The Dynamics of Resistance: Moral Concepts in Sīmīn Dāneshvar’s Sūvashūn

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The centuries long history of foreign interference into the internal affairs of colonies may be perceived as a continuous struggle to keep honour and dignity in the face of dominative external powers.2 Iran never

1Moulana Jalaloddin Rumi, Maṣnavī Māʿnavī (Tehran: Enteshārāt-i Hermes, 1386), 8 (own translation). These verses appear within the opening story of Rumi’s Maṣnavī Māʿnavī. It is about a king who fell in love with a slave girl and seeks a cure for his beloved sickness. Devoid of hope, he is brought to the mosque where he prays for God’s help. Eventually, in a sleep he acknowledges that his prayers were heard and the cure will be brought by God’s messenger the next day. When the king sees the messenger, he realizes that the one he is in love with is not the slave girl but the newcomer. In Sūvashūn, Sīmīn Dāneshvar quotes these verses with some minor modifications. Sīmīn Dāneshvar, Sūvashūn (Tehrān: Enteshārāt-i Khawārezmī, 18th ed., 1380/2001), 177.

2Nonetheless, Francis Fukuyama seemed convinced that Muslim societies failed to maintain dignity vis-a-vis the non-Muslim West; see The End of History and the Last Man (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 236.

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gained the status of a full colony, yet it has been exposed to imperial—mainly British, Russian, but also German, and later American—penetration and influence for a long time. As a country with a so-called semi-colonial status, and geographic location as a buffer state, Iran’s independence was entangled in the interests of foreigners through politics, trade and economic influence. Although Iranian relations with the various empires were not straightforward, the country has been marked by the policy of supremacy, which influenced the Persian collective consciousness, shaping Iranian political and social life. Therefore, Iranians, as repeatedly shown by Hamid Dabashi, have developed their own national ideology of resistance, as they perceived the political, economic but also cultural supremacy as a serious threat to their “self.”

The occupation of Iran by the Allied forces during the 2nd World War was one of many events that significantly affected the lives of Iranians and prompted them, consciously or not, to reconsider their own attitude toward foreign dominance. Despite the country’s plea of neutrality, and due to Reza Shah’s sympathy for Germany among other reasons, Iran was invaded and its sovereignty impaired. The occupation was a serious blow to a country which, at that time, was already struggling with many internal problems such as hunger, poverty, poor health care, as well as increasing animosity between central government and local tribes. These are the events that constitute the background of the story told in one of the most interesting modern Iranian novels—Sūvashūn by Sīmīn Dāneshvar. The author sets the action of the book in south-
ern Iran, in her hometown of Shiraz which was under British occupation. She narrates the story of a middle-class landowning family who try to conduct its everyday affairs in spite of the foreign presence and the turmoil and pressure this brings for the local community. The plot begins with Yūsūf’s—the main male protagonist—resistance to sell his crops to the British contingent and his decision to distribute it among local peasants. Criticized by his own brother, Abolqāsem Khān (Khān Kākā) but encouraged by Qashgai nomad leaders, Rostam and Sohrāb, he stands firmly by his decision, which eventually leads to his assassination. The main heroine of the novel, its narrator, Zarī, who is Yūsūf’s wife, though initially reluctant to openly oppose the British and the corrupt Iranian local authorities, with time becomes more and more determined to support her husband’s stance and does so in her own way.

Initially, the question of resistance, so widely discussed within postcolonial studies in relation to African or Arab countries did not find a very broad application to the Iranian semi-colonial experience. The situation has changed with the beginning of the 21st century which witnessed an increased interest in Iranian postcolonial contexts, both within national and foreign institutions.6 New research perspectives have opened

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for scholars willing to investigate Iranian reality in various domains – its history, politics, intellectual thought, but also its literary creativity. Reading Sīmīn DāneshVAR’s *Sūvashūn* within this perspective should not therefore come as a surprise as the book directly refers to the Iranian semi-colonial experience and its impact on the Iranian psyche. In Iran, the novel still remains one of the best-selling titles with over a dozen editions and over half a million copies sold. Its publication in 1969 was considered an important event on the literary scene that marked the introduction of a new perspective in modern Iranian fiction. By elaborating on the Iranian hardship of wartime occupation Dāneshvar managed to introduce expressive characters who, as noticed by Ḥasan Abedīnī, were “so distinctive that each of them embody morality and action of (different) social group.” Dāneshvar concentrated the action of her story around one house, which as Mohammad Ali Sepanlū believes represents the whole of Iran on the metaphorical level, with Zarī as a symbol of a woman in general, and Yūsūf standing for the country’s intellectual elite. Therefore, though limited to a space of a house, *Sūvashūn* resembles and represents the whole country and its society with its characteristic features which, as underlined by Jaʿfari Jazi, turns the novel into a coded political and historical narrative. Dāneshvar protagonists struggle and resist the foreign abuse, but their most difficult fight takes place in the confines of their moral imagination which was formed and moulded by prolific ethical patterns of the Persianate culture. Furthermore, as observed by Anna Krasnowolska, the novel

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6 Ḥasan Abedīnī, *Sad sāl dāstānnevīsī dar Irān*, vol.2 (Tehran: Tondar 1369), 76.
8 Abedīnī, *Sad sāl dāstānnevīsī dar Irān*, 76.
10 Jaʿfari Jazi, *Sūvashūn, Encyclopædia Iranica*.
played an important role in shaping attitudes of the whole generation of its readers before the Revolution. This also makes the book a good source material for the study of ethical motivations and the implications of this struggle.

Treating the story as a testimony of different attitudes toward foreign dominance among Iranian society, this study refers to two main research trends. It is based on an inquiry into the legacy of foreign dominance in Iran, while also attempting to reconstruct the anatomy and dynamics of Iranian resistance to this dominance. It therefore appeals to Iranian culture and its ethical concepts which Dāneshvar employs in her narrative.

The study begins with a close reading of the novel with a special interest directed toward the manifestations of characters’ objection to the socio-political reality. By analyzing the narrative, it will be argued that for the main protagonists of the book, the delicate question of nāmūs (honour), fear of a lack of mardānegī (manhood) and struggle to keep āberū (good reputation and esteem) and avoid sharm (shame) are the main motivational forces of actions. Firstly, however, it will be demonstrated how the political, economic and cultural influence of the British permeates the material and spiritual life of the Iranians in the story, in many occasions violating their sense of self-esteem, dignity, honour, reputation, social image and pride (in this article collectively referred to as āberū). Next, the study will focus on the two main protagonists of the book—Yūsūf and Zarī—and their response to the violation of their family, countrymen and homeland. In this section, it will be demonstrated how the behaviour of the protagonist can be understood through the above-mentioned moral concepts.

**Material and Metaphysical in Sūvashūn**

The presence of the occupant army on Iranian soil portrayed in Sūvashūn has consequences for its characters first and foremost in terms of material space, which has been captured and dominated in a physical sense.

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The physical or material presence of British troops and their interests affects the lives of the Shirazians on a day-to-day basis, as the army’s need for food products and infrastructure grows. The axis of the events told by Dāneshvar is built around this very thread. However, the presence of the British in the narrative is often invisible, as their behaviour is attributed to those Iranians who accept or favour them. It is also symbolic, as it seems to mark not only the events of the Allied occupation of Iran during the 2nd World War, but signifies the entire foreign influence during which the world’s empires entered Iranian areas and obtained comprehensive rights to the country’s natural deposits. Foreign physical and material domination over Iranian native space has already been suggestively portrayed in one of the first scenes of the novel. During a party held at the British headquarters, three characters—Zarī, Yūsūf, and Abolqāsem Khān—look at a map of Iran spread over one of the tables by the tent. The map is covered with colourful signs which prompts Yūsūf to say, “They have really chopped it up.” The feeling of physical dominance of the British grows in Yūsūf as the action develops. It is also mainly he, whose—according to Kamran Talattof—“anti-colonialists position reflects the national aspirations of that time,” who directly opposes the presence of foreign troops. In conversation with a friend, Malek Sohrāb, leader of the Qashgai nomads, Yūsūf regrets: “We khans have always had the best gardens in the cities, which are now the headquarters for the foreign troops, the best houses…”

The foreign interference into Iranian material space is also accompanied by changes that take place in the image of the city and its inhabitants. As Yūsūf’s sister, Khānūm Fātemeh says: “The city has gone to the dogs.” The complaints of an old woman expresses the grief of the

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13In most cases I quote M.R. Ghanoonparvar’s translation of the Persian text. Only in a few instances did I decide to give my own translation. In the footnotes, the location of both versions, original Persian and English are given, unless the footnote refers only to the Persian text. Sīmīn Dāneshvar, Sūvashūn, 34; Sīmīn Dāneshvar, Savushun: A Novel about Modern Iran, trans. M.R. Ghanoonparvar (Washington, D.C.: Mage Publishers, 1991), 48.
15Dāneshvar, Sūvashūn, 53; Ghanoonparvar, Savushun, 66.
16Dāneshvar, Sūvashūn, 57; Ghanoonparvar, 70.
lost tranquility of peaceful existence, a state prior to occupation. It is not only she who sees the changes that take place in the city due to British presence. The presence of Allied troops turns the town into a graveyard. As Yūsūf notices, “the most thriving part of the city is the Mordestān District.” 17 What he calls the “district of the dead” was in fact the north part of an old Shiraz, also named mahall-i darb-i shāhzādeh (the prince gate district). In the novel, it is inhabited mostly by prostitutes. 18 By accusing British of sending the Indian soldiers to them, Yūsūf points to the foreigners as those responsible for the situation, treating Indians as a submissive and passive element. As for women serving them, this seems to be even more humiliating for Yūsūf than the occupation itself.

The interference into material space manifests itself, in a sense, also in the field of technical progress that Iran witnessed due to British activity. Though Yūsūf sees the benefit of this growth, he treats it with sarcasm:

The situations here is such that the best school is the British school, the best hospital the missionary hospital. And when they want to learn embroidery, it is on a Singer sewing machine, the salesman for which is Zinger. 20

A similar frustration can be observed in Sohrāb’s words when he complains about the government that: “They built a few mud houses in places where there was no water and said, ‘Go live in them.’” 21

However, it is not the changes brought by foreigners, or caused by contact with the West such as the introduction of modern medicine or modern education into the lives of Iranians that are criticized by Western-educated Yūsūf. In trying to help little Kolū, the orphaned son of one of his shepherds, he intends to keep him in town and send him to school so that he might become a man (ādam) and be civilized. 22 Nor does

17Dāneshvar, Sīvashūn, 18; Ghanoonparvar, 33.
18Dāneshvar, Sīvashūn, 18; Ghanoonparvar, 34.
19Dāneshvar, Sīvashūn, 18–19; Ghanoonparvar, 34.
20Dāneshvar, Sīvashūn, 127–128; Ghanoonparvar, 140.
21Dāneshvar, Sīvashūn, 47; Ghanoonparvar, 60
22Dāneshvar, Sīvashūn, 145; Dāneshvar, 157.
modernization raise much opposition from the other characters of the novel who, like Zari for example, enjoy the benefits of Western-educated doctors. It is the interference into the non-material sphere of the lives of the Shirazians that causes frustration to Yusuf and others like him.

According to Partha Chatterjee, a postcolonial theorist, this is exactly the metaphysical or, as he calls it, the spiritual domain whose violation raised objection among colonialized societies. While what is perceived as material constitutes the “outside” space where “the West has proved its superiority and the East had succumbed,” and where this superiority has been accepted, as Chatterjee states, the “inner” domain, the locus of cultural identity becomes an area of resistance. Chatterjee concludes that, “the colonial state, in other words is kept out of the ‘inner’ domain of national culture (…)”. It is obvious therefore that any attempt to cross the borders of this sphere will be perceived as an act of violation of what is considered as dignified, precious and even sacred. This aspect of postcolonial theory has been already applied to analyze Dānehshvar’s writings by Razi Ahmad who studied the material and spiritual domains of colonial reality and its ideological use by the author. The perspective indicated by Chatterjee turns out to be also of some significance for contemporary study.

The division into material and spiritual domains proposed by the scholar to some extent overlaps the Iranian perception of the world as reviling itself in two aspects— “outer” (ẓāher) and “inner” (bāṭen), which by William Beeman has been considered a fundamental cognitive dimension in Iranian social life. Ẓāher aspect of reality constitutes what is obvious and easily accessible. It also functions as a veil or a cover for what

is located inside, what is hidden. Zāher therefore acts as a barrier against what comes from the external world, and at the same time protects the inner reality (bāṭen) against the defilement that it brings. This dual perspective is born out of the belief (present in Quranic exegesis, mystical philosophy and Iranian Sufism) that what is real and valuable is always hidden, and never exposed. This optic also works well with respect to human existence. It allows the constitution of the human “self” to be perceived as dual, with both zāher and bāṭen dimension. While bāṭen space is the locus of man’s soul, his inner ego and personality (shakhṣīyat), zāher reality constitutes the outer layer, the external shell that covers and separates it from dangers of the outside world. As accurately noticed by Hamid Naficy, “the constitution of the self as dual . . . necessitates an internal boundary, however amorphous and porous, which is encoded in the psyche as a veil or a screen. . . . this veil protects the core from contamination from the outside . . . ”. Following Persian concepts of zāher and bāṭen it can be indicated that in Iranian context, the safety of what Chatterjee refers to as the spiritual, inner domain of human existence, and what in Persian context can be called bāṭen, very much depends on keeping the external protective layer (zāher) intact.

Moral Concepts

In traditional Iranian culture, in personal and social life, one is expected to use various veils that are physical such as a woman’s ḥejāb, spatial, like the architectonical house division into andarūnī and bīrūnī, and perhaps the non-material such as the strategic behaviour of taʿārof to keep the bāṭen sphere, man’s inner personality (shakhṣīyat) untouched. This idea is perfectly manifested in a popular Persian proverb “zāheretān rā ḥefż konīd,” that is, “keep your appearance intact,” “save your outward, external image.” In Persian culture, this indicates the imperative to preserve one’s āberū—that is, good reputation, status, image (by some scholars believed to be an Iranian equivalent of

27See Beeman, Language, Status and Power in Iran, 11.
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“face”), and in some contexts, honour, pride and respect in the eyes of the others. The veil of āberū (pardah-ī āberū) as sometimes referred to in Persian, may therefore be considered one of the veils that help to protect the inner (bāṭen) sphere of human existence. Its violation, which may happen for various reasons, could be imagined as an act of tearing the veil (pardedārī), which results in exposing a person’s self to public criticism. This perspective is also manifested in the language in popular phrases like āberūsh rīkhteh/rafteh (his/her āberū dropped/is gone) or darīdeh shodeh (has been torn). Therefore, the violation of a person’s zāher, i.e. one’s āberū which stands for good social image and reputation, may lead to the infringement of one’s shakhṣiyat and one’s inner self. This claim finds confirmation, among others, in the words of Ayatollah Ḥoseyn Alī Montazerī who saw man as a possessor of a material, physical life (hayāt-i māddī) but also a spiritual life (hayāt-i ma’navī) which manifests itself inter alia in a social identity (shakhṣiyat-i ejtemāī). Montazerī claimed that man’s personality depends on āberū and ettebār; that is, a positive social image and credibility to which a person is entitled to, just as he is entitled to an innate dignity (kerāmat). Hence, āberū understood as an outer veil, a shield to be used in social interactions, can be seen as a keeper of the locus of one’s real “ego.” Its violation may therefore endanger one’s “self” located within bāṭen.

That is way in traditional culture, keeping āberū, a good social image and reputation was considered crucial for the stability of human shakhṣiyat, as it translated itself directly into one’s prosperity in private and public life. It was considered a condition for successful and fruitful personal, social, economic and political relations as well as the exis-


31Such a perspective is clearly visible in Shi’a religious narratives.
tence of the nation. Destroying someone’s public status and underm-
ing his or her social position resulted in the loss of respect and regard
from other people which could lead to exclusion from the community.
That is why, under some conditions, it used to be perceived as more
valuable than someone’s property or life.32

The loss of āberū could happen as a result of a disclosure of someone’s
weaknesses, imperfections and sins—that is, everything that fits with-
in the semantic field of the Arabic-rooted word eyb. In the moral con-
text, eyb may also stand for everything that was considered shameful.
Therefore āberū—one’s good name, good image and reputation which
ensure a stable social position and indicates a sense of honour and
respect—might be destroyed by exposing anything that is considered
against accepted social or moral norms. This directly connects it to the
dichotomy of bāṭen o ẓāher, because as rightly observed by Saīd Mo-
hammad Ḥoseynī and his colleagues, āberū might be destroyed when
something that belongs to the inner (darūn) sphere of human existence
penetrated into the outer (birūn) world.33

From ẓāher to bāṭen

If we now turn to the source material and apply this perspective in our
analysis we may notice that, indeed, the protagonists of the book are
already disturbed by many attempts to violate what belongs to the ẓāher
sphere of their existence. What frustrates Yūsūf are deeds and attitudes
that violate public image and social status of Iranian people— their
āberū. This can be observed in how Yūsūf speaks of prostitutes who
sell their bodies to Indian soldiers, doroshky drivers who are on call
for British officials and traders who, by learning a few English words
and doing business, legitimize the occupant’s presence in Iran. This ir-
ritates him, as he is convinced that already in this outer social level,
the British have entangled the Iranians into a spiral of dependency and

subjugation. In one of the conversations Yūsūf says: “What I despise is the feeling of inferiority which has been instilled in all of you.”34 In his opinion, by initiating technical and intellectual development, by establishing schools and organizing hospitals throughout the years, foreigners had turned the people into servants and given them very little in exchange. What is it worth, he says, that “the doroshky drivers, whores, and dealers have learned a few words of English.”35

However, this is just a symbolic scratch on the surface, as Dāneshvar provides the reader with more vivid examples of how Iranians’ āberū has been targeted by foreign powers or their collaborators. Some of the examples might even reflect the author’s own experience. Sūvashūn’s female protagonist, Zarī, just like Dāneshvar, received a missionary school education herself. That is how she recalls it:

In that same British school, you are right, the headmistress kept humiliating us in order to civilize us, to teach us manners and how to live. Zinger kept making us feel indebted to him because he was teaching us sewing so we would be able to make a living on our own. Khanum Hakim would say our recovery and cure was in her hands, but I knew in the bottom of my heart that they were only telling half the truth and that there was always something rotten somewhere. I knew that we were, all of us, constantly losing something, but we didn’t know what it was.36

The last sentence articulated by the female character carries perhaps the most important message here. What Zarī and her classmate felt was that they were losing their dignity. By undermining the girls’ self-esteem and revealing their helplessness in life, their āberū was impaired. Zarī recalls two other events in which the girl’s personal pride was targeted. While she was still grieving after her father’s death, she was made to wear a white blouse during an official visitation at school. Her friend, Mehrī in turn, was ordered to break her fast and was forced to drink water given

34Dāneshvar, Sūvashūn, 16; Ghanoonparvar, Sūvashūn, 31.
35Dāneshvar, Sūvashūn, 18; Ghanoonparvar, 34.
36Dāneshvar, Sūvashūn, 129; Ghanoonparvar, 141–142.
by the teacher. As we learn from the above narrative, Iranian customs and rituals were frequently referred to as superstitions at the school. Notwithstanding, perhaps the most symbolic, albeit peripheral, example of British behaviour toward the Iranians is portrayed during a party at the British headquarters where in the presence of Iranian guests, pork was served for dinner. The act, though of marginal importance for the novel’s plot, it symbolizes the lack of respect for Iranian customs and religious principles.

However, perhaps the strongest massage in this regard belongs to Yusuf who, while addressing his Irish friend, a journalist and war correspondent, the only foreigner in the story who clearly feels any discomfort regarding the occupation (due to the British policy toward Ireland), states: “Yes friend, the people of this city are born poets, but you have stifled their poetry.” With these words Yusuf accuses the British of depriving the Shirazians of their right to poetry—the Shirazians, the proud descendants of such poets as Sa’di and Hafez. Reciting poetry in this case is not only portrayed as an artistic activity hindered during the turbulent times of war when the native inhabitants of the city must not only deal with their own troubles but also meet the expectations of the occupant. Reciting poetry is addressed as a way of life, the way in which Iranians praise their heroes, build their good name, their dignity and national pride, construct their identity as well as strengthen their āberū in the eyes of the world. As Yusuf says: “You have emasculated their heroes. You haven’t even left them with the possibility of struggle so that they can write an epic and sign a battle cry. (…) You have made a land devoid of heroes,” and so, Iranians “suffer the consequences without having tasted heroism or honorable defeat.”

Taking away the reason to recite poetry deprived Iranians of an essential element of their personality, it undermined their position as nation and—to use postcolonial terminology—made them an object of a history.

The Struggle to Save āberū

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37 Dāneshvar, Sīvashān, 18; Ghanoonparvar, 33.
38 Dāneshvar, Sīvashān, 18; Ghanoonparvar, 33.
39 Dāneshvar, Sīvashān, 34; Ghanoonparvar, 49.
Though rarely articulated by any of the protagonists, the value of āberū seems to permeate the story in many ways. In its broad meaning—understood as personal reputation, self-esteem, good social image, and national pride—it is crucial for the dynamics of the resistance offered by Dāneshvar’s characters. Interestingly, this claim may also be strengthened by the parallel to the story of Sīyāvash, already highlighted in the novel’s title. The term Šūvashūn refers to the folk ritual commemorating the death of an old Iranian hero. In Iranian culture, Sīyāvash symbolizes innocence; however, based on the narrative of Shāhnāmeh, his life story indicates that many actions he undertook were motivated by the desire to regain his strained āberū—lost reputation and respect in the eyes of his father and the people of Iran. Slandered by his stepmother Sūdabeh, Sīyāvash decides to embark on a trail of fire to prove his innocence. Unfortunately, he is unable to fully regain his good name, previous position and respectability in the court. Rejected by his father, he leaves his home country and seeks shelter with Iran’s greatest enemy, Tūrān, where he is eventually killed by an old enemy of Iran—Afrāsyāb. The resemblance of Yūsūf’s story to the narrative of martyrdom of imam Ḩoseyn, invoked by many scholars, may also serve as an evidence here. In Shi’a Islam, what the third imam did to defend his religious claims is commonly considered to be an act of ḥefz-e āberū (act of saving good name and reputation). As argued by Ayatollah Javadi Amoli, one of the contemporary Iranian religious scholars, with his own blood, “seyyed ash-shahada granted āberū to religion and mankind (…).”

Yūsūf

The danger of losing āberū became an important motivation for Yūsūf’s behavior. It can be observed, for example, in his conversation with Khān Kākā when the protagonist gives vent to his emotions: “In the blink of an eye, they make you all their dealers, errand boys, and interpreters. At least let one person stand up to them so they think to themselves, ‘Well, at last, we’ve found a real man.'”

42Dāneshvar, Šīvashūn, 16; Ghanoonparvar, Savushun, 31.
For Yūsūf, becoming a servant to the foreign powers seems to be synonymous with the lack of *mardānegī*, literally “manhood” or “manliness”—that is, the right to be called *mard*, a “man.” In traditional Iranian culture *mardānegī* stands for honour, courage, generosity and even humanity and is a condition for public respect.\(^{43}\) Being *mard* means being righteous and fighting injustice. Its loss may result from neglecting or undermining someone’s ability to fulfil one’s social, cultural or moral expectations, and may inevitably lead to the loss of *āberū* in the eyes of society and bring *bīāberūī* (disgrace and shame). Farzaneh Milani compares *mardānegī* to a “barrier as solid and as forbidding as a veil around their [men] private selves.”\(^{44}\) As such, *mardānegī* may be perceived as something that strengthens one’s *āberū* and accumulates respect and prestige among others.

Many actions undertaken by Yūsūf result from this very concern for *mardānegī*, the lack of which may cause *bīāberūī*. While many heroes in the story engage in obscure activities like cooperation with the British (Khān Kākā), smuggling weapons (Ezzatoddōleh), prostitution (women from the Mordestān District), civil war (Qashgai leaders), or communist activities (Mr. Fūtūhī), Yūsūf unreservedly fulfils all the traditional criteria of *mardānegī*. He presents a straightforward attitude which he argues: “But as for deceiving them, I have to be honest. I won’t lie and cheat, even if it costs me my head.”\(^{45}\) Cheating and lying would deny his *mardānegī* which he strives to preserve in these turbulent times. Yūsūf is determined to sacrifice his life for this purpose. In one of the conversations with his wife, he reveals his motivation in the following way: “A land shall not be deprived of men.”\(^{46}\) Just as he regrets the prostitutes who sell their bodies to the soldiers, he worries

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\(^{43}\)The term however, is not restricted to men exclusively, and it can be applied to women, when expressing one’s ability to take responsibility, or loyalty to a given word. See Lorand B. Szalay, *Iranian and American Perceptions and Cultural Frames of Reference: A Communication Lexicon for Cultural Understanding* (Washington DC: Institute of Comparative Social and Cultural Studies), 6–11.

\(^{44}\)Milani, *Veils and Words*, 201.


\(^{46}\)Dāneshvar, *Sūvashūn*, 18. Own translation.
about Rostam and Sohrāb, Qashgai leaders who are overwhelmed by their desire for revenge on the central government for forced settlement and want to exchange Yūsūf’s crops for weapons. In a conversation with his friends he says: “You want food to give the foreign troops in exchange for weapons you will then use to shoot your brothers and compatriots? (…) Don’t you have any brains? (…) So, what happened to all that bravery, honour, and dignity?”

What Yūsūf feels sorrow over is the reality in which his compatriots lose their mardānegī. This may be explained by the fact that revealing their cowardice and inability to act as mard (men) also jeopardizes their āberū and that of the whole country. By failing to follow the moral pattern, a man proves his own failure and shortcomings and loses his honour, reputation and respect in the eyes of others. For Yūsūf, accepting foreign occupation means exactly this inability to act as a man (mard), which leads to public criticism and the judgement of future generations. The opposite attitude is represented by Khān Kākā, who sees no alternative to submission, and once tells his sister-in-law: “Make fun of me and say that I am not a man. But what can one do but submit and consent.”

In Yūsūf’s moral dilemma another important ethical concept plays crucial role – nāmūs. Nāmūs is an interesting term that is believed to come from the Greek word νόμος meaning law, custom, or social norm. In Persianate societies beyond the meaning of God’s law, the term has also been given a social context and was used in relation to women’s chastity, female members of the family, that is, everything that should be protected and whose violation may bring shame. In Dāneshvar’s story, nāmūs is not limited to its narrow meaning of family honour, but refers to the whole country. Mard is obliged to defend his nāmūs —here his family, his people and his motherland—otherwise he will not only become nāmard (a coward) but will also be exposed to āberūrīzī, public disgrace.

The fear of shame and public embarrassment inscribed in

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47Dāneshvar, Sūvashūn, 50; Ghanoonparvar, Sūvashūn, 63.
48Dāneshvar, Sūvashūn, 250; Ghanoonparvar, 256.
49The parallel of the term nāmūs (which traditionally refers to women as in saying that a woman
the story is perfectly expressed at the end of the book in two verses of poetry cited by a family physician:

Let us do something, otherwise we shall be ashamed

On the day that our souls depart for the other world.50

The quoted fragment is a modification of one of Hāfez’s ghazals, in which the poet encourages to rejoice before the end of days.51 Dāneshvar changed the first misra of the poem and transformed it into a warning against dishonour evoked by a lack of reaction, here obviously understood as indifference toward the occupational policy. In this case, resistance seems to be the only way to meet the requirements of mardānegī, defend nāmūs, avoid sharm and retain personal and national āberū. These are the values that motivate Yūsūf and seem to strengthen his belief in the rightness of his choices.

The ideological importance of Yūsūf’s character, as suggested by many scholars of Persian literature, first and foremost makes sense in the context of political struggle, nationalistic aspirations and idealistic concepts of the time; his attitude, however, effects Zarī as well. The woman is motivated by her own observations of the world but also is encouraged by her husband who tells her: “Why shouldn’t you have the courage to stand up to them . . .,52 and slowly matures to resist the reality she faces.

Zarī

Although as a woman Zarī is not obliged to follow the rules of mardānegī or defend nāmūs, she aspires to it as well. Her efforts are, however, focused on her struggle to gain mardānegī, rather than to keep it. Her

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is man’s nāmūs) with country or motherland was a characteristic element of the nationalistic discourse at the beginning of the 20th century when the term was used to construct a national identity. See Sivan Balslev, “Gendering the Nation: Masculinity and Nationalism in Iran during the Constitutional Revolution,” in Construction Nationalism in Iran: From the Qajars to the Islamic Republic, ed. Meir Litvak (London: Rutledge, 2017), 73.
50Dāneshvar, Sūvashūn, 287; Ghanoonparvar, Sūvashūn, 290.
51Hāfez, ghazal, 375.
52Dāneshvar, Sūvashūn, 128; Ghanoonparvar, Sūvashūn, 140.
desire strengthens as fear for her family grows. While Yūsūf, from the very beginning of the story, feels obliged to stand up against the violation of the Iranian “self,” Zarī matures to it with time. Her resistance is motivated by the threat to what she values and cares for the most—her family, her home that is what can be named harīm-i khusūṣī (private and safe space), as well as her personal and family āberū. When her husband feels a growing frustration towards the situation in the country, the young wife tries to convince him that he should reconsider his firm stand.53 Yet, when later, as she admits herself, the war has been dragged into her home, the desire to resist is fixed in Zarī’s mind. Zarī’s transformation starts with the situation that takes place during the wedding of the governor’s daughter, an event that gathers the Shiraz and the foreign elite. Zarī is asked by the governor’s younger daughter to lend her emerald earrings to Gīlantāj, the bride, so she could wear them during the ceremony. The woman hesitates as the earrings are her wedding gift and belonged to her mother-in-law, although she is not able to decline the request. When she meets the bride after the ceremony, Gīlantāj unexpectedly expresses her gratitude for the generous gift. Zarī is shaken by the turn of events, though she does not say a word and only chastises herself silently for being too cowardly to object.54 This event marks the birth of her self-awareness and ability to resist and results in her struggle to keep her pride and protect the honour of her family. The threat comes not from the British but from the Persians who seem to accept or even benefit from the foreign presence.

The second event that influences Zarī’s attitude occurs sometime later, when the governor asks for Zarī’s son’s colt for his daughter. Although he offers to pay for the horse, the act is an obvious abuse of power. Again, Zarī feels she is being robbed of something, she has the feeling of loss when someone wants to take away Khūshang’s beloved friend. She decides:

But this time, I am going to stand up to them. (…) I’ll go to the

53Dāneshvar, Šīvashān, 18–19; Ghanoonparvar, 34.
54Dāneshvar, Šīvashān, 36; Ghanoonparvar, 50.
Governor myself. I’ll tell him, there’s a limit to everything. Is it only your daughter who can take a fancy to a horse? Can’t she stand the sight of anybody else in this city who has something nice? What’s mine is mine, and what’s yours is mine too?55

Zarī’s decision might be dictated by the fact that the inability to resist (as Zarī puts it herself—her bī’orzegī, her stupidity—pakhnegī) puts into danger not only her ego, her “self” and her self-esteem, but exposes the reputation of the entire family. She says: “The man must stand up, and if they have gone to the winter pastures, their wives have to take their place.”56 In the absence of her husband, Zarī tries to act as a mard, and follow the behavioural pattern of mardānegī to save the honour and position of the family. However, her original zeal weakens and despite the desire to ignore the governor’s request she agrees and sends the colt to his residence, while deciding to tell her family that the horse has died.

I had decided to resist, despite Khan Kaka’s insistence, and not to give into them this time. I knew that eventually we had to stand up to them. But I got scared. Yes, scared. I got scared of the gendarme who came for the horse.57

Zarī’s fear is irrational as she was in no way threatened by the low-rank gendarme who was her servant’s relative. However, at this point she was still afraid to say no, to oppose.

Zarī’s transformation takes some time but is accelerated by Yūsūf’s death. On the way to the shrine Zarī hears a police captain insult her late husband by calling him a “troublemaker” in life and after death.58 She feels that the memory of Yūsūf has been disparaged and starts to complain: “the corpse of that unfortunate young man is not yet buried and you let them insult him like that?”59 She seeks the support among other participants in the procession but all she receives is the arrogance of the

55Dāneshvar, Sīvashūn, 60–60; Ghanoonparvar, 74.
56Dāneshvar, Sīvashūn, 61; Ghanoonparvar, 74.
57Dāneshvar, Sīvashūn, 127; Ganoonparvar, 140.
58Dāneshvar, Sīvashūn, 299; Ganoonparvar, 302.
59Dāneshvar, Sīvashūn, 299; Ganoonparvar, 302.
officer and Abolqāsem Khān incompetent attempts to calm the situation down. This final violation of Yūsūf’s good name and the infringement on the family right to organize a proper burial for him causes Zarī to eventually grow into her new role which she sees as a continuation of Yūsūf’s path, for she believes that “(…) my unfortunate husband’s was a sad unfinished story.” Zarī is torn as she feels that to regain the previous tranquility and the control over the life of her family she might be forced to turn to violence. “I wanted to raise my children with love in a peaceful environment. (…) But now I will raise them in hatred. I will put a gun in Khosrow’s hands,” she concludes. Supported by Yūsūf’s sister who expresses her regret that God hasn’t made her a man so she could show what manhood means, Zarī responds to the violation of her dignity that she experienced and retrieve all that has been taken away from her family and her country.

Regain What Has Been Taken Away

Regaining lost blessings, restoring what rightly belongs to a man, his haqq, his right to something, forms the common ground for Zarī’s and Yūsūf’s behaviour. The theme is highlighted in the novel on various occasions. The idea beautifully appears in MacMahon’s statement:

And what a calamitous day when our delights are taken away from us or we’re prevented from having them. Our children, our mothers, our philosophers…our religions…

The same thought, expressing a sense of harm resulting from a strong feeling of loss accompanies Zarī, who at some point wonders: “If they

60Dāneshvar, Sūvashūn, 287; Ganoonparvar, 290.
61Dāneshvar, Sūvashūn, 252; Ganoonparvar, 258.
62Dāneshvar, Sūvashūn, 250; Ganoonparvar, 256.
63Dāneshvar, Sūvashūn, 67; Gharoonparvar, 80. Taking person’s legal right to something (haqq-i kasī rā khordan) has been a powerful motivational force in Iranian social and political life that frequently stood behind people’s protest. In 2009, after the presidential election, by many considered to be illegitimate, Iranians went out into the streets and chanted “where is my voice?,” (ray-i man kā?) “return our voices!” (rāy-i mā rā pass bedīd!) That is how they expressed the frustration and anger of taking away their rights by undermining the importance of their votes.
This common motif of the novel—the sense of loss—arises in Zarī and in Yūsūf only partially due to oppression by the foreign powers. Another reason are the actions undertaken by their compatriots themselves. In Dāneshvar’s narrative the world is divided not only between colonizer and colonized. A certain role is also given to people whose behaviour in some way resembles what Hamid Dabashi calls a “native informer.” Though Dabashi speaks of the intellectuals, writers and scholars who become a tool for the implementation of the empire’s worldview, the term may turn out to be justified here as well. In Sūvashūn, the spiritual domain is frequently violated not directly by the British who, as stated before, occupy the background in the novel, but by the hands of Iranians themselves. In some situations, these are Iranians who are directly responsible for endangering the characters’ “self” and targeting their āberū, as is particularly visible in Zarī’s story of the seizure of emerald earrings because of Ezzatoddūleh’s intrigue. An aristocrat, a childhood friend of Yūsūf’s sister brings a green fabric to the wedding of the governor’s daughter, and gives it to the bride for luck. This prompts her to borrow Zarī’s earrings which will never be returned, as expected and anticipated by Ezzatoddūleh. As she acknowledges later, out of jealousy “I decided to do something that she will always feel the grief of the lost earrings in her heart.”

A similar dynamic can be spotted in Abolqāsem Khān’s behaviour toward Yūsūf and his family. In the novel, Khān Kākā represents a conformist attitude. He sells all the crops to British offhand, and reprimands his brother for not doing the same. Moreover, he accuses Yūsūf of risking his life and causing trouble for the others. Due to some obscure reasons, during Yūsūf’s absence he insidiously draws the governor’s attention to his nephew’s colt knowing that this will affect not only Khosrow but certainly his father as well. Internal animosities are what Dāneshvar indicates as one of the consequences of foreign interference. Just like

64Dāneshvar, Sūvashūn, 193; Ghanoonparvar, Sūvashūn, 204.
66Dāneshvar, Sīvashūn, 88. Own translation.
the prostitutes who sell themselves to soldiers, brothers quarrel, com-
patriots shoot each other and the rules of social life are violated. All
this contributes to Zarī’s transformation who decides to face the danger,
although she knows that, as Khān Kākā once said, “blood cannot be
washed with blood; it must be washed with water.”

Conclusion

Even though moral concepts are not a leitmotif of the Sūvashūn nar-
native, they occupy a key place in understanding the motivations that
stand behind the characters’ resistance. An investigation of the ethical
dilemmas of the story’s protagonists helps to grasp the mechanism
and dynamics of their process of decision-making. Yūsūf’s standpoint
might be considered a sign of his care for his people’s and county’s
nāmūs. It comes from his fear of not complying with the rules of
mardānegī and the danger of losing āberū, which in traditional Iranian
culture was considered as bringing shame and preventing the normal
function of society. Zarī’s internal and external struggle also seemed
to revolve around moral dilemmas when her own peaceful world, her
self-esteem, her family’s āberū becomes violated. Although both pro-
tagons know that, as Yūsūf says, “there is nothing surprising and new
about foreigners coming here uninvited,” it is difficult for them to get
used to the situation in which Iranians are constantly being deprived of
something—property, food, land, and dignity. Moreover, their lack of
resistance leads to the violation of their personal shakhšiyat and their
nāmūs. The mechanism of resistance manifested by both male and fe-
cmale characters is motivated by a sense of loss, which permeates the
story in many contexts. This resistance is rooted in their moral imagina-
tion and flows from a sense of moral duty to respond to injustice, zolm,
understood as an act of aggression against what rightly belongs to a
man, and what should be protected by him at all costs.

67Dāneshvar, Sūvashūn, 252; Ghanoonparvar, 258.
68Dāneshvar, Sūvashūn, 16; Ghanoonparvar, 31.