Guevara) in 1969. Some of her works has been translated into English and French. In the early 1980s, she emigrated to France from where she has started to write about experiences of life in exile. A familiar phenomena known to most Iranians, male or female who left Iran mainly due to the troubled political situation following the Islamic Revolution and the start of the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s.

In one of her post-Revolutionary stories, *Khâne-i dar Âsemân* (A House in the Heavens), Taraqqi portrays a old woman who becomes emotionally forced to leave her home and country when her son decides to emigrate to France. In this story, she gives life to a woman "with complex and contradictory emotions, Mahin Banu, whose motivations and whose difficulty in balancing her own needs with those of her children and the expectations of her culture, appear real and believable."⁷⁴ Mahin-Bânu, after moving abroad becomes a gypsy without a home of her own, just like many other elderly Iranians. She keeps quiet about her pain and as always is psychologically forced to be the 'typical' Iranian mother who ought not have a life of her own and who is always supposed to neglect her own needs for the sake of her children's happiness and comfort. But, Mahin-Bânu deteriorates from inside as a result of this and dies from heartache. She is unable to adapt to living abroad as she is a prisoner of her own past memories. She constantly remembers her past life, which was full of self-sacrifice for the sake of her culture, her authoritarian husband and her children but also a life in which she at least had a home of her own. Taraqqi successfully portrays an old Iranian woman's inner feelings, her love for her country and homesickness, her childhood in her father's house, her adult life and the change, which the Iran-Iraq war and the revolution brought upon her by forcing her to leave everything familiar to her. One is clearly shown the stereotypical Iranian mothers' hardships and one is also presented with disappointments and the regrets of exiled Iranians. Thus, Taraqqi writes literature close to her own experiences, she tells the story of the pain of emigration and condemns Iran's political situation for it. She also blames the Iranian culture for betraying women. "Her fiction is singularly reflective of contemporary life in Iran or the lives of Iranians living abroad."⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Franklin Lewis & Farzin Yazdanfar, *In A Voice Of Their Own*, p. XVIII.

⁷⁵ Faridoun Farrokh and M.R. Ghanoonparvar, "Portraits in exile in the fiction of Esmâ'il Fassih and Goli Taraghi", in Asghar Fathi, (ed.), *Iranian refugees and exiles since Khomieni*, (Costa Mesa, Cal., Mazda, 1997). p. 293.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, one can suggest that women of Iran have always had an inferior status to the men in their country, but they have been equally influenced by the political and ideological discourses and events in their country, thus portraying it in their writing. Always aware of their unjust limitations and ‘God-given’ possibilities, they have been waiting for a chance to give rise to their concerns and demands. After enjoying some ‘freedom’ during the era of the Pahlavi Regime, educated and intellectual Urban women felt seriously threatened by the sudden change in their rights following the establishment of the Islamic Republic. The upheaval in their lives together with legalisation of patriarchal restrictions, pushed them into writing about these matters. The feminist discourse which came about at that time resulted in women’s press openly criticising the regime’s policies on women issues, demanding progress, challenging the authorities, and making huge contributions in the society. Furthermore, the abrupt growth in population and the noticeable increase in women’s literacy, especially in the rural areas, resulted in more and more women writing and the emergence of a large number of readers who recognise their own lives, the lives of their mothers or the lives of their female neighbours. As the women writers in today’s Iran come from a diverse social and ideological background, it is easier for the readers to recognise the oppression faced by women and are compelled to debate over it, trying to find a solution in the framework of the Islamic Republic. Women in today’s Iran are reinterpreting the *Shari’a* law and are criticising the Constitution, doing this in a society where such re-thinking has been unacceptable. They know that if they do not take action themselves, the government will not bestow them freedom.

Furthermore, the pre-Revolutionary authors of prose literature, have started to write even more than before, adapting a new feminist style, not limiting themselves to certain political ideologies. They have turned their attention to mainly women’s difficult issues. The exiled female writers’ urge to criticise the women’s situation in Iran as well as writing about feelings of homesickness and heart ache, on top of experiences of cultural clashes abroad, have all resulted in a large number of publications outside of the country. With major themes in women’s literature being of “women’s lives in the past, women’s poverty, patriarchy, criticism of marriage traditions, and feminist-

oriented politics,”⁷⁶ post-revolutionary women prose writers have succeeded in showing all aspects of women’s social and personal lives in Iran. Thus, writing literature committed to vital female issues, real life issues, giving voice to Iranian women from all levels of life and social backgrounds and experiences. In books and articles the “religiously oriented women discuss issues from within the Islamic tradition itself, and the society seems to accept these changes with more ease and openness. Women’s issues are no longer considered automatically as middle-class or bourgeois concerns.”⁷⁷ Women’s writing has certainly become a ‘historic imperative’ in Iran. Secular women writers have joined forces with feminist Muslim authors, creating a feminist episode in Iranian women’s writing that is making a change, a change awaited for centuries by Iranian women.

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⁷⁶ Kamran Talattof, “Iranian women’s literature: from pre-revolutionary social discourse to post-revolutionary feminism”, p. 543.

⁷⁷ Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words*, p. 233.

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