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## Voice in Contemporary Literary Work by Iranian Women

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### ABSTRACT

**ABSTRACT:** Voice in literary works is being one of the categories, which is connected to the narrator or the one who speaks in the text. This study is concerned to the issues of voice in contemporary literary works by Iranian women originally in English. The focus of the study is how the voice is presented in the text by Iranian women linked to the theory of feminist narratology by Lanser. This study show how Iranian women explore their voice through their text as their way to voice the voiceless or unspeakable issues in the society. This study will apply feminist narratology that the text is linked to the cultural and historical context. Specifically, the analyzing of the text is focused to gender, sexual, and sexuality in interpreting the text in receiving communities. This study applied qualitative description method. Data is collected from the contemporary literary works by Iranian women originally in English.

**KEYWORDS:** voice, narrator, Iranian women

### I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of voice in literary works is being one of the categories, beside character and characterization, in analysing how voice is presented in the text. Literature, which is somehow always a reflection of social, political, and religious conditions, is being the link of special interest to explore the voice. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Prince Herndl, in *An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism* (1997), announce that voice or literary voice is usually associated to the writers or narrative elements, which have minority background or represent the minorities that usually as the impact of social, political, cultural, or even religion issues. The term minority is usually specified to race, gender, sexual orientation, or/and group of community that has to live outside their own country out of political reason, or just immigrant. Those issues are explored in the text by presenting existing reality behind the stories past or present.

Since the tragedy of September 11<sup>th</sup>, Muslim societies as one of marginal societies, regardless their achievement in certain sectors, has attract international attention out of fear and curiosity. Not to say thank you to the tragedy, however the issue of terrorism attributed to Muslim societies increased the interest of the West to know more about their politics, religion, social, intellect movement, and women live. They studied all those aspects through social science, politics, religion, women's study, even literary works. It is not surprising then when literary works by Muslim women or using women live as the theme of the stories improved unprecedented degree. Their words are resonant like an urgency to answer all the questions and curiosity to come to voice. Book titles announce as a literary voice, viz., voice from another world, another voice, lost voice, emerging voice, hidden voice, veiled voice, or voice as a humanist (Lanser, 1992). Benefiting from this situation and following what the writers before them have been done, Iranian women also used literary media to convey their voice both in Iran and exile.

Preliminary studies in literary works by Iranian and authors from Muslim societies indicate gender issues gain central important, that women are being the target of the study. However, the study is focused to describe the lives of women in the given communities. Western were so eager to interpret all symbols and condition that related to women such as their veil, whether they were oppressed, were her rights greater before Islam? Are her rights greater after Islam? Does she have a voice? etc" (Malti-Douglas, 2019).

Without taking any consideration to the important of gender consciousness that sexual discourse is not similar to all societies. That was the failure of the West according to Douglas (2019; Ember, & Ember (2007); Ember & Ember, 2007). It is not surprising when so many critics to the plurality about women, mainly in “the rejection of universalism of any grand narrative that claim to have the ability to explain the whole world and to underline the importance of giving voice to marginalized entities” (Khorrami and Vatanabadi, 2000). Golley for example based on her study to Arabian women literary works stated that feminist discourse will be weak to be applied in the society where there is specific rule on freedom (Golley, 2010). Even some blaming the West for the universal image created for Muslim women. In her book, *Let Me Tell You Where I've Been*, Karim stated “the image of Iranian women as voiceless is created by the West, one of is America (Karim and Young, 2006). In her view, in the eyes of Americas in which their society had been transformed by the free speech movement, the civil right movement, and the sexual revolution, Iran seems “nothing short of otherworldly.” While Americans had already the effects of American feminism, Iran’s post-revolutionary Islamic identity was being rigidly defined by perception about women and their appropriate social and sexual conduct. While Iran expressed its post-revolutionary ideology in part through its policies toward women, Americans became fixated on the veil as an icon of the essential identity of Iranian women. While women in Iran were limited in their opportunities and in their ability to vocalize dissent, Americans too participated in their silencing by assuming that they had little or no agency and were uninvolved in dissent,” which agreed by Satrapi by claimed that Western’s view to the Iranian women is far from the truth (Satrapi, 2009).

Resisting to be trapped to the same perception, and believing women live varied from one to another in Muslim communities, writer is interested to expand the study on women voice from different approach. If previous study related to voice indicates that most study focused on the cultural marker of women, Lanser introduces new approach to study women voice combining narrative situation, gender, and receiving communities. The writer postulates that writing in English, Iranian women have certain agenda in their narrative. Language as the cultural marker of the audience means the narrative is projected for the English-speaking communities or international. Then back to the preliminary study writer believes, beside benefitting the freedom of expression in the West for the exile, universal judgement on Muslim societies, Iranian writers takes the advantage for the space for writing to plea their cases in literary works to tell their own story, as their way to counter the image they were described before. The question then how voice is presented in the text? The objective of this study is to see how voice is reflected in the text.

## **II. THEORETICAL REVIEW**

In narratology, voice is the term designating teller in the text, which is not associated to the author or non-narrating characters of narrative. Despite the critics by structuralist to the issue between teller and voice, however by Genette who introduced the term voice in 1972 in his book “*Discours du Récit*” that later published in English in 1980 under the title “*Narrative Discourse*”, stated that in the narrative, someone is telling us story, and inviting the reader to listen to that story as it is told (Genette, 1980; Genette, 1988). This teller is an agent created by the author who speaks out the word in the text subject, which is indicated linguistically, not person (Bal, 2004). Then this voice become the complex pieces due to the interrelationship of so many elements which create this voice, however, tracking to the followers of Genette as the one who played important role in the further development of narrative theory, voice is being a major element in the constructing of story (Dwivedi and Walsh, 2018). Despite the concept of voice is recognized as power by narratologists, that can represent the unspeakable concern from minority, however, feminist narratology has slightly different view, that voice is not merely about subject who is speaking in the text but more to ideological dimension of the texts in which voice is asserted by women centered point of view as an attempt to refuse patriarchal pressures.

The term feminist narratology was first coined in 1986 by Susan Sniader Lanser (Warhol, and Herndl, 1997; 1995). However, the approach of course was not grounded without predecessor, because it was based on her early work, *Narrative Act* in 1981 and some critics from others literary studies. According to Lanser, so far studying on women’s text is too limited that primarily devoted its attention to the literary history and the absence of the women writers from the literary canon as well as to the questions about the female characters in the text (Warhol, and Herndl, 1997; 1995; Wilcox, 1990); Berensmeyer, 2015) and also the depiction of

characters, i.e., especially the representation of female character, within plot, and with women writers' specific uses and modifications of genres (Herman, 2005); Allrath, 2005). What is neglected from their study is the formal aspect of the texts, and the questions concerning the construction of meaning by and through narrative form (Warhol and Lanser, 2015; Lanser, 1992; Warhol and Herndl, 1997). Susan Lanser, in *Narrative Act*, found out that gender was completely disregarded gender in the formalist study of narrative voice (Lanser, 1981). Then in structuralist study, neither, Price, nor Bal, or Susan Suleiman hint at the possibility of any gender-based differences of patterns among narrative structure (Warhol and Herndl, 1997; Page, 2006). In the narrative discourse analysis, neither Genette nor Suleiman say anything to rule out the possibility of considering the historical or ideological contexts (Page, 2006). If so, they look at the utterance of the narrator in the context in which they are literally produced, but nothing to the question on what part the writer's gender plays in the kind of interventions she uses in narrative. The issue of gender to be one narratological category is not counted in the designating canon or in formulating question and hypotheses in narratology (Warhol and Herndl, 1997). While, for feminist Narratology, gender is important to be integrated into narratological analysis both of the story's content and in the way on how the story is rendered in the discourse. Feminist narratology is interested both in the formal features of narratives and in their contexts of production and reception.

Arguing the miss of gendered implication of narrative strategies as the weaknesses of narratology, then Lanser develops her feminist narratology by taking gender as one of narratological categories to analyze how narrative forms express gender-specific and gender related experience. The focus of feminist narratology then to the interrelation between feminist issues and details of narrative techniques, i.e., formal aspect of narratives such as voice, and focalization, presentation of consciousness. In its framework, feminist narratology pays attention to aspects of form and content. Feminist narratology opens up new areas of research, which allow for literary means of expression to be linked up with their social and cultural context. Relating to narrative voice, Lanser offers a more elaborate feminist narratological reformulation of theories in *Fiction of Authority* (1992), in which she links the concept of voice and narrative authority (Lanser, 1992). Starting from the assumption that female voice is a site of ideological tension made visible in textual practice, Lanser then elaborates more Genette's voice category of person by introducing a typology of narrative voice to illustrate the close relationship between social identity and textual form, and on the level, she proposes the notion of private and public voices. She considers that those contexts are crucial and complicated one (Lanser, 1992), Lanser, 1981). For women, it is not about prohibition to write but prohibition to write for a public audience. Therefore aspects of private and public have greater significance in the construction of textual authority than narrative poetics has traditionally allowed [18].

### III. METHOD

The study used qualitative method (Hasyim, 1997; Saleh et al., 2021) with feminist narratological approach by Lanser (1981). Data was obtained from Iranian women literary works originally written in English as the source of primary data. Secondary data was collected from another reference. The data from was collected from textual element of voice: textual subjectivity, content matter, and pragmatic signal. Verbal storytelling, like speaking in general, took place in a communicative setting comprising a speaker and an audience (or, a bit more generally, in order to account for written communication as well, as addresser and an addressee).

### IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

**The Stationery Shop by Marjan Kamali:** First novel discussed in this part is written by Marjan Kamali, *Stationery Shop*. Kamali in her novel used heterodiegetic narrator or the one who speaks was not participant in the story. Heterodiegetic narrator is indicated by the subject reference of third person pronoun that unmarked the narrator in the story. Referring to the addressee of the story, pragmatic signal indicates there is no linguistic reference indicated specific addressee which means the readers are invited to equate the narrator with the author and the narratee with themselves. Based on the finding on narrative situation and the addressee then writer categorized the text presenting authorial voice. According to Lanser, in patriarchal society, women access to public discourse has been restricted, then since the heterodiegetic narrator does not need to be marked by sex, authorial mode allowed women access to male authority by separating "I" from the female body, it will be simply to grant female voice.

The Stationery shop begins by telling a dreamy and idealistic girl named Roya, protagonist, who was living in the political upheaval of 1953, Tehran. Roya and her sister as high school students were on track to get the best education a girl could get in 1953 Iran. Roya's favorite place in all of Tehran was the stationery shop which had stock with books and pens and bottle of jewel-colored ink. In that shop, Roya met handsome Bahman who had a burning passion for justice and loved for Rumi's poetry. Roya lost her heart at once and their romance blossomed. Short before their marriage, when they agreed to meet at the town square, suddenly there was a chaos of the coup d'état that lasted at Bahman disappeared without any explanations. More than half a century, Roya was haunted by the unsolved questions, when finally, she was led back to Bahman who offered her to find the answers: why did you leave? Where did you go? How is it that you were able to forget me?.

Writer impression when reading the book, Kamali is cleverly packed up her story that through Roya and Bahman point of view about Roya's feeling when Bahman disappearing unnoticed. Even though the story was set during the coup d'état 1953 when Bahman and Roya first met coincidentally with the election of Mossadegh as the Prime Minister (SS.: 11), however, author cleverly mentioned only common imagination such as demonstration but not too deep to historical background behind the political impetus. Rendering of the story revealed the one who lost the love was not just Roya who was finally after sixty-years had a chance find the answer of her unsolved questions, but Badra as well. However, author cleverly structured the plot to put the answer in private level in letter of Bahman to Roya. Readers later learned how woman through Badra could ruined the dream of the couple in getting marriage.

The author structured the story started from Roya when she told her husband her plan to meet the boy, she knew years back in Iran, Bahman, after sixty years, "she was seventy-seven and exhausted, just to find the answer of her unsolved questions (SS.: 9). Then the author took her readers to follow the political situation in 1953, to tell the history of Roya and Bahman relationship, their intimate letters hidden inside the books with the help of Mr. Fakhri when Bahman and his family suddenly disappeared sort after their engagement party (SS.: 88), then to the last breath of their marriage plan, when Bahman did not appear as agreed to meet her at Sepah Square coincidence to the chaotic situation of demonstration in coup d'état(SS.: 105). This moment was being the peak of the plot that described Roya and Bahman lost love, that Roya until years wondered why. The subtext of Victorian nuance in this story revealed through character Badra, Bahman mother, that to set her into respected social class she had to marry prestigious man. Badra was described as greedy, obsessive to social status, and materialistic (SS.: 74). Roya in Badra eyes did not suit to her sweet boy, then against the match, as she had another girl, Shahla (SS.: 68), regardless she attended the engagement party. It was implied in Chapter 14 and later in Bahman last letter to Roya, that Badra was the victim the society class that she lost her love even half of her life. There in chapter fourteen, the author leads the readers to follow the history of Ali that surprisingly being the key to understand the pragmatic meaning behind the Stationery shop. It was not just a memorial for Roya and Bahman, but also hidden place for untold story.

Mr. Fakhri known as Ali as well as his first name, was the lover of fourteen years old Badra years back in 1916, era of Qajar. Because of social status that Badra was coming from low social class, the melon seller's daughter, Ali's father against their relationship and set another plan for him out of financial, logical, and social reasons. The match between Ali and Atieh, his father's plan, considered would create more wealth. The author did not tell much about the social system in Qajar reign, but writer assumed in feudal tradition, usually family would take one into their family whom they considered coming from the same level. Finding out that Ali failed to defy his father, Badra, who was accidentally already bear his child in her belly, aborted the child, even blamed Ali as the cursed of her three other miscarriage she had after her marriage to an engineer, descendant of Royalty, and proudly announced to Ali how she lived her live in the upper-class area (SS.: 145). Her revenge to her past was not just that. Because Bahman was the only child survived that she set all her dreams on him, the history repeated to Roya by Badra. Badra who was denied for Ali by his father out of her family as dehati, or low level class, denied Roya for the same reason as Ali's father. Traumatizing by her past as peasant girl, she manipulated Ali's guilt to do what she wanted. She convinced him to use his calligraphy skills to edit Bahman letter to Roya so that they missed the planned meeting.

This was her way to advance her social position as planned by having Bahman marry the woman she wanted for him. For the writer, Badra's act as her self-fulfilment of her incompleteness, traumatized by her past of her society. The content matter indicates that Kamali's authorial voice implies her way to criticize the social class by revealing some secrets hidden in the shop. Kamali cleverly wraps up her authorial voice through the point of view of her characters and Iran historical moment of political situation. In structuring her narrative, Kamali attaches private letter of Bahman to Roya to cover the intimacy from Iranian society in narrated time. Referring to the receiving communities, finding such story such as abortion by Badra is considered taboo, however since the publication place allows such sexual discourse, Kamali has no problem in revealing something considered taboo. Back to Iranian society which is very strict in social interaction between female and male, such taboo story surely has to pass certain censorship, not because of male public authority but to social and cultural reasons for the content.

**Song of the Captive Bird By Jasmin Darznik :** The narrative in Jasmin Darznik's novel *Song of a Captive Bird* (2018) focuses on the narrator who explores her life and her view when she found the meaning of her body and the cultural value located on her body. At the very beginning of this narrative fiction, the narrator already appeared as the one who was responsible to speak about the events and situation. This narrator is the one we hear as we read the narrative text. The narrator is a female which is indicated by textual elements such as content matter from the first chapter, "It was the end of my girlhood, though I didn't know it yet" (ch.1). It also indicates that the narrative has homodiegetic narrator in which the narrator is also one of a story's acting characters (Booth, 1983, nuenning 2018). This homodiegetic narrator is telling a story that she has experienced by herself. Grammatical feature is indicated by "my girlhood" and "P" or first-person pronoun as the subject of the sentences. Referring to Genette, the narrator is also autodiegetic in which she is being the protagonist in the narrative. As Lanser mentions in such condition, the narrative is considered as personal narration. In certain receiving communities, called it as Iran, personal narration can be considered transgressing the limits of the acceptably feminine. The risk for the women writers is easily labeled immodest and narcissistic, and criticized for displaying either their virtues or their faults. The use of personal voice also risks reinforcing the convenient ideology of women's writing as self-expression, the product of intuitive rather than art (Lanser, 1992). Noting that voice means to be heard, it is also confirmed by the narrator that the addressee of the narrative is implied readers and readers, indicated by pragmatic signal you in the sentence, "[...] I can tell you now [...]." The addressing you takes the reader into the sense of the private conversation with the narrator, the sense of trust. Reading the narrative of the *Song of a Captive Bird*, we hear the narrator, Farough as narrator calls herself, who dominates the narrating. She is the one who gives access to other characters, but most of the text, she dominates the judgment with her subjective expression giving meaning to the events.

The story is written inspired by Forugh Farrokhzad, that author explores the narrative based on Forugh's verse, letters, films, and interview. Darznik admits her intention to write about this woman is to revive Forugh's spirit to empower woman. Image of Forugh implies the symbol of woman struggle to free herself from society and the rules preventing women to express themselves. Farough was the image of the victim of social and cultural value on women, in which she refused to bear. However, reading the narrative, the writer some ways understands that all characters are like captive birds, trying to conform to societal rules in a suppressed society and being challenged by each other, yet also finding comfort in the confines of what is acceptable. All characters are described as the victim of the social and cultural demand on them. Focusing the story on young Iranian girl who was forced to be respectable, traditional, female behavior: quiet, meek, pious, modest and tidy, which by far against her nature: stubborn, noisy, and brash (Ch., 3:13), Darznik started her story from the issue of women sexuality, virginal blood, by describing the process on how little Forugh the first time losing her virginal blood in the clinic forced by her mother just to be sure she was still virgin approved by certificate. In time of Reza Shah, who reformed Iran to be modern that women could have their freedom at least leaving their veil behind, Iranian people were still trapped to the traditional system to see women as second class. The contradiction was described through the father character. Even though he was Colonel of Military officer in Shah reign, however he was still traditional Iranian men who considered his women unequal as men. Traditional system that authority in the hand of men, he even behaved like King in the house that he just allowed to be called Colonel in the family instead of father, even his first name was unknown by Forugh until many years, even after she fled her

house (Ch. 2:3). Colonel was being the symbol of Shah rule: “strike first, show no mercy, and trust no one (Ch. 2:6).” Probably this was his way to show his power in his family and society. From the beginning, little Forugh already understood her situation from the way her father educated her and her brothers. Her male relatives had the freedom in pursuing education and knowledge, while she had only access to those world from behind the wall in which poetry was her interest. Cultural markers that experienced by women through the personal experience of Forugh, girls were strictly forbidden from showing to other male (Ch., 2:18), in which separated space was applied in the house between an andaroon, or women’s quarters, and a birooni, men’s quarters (Ch., 2:2). Public space was described as a turbulent and dangerous place for girls (Ch., 3:9). To his wife, Forugh’s mother could lift up her veil and wearing red lipstick, but she had no voice upon her children and even her house. In the presence of Colonel, she grew quiet, timid, and small. She did not so much as lift her eyes to him when she spoke (Ch. 3, 20). Forugh revealed her mother feeling indicated her unhappy marriage that what her mother could beg not just her needs to run the house but more to her husband attention and company.

Writer personal view at Forugh from different cultural perspective, Forugh is smart and knowing what she wanted. As little girl, she was aware of her situation and being able to question her right, either by trying to impress her father by writing poem or in her social behavior. Her rebellious, by abandoning and disgracing completely subjugation of women, secretly met young boy who shared the same interest in poetry and book ended up to the clinic downtown for virginal blood test out of her parents fear her misbehaved, and forced her to be teenager bride, at sixteen, to Parvis who she considered her true love, to resist what considered shame to the family. Again author attacked the Shah modernization attempt which is considered failed to modernize his people about women early marriage valued in cultural system. As for failing to show the virginal blood proven to groom family on the piece of handkerchief in the wedding night that determined the acceptance of the groom family implies dreadful destiny for women, as later found out as the cause of her unhappy marriage to Parvis (Ch., 5: 17).

Problematic issue as a married woman, when she was shipped off to Rural Ahwez, then marriage was described as a prisoner for women. Forugh found herself as a property of her husband and by extension his mother, who demanded her to be traditional wife that she refused to be. As a wife, Forugh was no allowed to have her own wish beside for the interest of her husband and family. This unhappy marriage situation that her husband was not the one who she thought would support her, she pursued her dream to be a writer which was something unacceptable to the family and society. Writing as her dream and feeling alone in her marriage made her even more provoked to become writer and later success in making name for herself. Heroic act that Forugh did to release herself from her subjugation in her marriage and making her own name was bravely giving up her marriage at all cost: her right to her son, her family and the stigma of divorced woman. She proved what she ever vowed to herself: “I’d never beg anyone for anything (Ch., 3: 17).” Farough was the image of the victim of social and cultural value on women, in which she refused to bear.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

Referring to the time and place of narrating, Iranian women writers have no problem to voice their concern related to the receiving communities. There is no gender issue even if their narrator is marked as female. They have freedom of expression and attention because of political issue attributed to Muslim societies. The voice of Iranian can be considered silent voice, that waiting their chance to speak later.

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