

Representing Positive Image of African slaves in Persian Literature

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Abstract: Classic Persian Literature is full of negative images of former African slaves. *Simin Daneshvar*, as the first woman writer in Persian literature brought very positive image of African slave women in south of Iran and showed us their dilemmas and misfortunes.

Keywords: African- Iranian, Persian Literature, *Simin Daneshvar*

1. Introduction

In this paper I would like to represent the image of African slaves in short story written by the first women writer in Iran. Simin Daneshvar born on 1921 in Shiraz in south of Iran. In 1961, she published her second collection of short stories, *Shahri Chon Behesht* (translated as *A City Like Paradise*) that provides readers with rare and intimate scenes into the lives of very subordinated men and women. This collection is written due to the results and consequences after the CIA coup of Iran in 1953. Daneshvar fictions reflect simplicity and feature images of ordinary life, such as death and life, love and hatred. Some have even called her stories as the “true mirror of Iran society.”¹ She dives into the inner-parts of people lives and tells their stories – what goes on in their minds and hearts, in a new way unlike any authors. *The city like Paradise* presents the problems of social classes and races such as black slaves and Indian workers. It represents the situation of Persian Gulf around the Second World War and argues about the life of ordinary people in the time of occupation by British army.²

2. The Image of African Iranian in Persian Literature

Apart from slavery in old times of Iran, which is not our point of concern, the slaves in Qajar and Pahlavi era (around 19th and early 20th century) were bought from slave bazaars in Mecca and Iraq and were sold in Iran to aristocracy. The other way to bring slaves was from Persian Gulf to the southern beaches. They were brought from Sub-Saharan countries and east Africa called Zanj (Zang in Persian means Black). If men, they were called “kaka” and if women they were called ‘Dade’, or ‘kaniz’, which means maid. There were different kinds of slavery: war slavery, domestic slavery, and sex slavery. “Domestic slavery in Iran was of the kind familiar in the rest of the Islamic and middle east world at that time. Slaves were used as domestic servants and attendants, including in the women’s quarters or harem.” (Bosworth)³

The character of black nigger in Persian literature is not very rare and uncommon. Blacks were the most subordinated images in Persian literature, they called them “Asir (literally captive), Bandah (means captive too), Bardah (Slave), chakir (Drudge), Dadah (slaved maid), Parastandah (worshiper), Rahi (someone came from very distanced way), and Zarkharid (bought with gold).”⁴ The color of their skin emphasized their inferiority in a society. In Iran skin color is controversially racist, just because the fair white color of skin is one of the main marks of the true Arians. In Persian literature black is metaphor of unfortunate and the image of blacks is very negative in medieval Persian writings. ‘Siah Roo’ or the black face means

¹ S. Daneshvar, <<http://www.iranchamber.com>>.

² The Persian version of the book *A city Like Paradise* contains a short story with the same title. This story translated in English and with some selected stories of Simin Daneshvar published in a collection called: *Sutra and Other Stories*

³ Bosworth. C. E., "Barda and Barda- Dari iii. In Islamic period up to the Mongol," *ENCYCLOPEDIA IRANICA*, <<http://iranica.com>>.

⁴ Southgate Minoo, "The Negative Images of Black in Some Medieval Iranian Writings," *Iranian Studies* 17.1 (1984): 3-36.

someone who is dishonor, blatant and without zeal. The Persian word 'Zangi' means native of east Africa, or Zangbar (Zanzibar) in Persian 'Zangi' is metaphor of "uncivilized and stupid person"⁵ and Many times the blacks were called 'Zangi'.

What happened to the slaves in Iran is exactly the same that happened to the western countries. The descendant of former slaved who are known academically African- Iranian, but between people are known as Black- Iranian, have very rare chance to represent themselves. This study is kind of " Exploration by analyzing writing about African presence in spaces not conventionally considered within reach of African Diaspora(Lemon)⁶".

African- Iranian did not have the position and the power to represent themselves. They did not have the chance and opportunity of being Afro- American or Afro- French to use the language and power of their host country as device of empowerment. The provinces that former slaves were come from in Iran are one of the poorest parts of the country. As the 'poorest of poors', there is no such thing as slave narrative in Persian literature, nor there is even their word or existence as normal inhabitance of the reign.

In *the City Like Paradise* Simin Daneshvar for the first time, gave new and I believe positive, image of black slaves in Persian literature. *The city like paradise* is the narration of the very subordinate people of our society. "A city like Paradise" is the story of a black servant who works for a middle class family in the Shiraz of Daneshvar's childhood, her ill-treatment by various members of the family for whom she works, and her dreams about a past she has only heard about from her mother concerning life in Africa, a land like"⁷

Daneshvar went inside the Shiraz's houses and brought some unknown invisible realities to the story world. The name of *The City Like Paradise* is an irony to show the kind of hell they were living in. The story is about the dark life of a black nigger, Mehrangiz. Mehrangiz called 'Dade Siah' which means 'Black Negro girl'. Black servant tells her stories in form of bedtime stories to his master's children while they wanted to sleep. In addition the story not only shows the blacks but also the very tough and laborious life as "Others" in Iran at that particular time.

The stories of South of Iran are joining together with the unbearable situation of south of Iran is the place of binary oppositions with the imported modernity by British and at the same time very traditional costumes of slaves and Indian and local people which has been combined together. Literature of south is under the influence of the very hard, hot and humid atmosphere. Poverty, smuggling, fishing, sweating and sailing are the theme of this literature. The stories are combined with the situation of Persian Gulf, the foreigners in the area: British army, African, Indian and Arab labors. Literature of south has the theme of protesting against the foreigners and occupations in south of Iran. In the preface of the *City like Paradise* Daneshvar mentioned that this book is the memento of repression times and a conspectus of such society that I have lived in and experienced life. Most of its characters are actual people and I have met them personally.

What is important in this story is the deconstruction in Persian literature history. In Persian literature even the voice of Iranian women is unheard. They are subordinate and inferior characters of literature. Sometimes they play just the role of being beautiful mistress, good housewife or mother. This story went inside the house and let us to hear the story of slaves. Mehrangiz, the black girl of story, has her own wishes and dreams. She knows that over the seas there is a city like paradise that all black are from there. During the bedtime which she tell for her master's children she tell us that in her dreams she is waiting for people to come and make her free. Daneshvar shows the mistreat of master family with her and make a situation in which we heard her voice, her very hopeless situation, her dreams.

The problematic life of slaves within families is about sexual abuse, rape, poverty and difficult work conditions. The story unfolds all the events that may happen for 'Others' in host society. The very hopeful part of this story is that although the parents of family cannot accept the blacks as their family but the new

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Kesha Fikes and Alaina Lemon, "African Presence in Formern Soviet Spaces," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31 (2002): 497-524.

⁷ . Ghanoonparvar. M. R, "Surta and Other Stories, Simin Daneshvar, Trans Hassan Javadi and Amin Neshati," *Iranian Studies* 29.3/4 (1996): 376-377.

generation of children sees no difference between black Negro and the other member of the family. Daneshvar shows that the difference of colors step by step becomes less important and the sense of humanity grows among the people.

She abused sexually by the father of family and beaten by the mother of the family the very next day. "Mehrangiz Head was bruised and bleeding. Ali said, weeping, "Don't hit her I'm scared." But Mehrangiz was not crying." (63) ⁸Daneshvar opened out the hard time of the Negro girl, the way the women forced her to miscarry her child. "The bleeding did not stop...Mother picked up the water burner that stood by the pool and poured tobacco ash into the wound. She said, "You'll become a whore yet." Ali kept asking, "What's a whore?" Mother said, "I'll get a midwife." Ali said, "Housewife?" Mehrangiz burst into tears." (64)

Later, they accused her to have relation with Ali, the son who was like her own son. Daneshvar, in this story fights with stereotypes, preconception ideas about blacks and prejudiced images. The Negro girl in this story changes the readers mind. In Classic Persian literature "blacks are frequently pictured as ugly and distorted, intellectually inferior, remote from civilization, excessively merry, sexually unbridled, and easily affected by music and wine."⁹But Daneshvar brought the voiceless situation of silence subaltern black woman from the very inside of houses. Their hopeless instable position, disappointment to return to their own city, which is, like paradise and their inability to live as ordinary people.

She changed the image of blacks in literature. Showed them as victims of modernization. Daneshvar very wisely unfold the problem of abolition and banding of the slavery and the problematic interference of British in the region. The emancipation along with social and economical crisis of the time made a very uncertain and undecided situation both for masters who did not have the financial ability to feed another person in the house, and slaves who suddenly become free in society with no support and shelter. "Owners had been responsible for providing security, food and clothes considered autonomous, self-determining individuals. Thus, the notion of emancipation marked the beginning of an era characterized by absence of social protection, economic and psychological support." (Mirzai)¹⁰

For the first time a woman writer represented a positive image of African slaves in Persian literature. By positive image I mean she had the courage to show the African slave as victim who suffered by culture discrimination. Nowadays in south of Iran black- Iranian people are consider totally as Iranian. They live and work very normally and have their own ceremonies, costumes and languages. Their accent is a combination of Persian, English, Indian and African. Their ceremonies and tradition is also mix of these four poles. They have made their own multiple cultural: The African-Iranian culture of south of Iran. The descendent of former slaves now live as Iranian in south of Iran and their position as Iranian has been accepted in the society.

3. References

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⁸ Simin Daneshvar, *Sutra and Other Stories*, trans. Hasan Javadi and Amin Neshati (Washington D.C.: Mage Publishers, 1994).

⁹ Southgate Minoo, "The Negative Images of Black in Some Medieval Iranian Writings," *Iranian Studies* 17.1 (1984): 3-36.

¹⁰ Mirzai. Behnaz A. Brock University Canada , "Emancipation and its Legacy in Iran: An Overview," *UNESCO* (2008).