

Feminist Thought in Shahrnush Parsipur's Women Without Men

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ABSTRACT

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The novel "Women Without Men" written by Shahrnush Parsipur, a famous Iranian writer, is one of the prominent novels of contemporary Iranian literature. The story of this novel is based on the life experiences of five Iranian women of different ages and different classes of society and shows the rights and interests of Iranian women in a patriarchal society. Because the five women in this novel have different personality traits and backgrounds and represent different ages and social classes, their life experiences are an example of different groups of women in Iranian society. The awareness of women's independence embodied in this book indicates the awakening of feminism's thoughts. For this purpose, in this article, an attempt has been made to explain the female characters based on the analytical-descriptive method and to examine the ideas of feminism embodied in this novel by using the theory of feminism.

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Introduction

Shahrnush Parsipur's novel, *Women Without Men*, stands as a landmark in contemporary Iranian literature. The narrative weaves together the lives of five Iranian women from diverse social classes and age groups, collectively illustrating the systemic injustices and interests of women within a patriarchal society. Through the lens of these varied experiences, the novel serves as a vessel for the awakening of feminist consciousness. This research aims to analyze the characterizations of these women and explore the feminist ideologies embedded within the text, examining how the narrative challenges traditional structures of power and gender.

Method

This study employs a descriptive-analytical methodology to interpret the characters and themes within the novel. The research utilizes feminist theoretical frameworks—drawing on the concepts of Simone de Beauvoir regarding the “Other” and the “Second Sex,” and Catherine MacKinnon's theories on sexual harassment and patriarchal domination—to decode the social and psychological realities presented in the text. The analysis focuses on the intersection of character development and ideological critique, observing how the novel employs magical realism to articulate the struggle for female autonomy.

Results

The analysis of the five central characters reveals distinct responses to patriarchal oppression, representing a spectrum of female experiences in Iranian society:

- **Mahdokht (The Traditionalist):** Represents the archetype of traditional chastity and modesty. Her identity is defined by a rigid adherence to “purity,” which ultimately leads to a psychological fracture. Her transformation into a tree—a magical realist element—symbolizes a retreat from the human/male social sphere into a state of pure, non-human existence to preserve her perceived sanctity.

- **Faezeh (The Seeker):** Embodies a complex struggle between progressive desires and residual patriarchal influence. While she seeks love and social agency, her views remain partially tethered to traditional norms (e.g., valuing her own “femininity” for marriage while judging others). She represents the transitional phase of feminist consciousness.
- **Moones (The Awakened):** Functions as the novel’s primary agent of liberation. Through a symbolic “death and rebirth” process—physically and ideologically—she transitions from a submissive girl to an independent woman capable of intellectual agency and direct social critique. Her journey represents the successful dismantling of the “Second Sex” identity.
- **Zarrinkolah (The Marginalized):** Represents women from the lower socio-economic strata. Her struggle against sexual exploitation and the commodification of her body highlights the intersection of class and gender. Her psychological trauma, manifested through the magical realist vision of seeing “men without heads,” underscores the profound dehumanization inherent in patriarchal exploitation.
- **Farokh Ligha (The Resilient):** Illustrates the domestic sphere’s psychological violence. Trapped in an unsatisfying marriage, her struggle is one of emotional survival. Her eventual act of killing her husband serves as a radical, albeit violent, reclamation of agency and a rejection of domestic servitude.

The research further identifies that the novel utilizes **Magical Realism** not merely as a stylistic choice, but as a tool to expose the “fundamental evil” of treating women as objects (commodities) rather than subjects. The establishment of the “Women Without Men” community in Karaj symbolizes the ultimate goal of feminist resistance: the creation of an autonomous space free from male hegemony.

Conclusion

Women Without Men is a seminal work that challenges the ideological foundations of the Iranian patriarchal structure by deconstructing traditional concepts of femininity, chastity, and marriage. The novel

successfully highlights the “Second Sex” status of women and their struggle to achieve ontological independence. However, the study notes a theoretical limitation: the narrative tends to adopt an existentialist feminist binary, often positioning men solely as aggressors and failing to explore the complex interdependencies between genders or offer structural socio-political solutions beyond individual or communal secession. Despite this, the novel remains a crucial turning point in Persian feminist literature, providing a powerful critique of the systemic erasure of female subjectivity.