SIMIN DANESHVAR

SAVUSHUN

A NOVEL ABOUT MODERN IRAN

Translated from the Persian by

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Introduction by

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INTRODUCTION

FIRST PUBLISHED in 1969, Simin Daneshvar's *Savushun* has gone through sixteen printings and sold half a million copies—a record for a work of literature in modern Iran. The reason is not obscure. Daneshvar's style is sensitive and imaginative. Her story follows basic cultural themes and metaphors. It goes straight to the hearts of a generation of Iranian readers, striking special chords of emotion and memory of the recent past.

Savushun enriches a generation's understanding of itself. It encapsulates the experience of Iranians who have lived through the midcentury decades which led up to the 1979 revolution. They feel immediate identity with the major characters, each of whom struggles in their own day-to-day lives with the social and historical forces that gave prerevolutionary Iran its characteristic hopelessness and emerging des-

peration—so inadequately understood by outsiders.

The work of translation is long overdue, but may in fact be more successful with Western readers now than earlier. In the 1970s we were too confident in our outsider's view of Iran to appreciate its full significance. The revolution shattered that view and brought home to us the extent of our outsiderness. Iran today seems incomprehensible to outsiders. This novel helps us to reconstitute our earlier view, to rebuild our dialogue, and to trace the historical and cultural continuity through the 1979 revolution into the present.

The translation of such a novel into English presents special problems. If it means so much to Iranians, will the Western reader understand it? Should we expect that any novel could convey a single package of meaning to two culturally distinct readerships—especially when it deals with historical events and interests that have recently separated them? Though the work of translation was unusually challenging, I think its success is facilitated, perhaps even ensured, by the humanity of Daneshvar's central characters. This humanity shows irrepressibly through several passages that are not otherwise directly translatable from one cultural discourse to the other. Although the lives in the novel are so obviously different from Western lives, as non-Iranians we also can relate to them immediately and unconsciously—to the underlying human nature we share with them, and which the author so sensitively develops in the course of her story.

Most of the action takes place in a middle class, land-owning household in the town of Shiraz in southern Iran. The events as they unfold are seen through the eyes of the young wife and mother, Zari, whose first concerns, whether unconsciously or consciously, are her children, her husband and the security of her family and household. Much of what she does not experience herself is narrated to her by visitors

participating in family situations. The centrality of the life of the family and of Zari within it is a major factor in the book's appeal. Using the household as a stage, the author weaves a narrative of steadily increasing complexity, involving a variety of situations and personalities that work through the gamut of Iranian collective concerns. The household includes Zari's maturing son, her twin daughters, her widowed sister-in-law, and devoted servants. Her principled husband spends extended periods away in their village. Frequent visitors to the household include her ambitious brother-in-law and headstrong tribal leaders who are in rebellion against the government. Other significant characters include the governor and his family, officers and policemen, and the British (including Scottish officers and an Irish correspondent). But the essential field of action is Zari's evolving sense of herself and her vacillation between her fears for herself and her family and her respect for her husband's ideals. She works these out in her personal experience of childbirth and charitable work in a mental hospital and through participation in weddings and contact with disease. The narrative is developed within basic Iranian paradigms of womanhood and married life. Each character plays out the role that is inherent in their personalities. Even divorced from its essential historical context this makes for an unusually good novel. But understood in its context it is a unique piece of literature that easily transcends the boundaries of the historical community in which it was written.

Nevertheless, the more we know about the historical web in which these characters live—which is an integral part of the consciousness of the Iranian reader, but alien or unknown to us—the better we shall be able to appreciate the novel. The major strands of this web are the interests, privilege and influence of foreign powers, corruption, incompetence and arrogance of persons in authority, whether in national and

local government, the army or the police, the paternalistic landowner-peasant relationship, tribalism, the fear of famine, and the intellectual appeal of Soviet-inspired communism as a way to escape from hopelessness. Other important strands include the implications of the author's choice of location in and around Shiraz during the Second World War, opium addiction and the interplay of Islamic and pre-Islamic ideas and rituals.

The story's main concern are the years between 1941 and 1945. Iran had been occupied by the British and the Soviets, joined later (in 1945) by the Americans, because it sat astride the supply lines from India and the Middle East to the Soviet Union. The Allies considered the occupation necessary because they could not afford to allow the possibility of German activity in the area. Many influential Iranians were ready to collaborate with the Germans in order to counteract the suffocating dominance of British and Russian interests that had become a fact of life.

The Russian expansion through the Caucasus over the past hundred years had become a threat to Iranian interests towards the end of the eighteenth century under Catherine the Great. Later, in 1828, the Treaty of Turkmanchai set the tone for the next 150 years by forcing Iran to cede most of her Caucasian territory and to grant extra-territorial rights to Russians on Persian soil. Meanwhile, the British were anticipating the extension of Russian interests towards India and from the beginning of the nineteenth century actively sought to dominate Persian foreign policy and to influence the Persian economy. Since then competition between Russia and Britain (since 1947, between the Soviet Union and America) has dominated Iranian political life. All the modern borders of Iran were drawn by Russian and British teams during the nineteenth century, with only minor revisions since. In

1907 Britain and Russia concluded an agreement whereby they avoided direct competition with each other by dividing Iran into zones of influence for the purpose of commercial development. This caused outrage in Iran, although it made little difference to the existing state of affairs.

In 1941 Britain occupied the south while the Soviets occupied the north. Reza Shah Pahlavi, who since 1925 had achieved a measure of success in extricating the country from its economic and political dependence, was forced to abdicate in favor of his son (who reigned until 1979). From 1941 to 1945 Iran was reduced to the most abject state of dependence of its modern history—while still nominally retaining its own independent government under the young Shah. The occupying powers subordinated everything to the economic and political objectives of supplying the eastern front and winning the war, with disastrous results for Iran's small economy. The worst of the results was widespread famine, especially in 1942–1943, triggered by a poor harvest the previous year. Existing extremes of poverty were exacerbated, disease rates increased, and typhus became a chronic problem. Corruption, incompetence and arrogance characterized almost anyone in authority, in national and local government, the army and the police. The influence of the occupying powers had a Christian-religious extension in the south, and a communist-ideological extension in the north, both of which were socially disruptive. In particular, the Soviet presence encouraged the formation and development of the Party of the Mass *(Tudeh)*, a political party which found appeal among middle class urban intellectuals. All of these factors are significant in the novel.

Apart from these results of external influence, the author makes excellent use of purely internal factors. The southern town of Shiraz, which provides the setting for the story, is more than any other town

central to Iranian historical identity. It evokes images of shrines and Sufis, of the tombs of the great poets, of Persepolis and the great monuments of pre-Islamic Iran, and, in the hinterland, of the nomadic tribes. It is not easy to convey in a few sentences the significance of tribalism in the Iranian consciousness. Iranian writing has exaggerated the fear and dislike of the city dweller for the "uncivilized." This is somewhat overcompensated for by the work of anthropologists, who have provided monographs on particular aspects of the tribal experience, but none summarizing the significance of this other way of living for the society as a whole. Historically the tribes have represented the spontaneous organization of populations that were not controlled by any central or urban government. When the government was weak tribes often terrorized the countryside. In the early part of this century tribal leaders played a significant role at the national level. However, since they are essentially the antithesis of strong government, Reza Shah made a special point of bringing them under control. He did this by depriving them of their economic resources, and by forcing them to settle. On his abdication the leaders escaped and within weeks the tribesmen were back on the migration trail. The Qashqa'i confederacy, which was the most powerful in the Shiraz area, was pro-German and kept a German military adviser for a while until they found that he could not deliver the arms they wanted. There was sporadic fighting throughout the period of the Allied occupation. All this is there in the novel.

Against this background—corruption, disease, famine, insecurity, and foreign dominance—provincial life continues. Everyone works out their own day-to-day lives. The demoralization is evident in the exploitation of any position of power, by the governor and his family, by petty officials, in the arrogance and incompetence of army officers

and of the paramilitary gendarmerie. Socialist ideas provide hope for the young. Opium offers an option for the old. But Zari's husband, Yusof, who is the hero of the work, displays a calm, responsible, human decency. He is accused of idealism, but is never fanatical. He is a landowner but treats his peasants fairly and with no more paternalism than is inherent in the system. He is frustrated by the indecency and injustice around him, but he stands firm against the time-serving maneuvers of his brother and others, who see no point in making things worse for themselves for the sake of abstract principles and with no prospect of any return.

Savushun, the title of the novel, is a folk tradition, surviving in southern Iran from an undatable pre-Islamic past, that conjures hope, in spite of everything. It is evoked in some detail in the final pages—a metaphor for the flame of idealism against a backdrop of hopelessness and helplessness, a basic metaphor that is found in many traditions, religious and secular. In Iran over the centuries it has become entangled with the Shi'a Muslim passion of Hoseyn, the Prophet's grandson, and the tragedy of Karbala. It suggests the transformation of hopelessness into salvation. This is the essence of Iran, with no compromises, in a novel of universal appeal.

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