

# Dynamics of Quest and Search in Three Narratives by Parsipur

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This article examines the themes<sup>1</sup> of quest (*takaapu*) and search (*jostaju*) in three of Shahrnush Parsipur's narratives through the lens of their female characters. Through a close reading of three of her novels—*Tuba and the Meaning of the Night* (*Tuba va Ma' naye Shab*), *Women without Men* (*Zanan-e bedune Mardan*), and *The Blue Intellect* (*Aql-e Abi*)—I analyze the various recurring demonstrations of the quest theme in Parsipur's work, and explore the way the heroines of her narratives are each pursuing the journey to enlightenment (*Roshangaree*). By examining the

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<sup>1</sup>Northrop Frye describes archetypal criticism as tracing the associative clusters of symbols within a body of literature in which the critic is essentially concerned with the literary text's relationship to the broader body of literature. He argues that if archetypes are communicable symbols, and if there is a center of archetypes, we will find universal symbols. He also categorizes archetypes into two categories: "symbol as archetype" and "meaning/theme as archetype." According to this categorization, the themes of quest and search can be defined as archetypal themes. See Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957).

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heroines of each novel throughout their quests, I suggest that the urge to find liberation, agency, and emancipation continuously reemerges as the female characters evolve both emotionally and spiritually during the journey. Additionally, I show that these characters find different resolutions in their journey as they evolve. I attempt to compare these journeys to highlight that the previously unresolved issue of search finds its resolution in *The Blue Intellect*, specifically through the most refined prototypic character, Zan. The search can be concluded in the corporeal world and through emancipation of the body and soul.

In my study of these three novels, I argue that the author has embedded a common theme in the narratives: the different ways that women strive to reach liberation from societal boundaries and male dominance in addition to emancipation of the soul. This theme addresses the continuous unresolved issues of the urge to emancipate soul and body in its modern form. The issues of quest and search reappear in each of these novels as recurring and perpetual issues; yet these themes evolve from one narrative to the next.

### **Tuba's Journey**

The novel *Tuba and the Meaning of the Night* is a third-person omniscient narrative. Despite this, the characters' words and thoughts are invariably perceived from Tuba's perspective. Her lifelong search to find peace and emancipation from stagnancy is illustrated through many decades of her life and in the end, unresolved with her death. Engrossed in her spiritual quest and search<sup>2</sup> for the truth and unity with God, Tuba experiences decades of Iranian revolutionary turbulence.<sup>3</sup> She represents

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<sup>2</sup>For my purposes, the internal quest (*takapu va puyesh*) to find tranquility (*arames*) within oneself is defined by *quest*. *Search*, for my purposes, is the questing journey (*jostoju*) that is articulated through various narratives by using different literary tropes. The distinct terms of *quest* (*takapu va puyesh*) and *search* (*jostoju*) highlight different aspects of the journey. In the mystical texts, the notion of the quest refers to the soul's striving to regain the original homeland, the origin (*asl*), and is often defined as the internal quest into the self. However, for the purpose of this analysis, I use the term slightly differently and incorporate the two terms of *quest* and *search* to highlight the two stages of this journey to tranquility in the modern narratives. See Taqi Purnamdarian, *Ramzi va Dastānha-Ye Ramzi Tahlihi Az Dastānha-Ye Erfani-Falsāfi Ibn Sina va Sohravardi* (Tehran: Elmi Farhangi Publishing, 1988).

<sup>3</sup>The main character, Tuba, is named after the tree of divine light and wisdom in Persian legend and

a woman confronting the challenges specific and unique to the era when the nation undergoes various political and social changes: “Tuba lives over eight decades and through her life she experiences different, and at times contradictory, articulations of concepts such as nation (*mellat*), homeland (*vatan*) and womanhood (*zaniyyat*).”<sup>4</sup>

Tuba, a smart and spiritual fourteen-year-old girl, proposes to a middle-aged man after her father dies, to obtain financial security and to pursue her will in her spiritual journey. However, miserably depressed, she divorces him a few years later and marries a Qajar prince. This relationship is loving, but when the prince takes a second wife, Tuba divorces him as well. After the second divorce, Tuba returns to her original childhood dream, which was a spiritual quest for unity with God and search for love. In this way, Tuba reclaims the dream she lost after her father’s death.

Although she reclaims her quest and search, the outcome of her journey is foreshadowed in the beginning of the narrative when Tuba is scrubbing old scum after seven years of drought: “The earth no longer had to remain a slave to its dream for water.”<sup>5</sup> Tuba’s notion of imprisonment is what keeps her stagnant in time and place; therefore, the narrative begins with Tuba’s reflecting on how her stagnation carries her back to her state of search in her childhood. This lifelong search is narrated over eight decades and remains unresolved with her death.

## Plot and Character Development

Woven throughout the story are five women, three of whom—Munis, Maryam, and Tuba—represent the presence of women through the changes in society and the challenges they face in their desire to search.

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lore. Houra Yavari, in her afterward of the translation, writes: “It is a story of the Constitutional Revolution (1906-1911), the reign of Reza Shah (1925-1941), oil nationalization (August 1953). Tuba, who lives over a hundred years, experiences the three historical phases that the nation undergoes in projecting the notions of modernity. Two revolutions encompass the endless life of Tuba’s life.” Houra Yavari, *A Woman for All Seasons*, trans. Kamran Talattof (New York: Columbia, 2006), 307.

<sup>4</sup>Yavari, *Woman for All Seasons*, 335.

<sup>5</sup>Shahrnush Parsipur, *Tuba va Ma'naye Shab (Tuba and the Meaning of the Night)* (Tehran: Tohid, AH 1367/AD 1988), 1. Translation mine.

The other two, Setareh and Leila, who denote alternative voices for Tuba, represent the free voice for these women through their challenges. Leila becomes the eternal manifestation of Tuba's earthly form.<sup>6</sup> These two characters are contrasting: Tuba desires lifelong intellectuality, which conflicts with her religious thoughts, and Leila is a non-religious being who is free from such conflict.

Tuba is the first generation of women on a quest, and she plays the leading role in both creating and protecting the home, a safe domain, for the succeeding female generations. Tuba is married twice, once to an old man who does not love her, and then to the king's son, who is repeatedly unfaithful to her; in both instances, she divorces the man (a highly unusual action for the time period and culture). Tuba's first marriage, which saves her from financial insecurity, leads her to be housebound. With the second divorce, she is also housebound for a long time because of her divorce scandal, which allows her to gradually create a relationship with her home as the only safe place she recognizes.

This need for safety becomes paramount as two revolutions, with their ensuing chaos and instability, unfold during Tuba's life. Both the Constitutional Revolution and the oil nationalization catalyze social and political unrest in Iran, escalating a sense of danger and the need to protect the homeland. This escalated sense of danger manifests in Tuba's character as an increasing urge to protect the home to which she is bound.

Tuba's daughter, Munis, embodies the succeeding generation and its unique place in the narrative and in history. She has the chance to expand beyond her house and is able to marry for love. In this way, Munis is able to search for love whereas Tuba is not. Regardless of these new freedoms, Munis's relationship with her husband, Ismail, remains a secret from the public world because he has an active, but clandestine, political role working against Reza Shah. As a consequence of his activi-

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<sup>6</sup>Leila is the ethereal woman who represents the liberated Tuba, liberated homeland, and liberated woman. She expresses the voices of women who in wanting to be liberated are nonetheless suffocated. Leila, being a deathless creature, never submits to any such boundaries. I will discuss this further through my close reading. Leila also reappears as the transcendental woman or perfected soul (*nafs-e mot'alie*) in the third novel, *The Blue Intellect*.

ties, he is arrested and imprisoned. Realizing that she is pregnant with his child, Munis feels obliged to disclose her marriage to her mother. Tuba regrets her daughter's love match and freedom and does not accept or agree with Munis; hence, Munis leaves the house to seek truth. Finally, Maryam, the granddaughter, leaves the house to pursue a university education and subsequently joins a leftist political party. After being fatally shot by a police officer, she returns to Tuba's house—a space defined by its security—and dies before her child can be born,<sup>7</sup> thus halting the progress of generations.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, Setareh, the teenage daughter of the maid, who is part of Munis's generation, is raped by strangers and becomes pregnant. This series of events leads to Setareh's murder by her uncle due to the shame she has brought to the family. This violent act takes place inside the safety and sanctuary of the home. After Setareh's brutal death, she is buried in the house under a pomegranate tree. Soon thereafter, she reappears as a ghost, and Tuba witnesses Setareh growing in the house as an ethereal holy tree. Her existence as a ghost remains a secret and is revealed to only Tuba. Tuba is the only person who can see Setareh and talk to her. Tuba, who feels haunted by the corpse's curse, puts aside her dream of searching for God, to adapt and turn the wheel of her fortune until the proper time arrives for her to resume her search. Tuba feels trapped in the house by the fear that if she leaves, the walls and the lives that she protects will be destroyed. She carries this fear until the second death. After Maryam dies in the house, the space becomes unbearable to Tuba. Following Maryam's burial, Tuba leaves the house because she realizes she cannot protect it anymore.

Leila, another female character in the story, never appears as a real person, only as a voice and a ghost representing the notion of search and movement in Tuba's life. Leila, too, can be seen by only Tuba. At the end of the story, Tuba dies at the moment of her realization and epiphany. According to her, the moment of her death is when she

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<sup>7</sup>In the book, there is never an indication of how Maryam becomes pregnant.

<sup>8</sup>*Progress* here is defined as the notion of the search for love and venturing beyond boundaries, even if none of the attempts are successful.

realizes that she does not need to search anymore. She feels free and liberated. Leila appears in the story only at the end of the narrative when Tuba is ready to leave the house and leave her stagnant phase. On the last page of the story, the narrator who speaks through the mind of Tuba says, “Tuba was now someone else. She no longer had the need to search for truth.”<sup>9</sup> Through this confession, the gaze and voice switch to Tuba: “You are your own veil Hafiz be gone from our midst” (*to khod hejab-e khod’i Hafiz, az miyan barkhiz*).<sup>10</sup> Tuba alludes to Hafiz’s line in order to highlight her realization and mark her death as the end of her search. She pronounces that her search has ended by taking away the symbolic veil, her corporeal body, manifesting that her life in this world is the only obstacle between her and unification with God.<sup>11</sup>

Leila represents Tuba’s inner voice in the form of a transformed, fragmented figure. She embodies Tuba’s liberated self and manifests next to her only when Tuba is enlightened and free. The voice appears to belong to a different space that Tuba could not comprehend before death. This distorted and distorting reality is actualized for Tuba when Leila chants to her that it is time to depart. Image and perception are both distorted in Tuba’s consciousness. The only reality is the resonating voice of Leila:

“Groups of people drowned in blood,” Leila said, “it is up to them to become liberated.”

Tuba asked, “Am I dead?”

Leila said, “You are dead.”

Tuba asked, “You too?”

The response was “I cannot die.”<sup>12</sup>

*“mardom dasteh dasteh dar khun gharq mishodand.”*

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<sup>9</sup>Shahrnush Parsipur, *Tuba and the Meaning of the Night*, trans. Havva Houshmand and Kamran Talattof (Syracuse, NY: Feminist Press, 2006), 511.

<sup>10</sup>Parsipur, *Tuba and the Meaning of the Night*, 511; Parsipur, *Tuba va Ma’naye Shab*, 337.

<sup>11</sup>Parsipur, *Tuba va Ma’naye Shab*, 511–12; Parsipur, *Tuba and the Meaning of the Night*, 337.

<sup>12</sup>Parsipur, *Tuba and the Meaning of the Night*, 338.

*Goft: "digar ba khodeshan ast keh berahand ya narah-and."*

*zan porsid: "aya man mordeh-am?"*

*Leila gof: "mordeh-i."*

*porsid: "to niz?"*

*gof: "man nemitavanam bemiram."<sup>13</sup>*

The two voices interweave and at one point merge; the space is fragmented, and the voices resonate in the space that sets the novel's termination. In the last line of the narrative, Tuba realizes that Leila, the autonomous voice who was next to her, is the liberated self that is eternal. The image of people who drown in blood represents the non-liberated ones who are bound in their perishable form.<sup>14</sup>

Setareh and Leila each represent alternative voices in Tuba's mind, which reflect her twofold being. One voice is imprisoned in the stillness of an "I" who listens to the alternative voice that projects a chaste image, protecting the house with its stillness. The other voice is liberated in the spirit of a mobile "I" who seeks its home or "place of origin." Setareh is both the bound and the chaste; Leila is both liberation and dishonor. A paradoxical space underlies the duality of search and stagnancy: chastity brings stagnancy and liberation carries dishonor. If the desire for search is discovered, then the searcher is plundered. Setareh is the redeemed soul whose chastity is devoted to maintaining the chastity of the house. These binary attributes, which on the surface seem to be contrary, explain and illustrate the conflict that Tuba faces in every step of her search on a deeper level. This conflict can extend to religion versus Gnosticism, tradition versus modernity, and the material/corporeal versus the sublime.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Parsipur, *Tuba va Ma' naye Shab*, 512.

<sup>14</sup>The image of people who are drowning also points to the killing and bloodshed after the Constitutional Law and the oil nationalization revolutions; in both incidents, many people were killed, and as mentioned before in the story of *Tuba and the Meaning of the Night*, Tuba's search and the political events develop in parallel.

<sup>15</sup>Parsipur, *Tuba va Ma' naye Shab*, 356; Parsipur, *Tuba and the Meaning of the Night*, 232.

The two figures of Setareh and Leila distort the divide between conscious and subconscious, dream and reality, and introduce a new space to Tuba wherein she is bound to marginalize her own search and protect the house and its people. Setareh, the emblem of chastity, signifies the boundaries that keep Tuba from her search, obstructing her liberation. Setareh emblemizes the Indigenous rites and rituals, tradition, and religious boundaries that simultaneously are protected as part of the culture but also prevent Tuba's flight.

Setareh is the floating consciousness of Tuba's mind who spreads her roots in the house. On the surface, the house represents the *vatan*, "homeland," which needs to be protected and maintained safe from political and cultural turbulence. Yet on a deeper level, it also represents the limitations and boundaries that thwart people from their search. As Tuba says, "I wanted to fly and follow the truth, but I had to protect the house" ("*del-am mikhast parvaz mikard-am va miraftam beh donbal-e haqiqat amma bayad az khaneh moraqebat mikaram*").<sup>16</sup> Tuba says that Setareh is the soul of the house, and it needs to be protected.<sup>17</sup>

The plot in Tuba's narrative alternates between two themes developed in parallel; they both revolve around the notion of search. One is the spiritual quest and search that inwardly captures the characters—a search for love and unity with God, articulated by Tuba from the beginning of the story and embodied by Setareh. The other is the search embedded in the country's changes—the search that stems from societal and political changes in the country at the time. Leila, who assists Tuba in pursuing her will to search, appears only after Tuba demands to leave the house and embark on her search. Suddenly with Tuba's realization, Leila appears embodied as a ghost and invites Tuba to leave the house. Leila is an ethereal woman, roaming deserts. She has an adorned face but absolute purity behind that appearance.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Parsipur, *Tuba and the Meaning of the Night*, 276; Parsipur, *Tuba va Ma'naye Shab*, 373.

<sup>17</sup>Parsipur, *Tuba va Ma'naye Shab*, 366; Parsipur, *Tuba and the Meaning of the Night*, 239.

<sup>18</sup>Parsipur, *Tuba va Ma'naye Shab*, 498; Parsipur, *Tuba and the Meaning of the Night*, 329.



For Tuba, the only way to detach from the house is to kill Setareh's soul since Setareh's chastity and purity has restrained Tuba from her own search outside the house. Tuba craves distance from it; she is in a state of inbetweenness where one choice mirrors chastity and the other prostitution. To find her mobility and her desire to be free from the house, Tuba likens her choice to prostitution. Her desire for search forces her to embrace the impurity and kill her chastity. Tuba hears the last *tanesh* ("resonance") of Setareh while her image is drowning in blood. Setareh, who symbolizes Tuba's attachment to her house, becomes marginalized, and her voice echoes the monotone resonance from afar, replaced by a new light and a new voice, that of Leila.<sup>19</sup>

Tuba's countenance is depicted as two states of being: when she is enlightened, and when Leila becomes one with her. During *agahi*, Tuba completely detaches from Setareh and peacefully unites with Leila, who is free, mobile, and enlightened. The paradoxical feature is that she denotes all this through the body of the prostitute, Leila, *ruspi-gari*. Leila, as an enlightened, ethereal prostitute, redeems Tuba, whereas Setareh, the emblem of holiness, purity, and chastity, remains imprisoned in the house.

In this way, quest manifests itself in two distinct layers in this novel through the development of various characters. The first layer of search embodies the desire of women to search for love and autonomy, represented by Munis and Maryam, who leave the house only to return defeated in their quest. On this level, the search for mobility and freedom is actual, physical/corporeal, and presented on the ontological level of reality. The second layer of search is for an inward perception that causes the person to be enlightened. Tuba embodies the second layer of search, demonstrated by the ontological feature of the mystical characters who appear to Tuba alone. The worldly quest for these women halts when Maryam has to return home from her search. In the story of Tuba, women seem to be defeated in this search. They expand their perceptions and horizons to achieve the mobility and freedom that they desire, but, ultimately, they cannot achieve it.

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<sup>19</sup>Parsipur, *Tuba va Ma' naye Shab*, 603; Parsipur, *Tuba and the Meaning of the Night*, 332.

The second layer of the search theme, applied in conjunction with the surface theme, creates a narrative that encompasses a twofold purpose. One articulates the complicated relationships of social and political structures of a country and women's mystical experience: the unresolved issue of search in order to return to the origin. The second illuminates a deeper conflict in the narrative in which the figures of Setareh and Leila are transmuted to abstract beings, personifications of purity and impurity. The dichotomy of these reframed figures stands as the binary of tradition and modernity. At the end, the narrative offers no resolution, and the search terminates in Tuba's death. The death foreshadows glimmers of hope but leaves the quest and the search unresolved.

### **Quest and Search from Corporeal to Spiritual**

Tuba's house in the narrative is often referred to as a secure space that should be protected from strangers and enemies. The act of protecting the house evokes a parallel to the notion of homeland, *vatan*, which marks the space as the point of return for these women after their journeys.<sup>20</sup> Tuba, in her stream of consciousness, overtly compares her house to the country; she maintains the house as the source of her safety, and throughout the narrative, everyone who is defeated or victimized returns to the house. She believes that as long as she remains inside the house, outside forces cannot affect its occupants. In *Tuba and the Meaning of the Night*, Tuba, Munis, and Maryam each experience an unsuccessful search. Tuba's spiritual search is completed only at her death, Munis's search for a romantic marriage causes her dishonor, and Maryam's search to pursue her political beliefs ends with her death.

To conclude, each character embodies a different notion of search: spiritual, romantic, or political. Even though the narrative maintains the two themes at the same time, the spiritual search for Tuba ends with unification and returning to God through her death, and the physical search remains unresolved. Further, the only solution for the ones who do not die is to stay in the despair of abjection (*heghaarat va koochaki*)

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<sup>20</sup>The motherland embodies the mother's womb, the place to which all these women seek to return and discover tranquility.

until death and the return to the self's origin. As we shall see in the next narrative, *Women without Men*, the same cycle is repeated with a slight difference. In these two works, the notion of quest and the unresolved issue of search ends with unification with oneself.

### ***Women without Men***

Parsipur's second story, a shorter, more abstract and poetic narrative than *Tuba and the Meaning of the Night*, is inextricably tied to this first story through its narrative techniques, themes, and even characters. Munis, who left "the house" disillusioned at the end of the previous story, appears in this story under the same name but with a different identity. The choice of Munis as the character's name in these two narratives is not coincidental. There is an affinity between the two characters. The reason that Munis leads the women's journey in the second narrative is that she found neither serenity nor stability in Tuba's house or in the larger house, "the country." Therefore, the search continues, and the narrative assumes a new form in the second novel through the search for autonomy and freedom, which expands into a spiritual search.

### **Plot and Character Development**

The novel begins with Mahdokht, a former teacher who visits her brother's garden in Karaj, a city just outside Tehran. After witnessing an illicit sexual encounter, Mahdokht decides that the burden of her virginity is too much to bear and, declaring herself to be a tree, plants her feet in the ground. Just as Mahdokht transforms herself, the tree is transformed into a symbol for impossible femininity and Virgin Birth.<sup>21</sup> As through her own seed, Mahdokht is able to reproduce while maintaining her sexual purity. She becomes a fertile tree even though she is a virgin. Though Mahdokht finds peace through her transformative act, its unnaturalness shames her family, forcing her brother to abandon his garden. Mrs. Farrokhlaha Sadrall-divan Golchehreh, a widow from

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<sup>21</sup>The Virgin Birth here symbolizes a rebirth of the spirit that can be experienced as Joseph Campbell describes. See Joseph Campbell, *Thou Art That: Transforming Religious Metaphors* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2001).

Tehran, purchases the property cheaply. As women begin to congregate at the site of Mahdokht's rebellion against conventional sexuality, the garden in Karaj becomes a sort of feminine utopia, a refuge for those fleeing the constraints of patriarchal Tehran.

In contrast, there is Munis and her ill-tempered friend Fa'eze. After carefully guarding her virginity for thirty-eight years, Munis has discovered that she has been misled about the nature of her own body. When she was eight years old, Munis's family told her that God would never forgive a girl who lost her virginity. After thirty-eight years, through a conversation with Fa'eze, she discovers that virginity is a hole, not a curtain. After discovering that her virginity is not an easily torn curtain, but rather a hole, Munis leaves Tehran with her traditionally minded friend Fa'eze, who has been protecting her own virginity with the hope of marrying Munis's violently temperamental older brother. Shortly after embarking on the first of their pilgrimages, Fa'eze and Munis are raped. Upset, they seek refuge in the garden.

At last, Zarrinkolah, a woman of twenty-six who begins to see her clients as headless monsters after years of prostitution, flees to the garden in Karaj, where upon her arrival, reality blends with the magical. When she arrives in Karaj, she adopts a different role, transforming from a prostitute to a holy person. The reality of life resides in a magical space for her. She finds peace in the garden, which has become a utopia for the women searching for their femininity and autonomy. The narrative ends with the female characters leaving the garden (the temporary utopia).

This multivocal narrative incorporates five female protagonists (an old maid, two teachers [Munis and Mahdokht], a widowed housewife, and a prostitute) and one man. Each woman feels constrained by her life, her role, and the spaces she inhabits. In response to this frustration, the women desire their autonomy, freedom, and femininity. They search for a utopian space in which they believe they belong. In their attempt to find their unique path, they all gather in the garden, which, to them, resembles heaven. However, the heavenly quality of the space is temporary for

the characters; the women fail in their attempt to create a utopian<sup>22</sup> space, and they return melancholic to the city, scattered and separated.

### **Theme of Quest in *Women without Men***

In *Women without Men*, each woman identifies her quest and search as resisting stagnation. Zarrinkolah, the prostitute, is confined to a brothel and follows her spiritual quest by freeing herself from bondage. By doing so, she is forced to seek refuge in the streets. For Munis, the forty-year-old unmarried woman, committing suicide becomes, however paradoxically, a way to pursue her quest and desire in her transformed body. Mahdokht, the school teacher who lives with her brother, pursues her quest and frees her soul by transforming herself into a tree, thereby becoming one with nature and fluid in soul. While as a tree she is rooted to the ground, her seeds are free and can be cultivated anywhere. Farrokhlaqa kills her husband and leaves the urban town to reside in the garden in Karaj, where she hopes to find her liberation.

In *Tuba and the Meaning of the Night*, each of the female protagonists (Tuba, Munis, and Maryam) contemplates her attachments and detachments in her own way, meditating on the challenges she faces and charting her own boundaries regardless of the chains of convention. In *Women without Men*, the female characters desire autonomy and freedom; however, their roots in constricting convention and traditions do not permit them to be completely liberated. In both stories, the journey begins with the characters' epiphany and enlightenment. Here, the themes of quest and search in the narrative becomes a notion of realization for the characters of their stagnancy and stillness. For the characters, the notion of quest and Desire<sup>23</sup> to search is catalyzed by the realization that their captivity and imprisonment is due to fallacies about life and chastity. The notion of search for each character manifests in a different shape: for Munis, it is the quest for her autonomy; for Farrokhlaqa, the quest to

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<sup>22</sup>I define *utopia* as the space where forced law and patriarchal hegemony cannot be imposed, a space where men's presence is marginalized or eliminated. This space is a mystical land, which the characters find to be the ideal world.

<sup>23</sup>I use the notion of Desire, capitalized, to distinguish between the common meaning of desire and the notion of Desire as a catalyst of these characters to seek subjectivity and autonomy.

find her freedom; for Zarrinkolah, the quest to find her identity; and for Mahdokht, the quest to immortalize her virginity.<sup>24</sup>

Zarrinkolah, Mahdokht, and Farrokhlāqa represent alternative paths to self-realization. Moreover, each symbolizes the ways in which the earthly or material world imposes restrictions on humans but more specifically on women. For example, Zarrinkolah, the prostitute, redefines virginity and chastity. She is a woman who lost her virginity in her childhood, and after many years of being abused, decides to revive her chastity.

Through Zarrinkolah's search for reality, she obtains her first sign of enlightenment: she comes face to face with decapitated men. She decides to purify herself, and through this purification, she is transformed into a holy entity and an emblem of purity. She symbolizes chastity. She is entirely transformed and as pure as a newborn.<sup>25</sup> The initial cause of Zarrinkolah's enlightenment remains unclear; however, the time for this enlightenment occurs after a dream<sup>26</sup> and at dawn.<sup>27</sup> Dawn symbolizes the time between dream and waking; it equates with the time of in-betweenness and transcendence. Zarrinkolah achieves transcendence, is reborn, and becomes pure at dawn. The quest is the cause of the rebirth which characters (seekers) experience.

### **Emancipation and Reemergence of Tuba**

In the first narrative, Tuba begins the journey of the soul and discovers it in her annihilation (*fana*) as she says: "I don't need to search anymore" (*digar niazi nemidid beh jostojuye haqiqat beravad*).<sup>28</sup> She achieves enlightenment by returning to the place of origin, or enlightenment by

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<sup>24</sup>Shahmush Parsipur, *Zanan-e Bedun-e Mardan (Women without Men)* (Tehran: Tohid, AH 1369/AD 1990), 22; Shahmush Parsipur, *Women without Men*, trans. Kamran Talattof and Jocelyn Sharlet (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1998), 28.

<sup>25</sup>Parsipur, *Zanan-e Bedun-e Mardan*, 83; Parsipur, *Women without Men*, 76.

<sup>26</sup>Parsipur, *Zanan-e Bedun-e Mardan*, 78; Parsipur, *Women without Men*, 73.

<sup>27</sup>This may allude to Arabic Aristotelianism, which believes that it is especially in dreams that the active intellect communicates with men. This is the time when reality becomes evident, and the dawn may suggest the time that she receives her epiphany even though it is not overtly stated.

<sup>28</sup>Parsipur, *Tuba and the Meaning of the Night*, 370; Parsipur, *Tuba va Ma' naye shab*, 511.

death. Her living mythical source, Leila, leads her to her Mystical Death (*fana*). However, Leila, ironically, is the Eternal Feminine who appears as *Lakateh* in the figure and shape of a mythical ghost, who is known as the unfaithful wife in modern prose.<sup>29</sup> The fact that Leila is the ethereal woman (*zan-e asiri*), denoting eternal beauty, shows the continuity and correlation between the archetypal characters by juxtaposing the two contradictory notions of Eternal Feminine next to the Mystical Death. On the other hand, Munis, Tuba's daughter, neither achieves the Mystical Death nor quenches her urge to go on a quest. In the second narrative, Munis appears with the same name and same conflicts, but as a different figure. In this narrative, after becoming enlightened, Munis kills herself. This represents a symbolic annihilation that takes a corporeal, worldly shape in the modern narrative as a suicide. Similarly, Mahdokht attains enlightenment about femininity and, therefore, desires to be united with a tree.<sup>30</sup> Desire brings madness, which is the beginning of love and quest in the mystical world. From one intermediary to another, all three women discover the ultimate resolution to their quest is complete annihilation (*fana*).

The title of the second chapter in *Women without Men*, "Munis, First Time Death," foreshadows Munis's journey. Munis reappears with a new gaze in the second narrative, and after discovering the truth about her virginity, she decides to seek the truth about life. Her decision to be annihilated grants her the ability to read minds—a direct conduit to truth. She replaces the rational soul through the intellectual and spiritual domains in the physical.

After this death, she returns to life and goes on a journey for forty days. When she returns home, her brother kills her for the second time. With her second death and subsequent reincarnation, Munis achieves complete awareness and enlightenment and reappears as a spectral woman for whom worldly things do not matter.

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<sup>29</sup>*Lakateh* literally means prostitute, but in modern literary texts, such as *The Blind Owl*, it generally refers to the unfaithful wife, who has become an archetypal character. See Sadegh Hedayat (1903–51), *The Blind Owl*, trans D.P. Costello (New York: Grove Press, 1969).

<sup>30</sup>Parsipur, *Zanan-e Bedun-e Mardan*, 18; Parsipur, *Women without Men*, 12.

Munis, through death and reincarnation, tries to reinvent herself and the other women around her. She epitomizes the living myth of Leila and Setareh from the previous narrative and completes those roles in a new Munis. Munis explains to Fa'ezeh that she possesses the ability to see things beyond what they are, and through this insight, she encourages the other women to reinvent themselves. Munis carries over the incomplete Munis of the previous narrative but has new abilities—similar to Mahdokht, who is the more developed version of Setareh, even in her weaknesses. In the second story, Munis, who has an unfinished destiny in the first novel, reappears, and this time encompasses both the holy and the unholy side.

Munis acts as the spiritual guide for the other women since she has an almost-perfect soul. She remains calm and peaceful in all earthly circumstances because she has received strength and power that is beyond worldly enforcements. Munis epitomizes the living soul who can guide the other characters to pursue their quests without being affected by worldly forces. The restrictions that derive from the male hegemony and patriarchal society do not affect her. She is a living corpse with a mythical soul who can die and reincarnate and guide the other women. In each encounter where she is abused or even murdered, she remains calm and seeks the next phase of her journey.

With each life, Munis progresses on her spiritual quest. She begins her resistance by rebelling against those sources within herself that were preventing her quest (e.g., her virginity). Her fight continues against her brother, who represents male hegemony in her society, which results in her death at his hands. In her third life, Munis battles against patriarchal hegemony on a wider scale when she is raped on the road by two men who symbolize the control and dominance men have over women in society.<sup>31</sup>

Therefore, in these two narratives, *Tuba and the Meaning of the Night* and *Women without Men*, a twofold theme is presented that incorporates two distinct yet related ideas of search and quest in both its physical

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<sup>31</sup>Parsipur, *Zanan-e Bedun-e Mardan*, 86; Parsipur, *Women without Men*, 86.



and spiritual form. On the physical/corporeal level, the search and quest for these women spring from their desire for subjectivity, autonomy, mobility, and freedom from male hegemony. On the spiritual/sublime level, the theme focuses on quest and desire for achieving the ultimate unity with the divine being, which is an anagogical theme addressing the movement or journey of the soul. Both levels are depicted as the main character of each book, Tuba and Munis, progresses on her journey of the rational soul and feminine body. On the one hand, they become the voice calling for their subjectivity and autonomy, yet they also desire a search which springs from a deeper existential issue, a yearning for the original home or place of origin. Both narratives end with the Mystical Death and dissolution of the self for the main character, who achieves awareness and is therefore ready to be annihilated.

The way the characters are placed and used in the two narratives defines their stage in their desire. Clear parallelism exists between the characters and the unique symbolism of the two journeys. The main characters, who represent the journey of the soul and body simultaneously, find peace and tranquility through annihilation and unification with the divine soul. But what does search mean for the other women? How do the quest and search in their worldly manner achieve (or not achieve) conclusion?

When the characters of the two narratives are juxtaposed, the correspondence between them shows a pattern that indicates the imperfection of the earthly search. Munis (from *Women without Men*) and Tuba represent annihilation, Mystical Death, returning to the origin, and in Munis's case, returning to life. Setareh and Leila, and Mahdokht and Zarrinkolah, symbolize transformation to a new form; Setareh and Leila represent not voluntary annihilation but murder, while Mahdokht and Zarrinkolah do not stand for death or annihilation in its complete form. Finally, Munis (from *Tuba and the Meaning of the Night*) and Maryam, and Fa'ezech and Farrokhlaqa, symbolize disillusionment and hopelessness.

Moreover, the juxtaposition of the characters, Tuba/Munis, Leila and Setareh/Mahdokht and Zarrinkolah, Munis and Maryam/Fa'ezech and

Farrokhlaqa, highlights a parallelism between the spiritual search and the corporeal/earthly search. It shows that the search of women for their identity, subjectivity, and autonomy is not always a celebratory one and often dwells on loss, unresolved goals, and melancholia. Therefore, the notion of quest can be achieved in only its spiritual form or after death. However, I believe, at last, the search and the quest find a resolution for these female characters, and the resolution is presented through the embodiment of the one female character, Zan, in the novel *The Blue Intellect*. The long quest is fulfilled in the material/corporeal world, and this resolution differentiates this novel from the other narratives.

### ***The Blue Intellect***

The *Blue Intellect* is a narrative illustrating the first decade of the Islamic Revolution, which began in 1979. The story of the main character, “the woman” (*zan*), begins on a cold winter night while Tehran is being bombed. She enters the lieutenant’s office hiding a deer under her veil. She sits in front of “the lieutenant” (*sarvan*) and begins telling her life story.<sup>32</sup> The lieutenant first thinks the woman is a prostitute (*andishid ruspi*) and is initially reluctant to listen, but he then realizes that she is an intelligent, wise, and educated woman from a respected middle-class family. The lieutenant is fair and logical (*ahl e ensafbood v mi andishid*); therefore, he decides to listen to her complaints. Zan explains how she used to work as a manuscript archivist but lost her job after the Revolution because she disobeyed the hijab enforcement. Her manager, Mr. Menbodi, who ordered her to resign, replaced her with another woman named Mrs. Rahro. After some time, Zan decided to return and reclaim her position. She returned with no prior appointment, and she caught him kissing Mrs. Rahro. She learned later that Mrs. Rahro was forced to submit to Mr. Menbodi’s sexual assault because she needed Mr. Menbodi’s help to get her brother out of the country. Zan tells the lieutenant that both women felt betrayed and decided to murder Mr. Menbodi. Their attempt, however, failed, and Mr. Menbodi

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<sup>32</sup>In Persian, neither *zan* nor *sarvan* are proper nouns, but since these are the only names the characters are given in the novel, I use them as proper names to harmonize with the other characters’ names. Further, the name Zan as “woman” represents all women.

managed to throw Mrs. Rahro from a bridge and make it look like an accidental death.

Zan, who feels responsible for this incident, explains to the lieutenant that the seven members of her family began to lose solidarity during this time. She seems to see these incidents as connected, and she thinks of the loss of solidarity as the beginning of her family's destruction. Her two older brothers migrated, her younger brother and sister were killed in a street riot, and her mother turned into a veiled, fanatically religious woman. Finally, her grandfather, who felt responsible for his family's ruination (Zan's father died before the Revolution), suffered from immense guilt and went mad. Zan, who looks at the Revolution and its consequences with skepticism, blames the Revolution and war for her family's destruction (*pashideh shodan nezame khanevade-giash*). While she describes all these life events to the lieutenant, he sympathizes with Zan, thinking that her life story applies to him and many other middle-class Iranians during the Revolution (*Sarvan fek kard ke in dastane Zan v do kokhtar cehehl roozeash mitavanad bashad*).

The second half of the narrative assumes a non-linear format and revolves around a continuous dialogue between the woman/Zan and the lieutenant/Sarvan. Therefore, I have not provided a summary of the events and the characters' dialogue. Moreover, the second half illustrates a continuous metamorphosis of the characters and depicts a coexistence of spaces of magic and of reality. In the second half, Sarvan no longer listens to Zan's stories; rather, he undergoes Zan's experiences with her, like two halves of one existence (*do nimeye yek vojood*). In the second half, the plot is structured so that the narrative shifts between the memories and anecdotes of ancient history, and the time of the Iran–Iraq war. This time and place juxtaposition happens through the continuous dialogue between Zan and Sarvan until the last part of the narrative. Then, Zan disappears, and the setting returns to the first part of the story and is narrated through the lens of Sarvan but with Zan's vision and experience. The narration becomes a stream of consciousness, and that is how we understand that it is Zan's voice and vision expressed through Sarvan's mind. At the end, Sarvan cleans his house with a broom and recalls the

same experiences as Zan at the beginning of the narrative, and that is how we know that at the end, he is the same figure as Zan.

### Blue and Its Symbolic Meaning

If blue represents wisdom and peace, *The Blue Intellect* refers to a peaceful and wise intellect. Also, if blue represents the ability to think, heal, and bring peace, *The Blue Intellect* represents a mind that is able to heal and bring peace to those searching for tranquility. *The Blue Intellect* is the story of a woman in search of the truth. Zan, disillusioned by revolution and war, thinks of revolution as the reason for her family's destruction. She also feels responsible for Mrs. Rahro's death and, with great perplexity, searches for the truth and her lost dignity. One night, with a black chador, she hesitantly enters Sarvan's office to share the injustice that she has endured. From then on, Zan appears every night with a new story, and Sarvan calls her *aghl-e abai* (and sometimes, *aghl-e aram* ["the peace intellect"]). She symbolizes the blue intellect, she is the prototype of wisdom, and she appears at night, enlightening both herself and Sarvan. She begins her visits wearing the black chador (a veil), but one night, she visits Sarvan wearing a revealing dress instead of a chador. Zan changes her appearance from a veil to a revealing dress to signify the transition in her state of mind. She feels closer to Sarvan, and she invites him to elevate together. She views Sarvan as being as wise and enlightened as herself, and she tells him, "Please forgive me, Lieutenant, I came for a visit with the same dress in which I usually visit the noble men" (*mibakhshid Sarvan man ba haman lebasi be didare shoma amadam ke ba an bar mardane bozorg vared mishavam*).<sup>33</sup>

In fact, Zan emphasizes that she views Sarvan as a noble man (*mard-e bozorg*).<sup>34</sup> This moment highlights Sarvan and Zan's reconciliation and mutual trust (*ashti kardan-e zan v mard*). Their growing trust signifies the shift in the narrative; it is in fact the turning point wherein the feminine and masculine sides reconcile. This trust marks the woman's en-

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<sup>33</sup>Shahrmush Parsipur, *Aql-e Abi (The Blue Intellect)* (San Jose, CA: Zamaneh, AH 1373/AD 1994), 190. All English translations of *The Blue Intellect* are my own.

<sup>34</sup>*Mard-e bozorg* or *bozorg mard* means a noble man in Persian, referring to prophets, philosophers, and people who had an impact on history.

lightenment, but it also indicates Sarvan's awareness and concession to the path toward which Zan is directing him. Therefore, their souls elevate simultaneously; Zan shows him her entirety beyond her body and soul, and Sarvan accepts her and sees her beyond her feminine symbols. Additionally, because Zan embodies the emancipation, liberty, peace, and salvation of blue, as she sheds her inhibitions and shows her blue appearance, Sarvan is also drawing nearer to blue. Therefore, metaphorically he is gaining access to the notions that blue symbolizes and, consequently, this enlightenment helps him to learn and overcome his worldly desires.

From this point on, Zan serves as the voice of wisdom who leads Sarvan on his journey to enlightenment. She tries to guide the lieutenant from darkness to light to reach self-gnosis and helps him move beyond his masculine and physical nature.<sup>35</sup> She wants to bring the man to the same level of transcendence as herself. She relates various tales, and through them, tries to tell the man that he has to reconcile with his feminine side. Sarvan is now yearning for Zan's nightly visits, eagerly wanting to learn more. Recasting his own life through Zan's nightly stories, he yearns for the blue state and views Zan's life as mirroring his own. He reflects on what Zan offers, which is to become the same as her. He sees Zan as a vehicle that can transport him to the blue state: a state of mind that can bring him wisdom, peace, and liberation, free from the boundaries of masculinity and femininity (*mardanegi v zananegi va ham mardiyat v zanniyat*). In this way, Zan becomes the medium between Sarvan and his inner voice.

As evidenced by one night in particular, Zan personifies the blue intellect and guides Sarvan to reach the blue state and from there, salvation. Zan appears at Sarvan's house and enters without knocking. She is covered with a blue garment:

He heard the door. He was surprised for two reasons. First because the woman said she opened the door herself. Second because she was

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<sup>35</sup>Abbas Milani, *Lost Wisdom: Rethinking Modernity in Iran* (Washington, DC: Mage Publishers, 2004), 154.

wearing blue. However, her blue dress did not seem like any kind of fabric one would have seen before; it was ethereal and flaming.

The lieutenant said: “Did you have a key?” The woman said: “Lieutenant, the hardest locks can still be broken with some skill, but I just turned the doorknob to open the door.”

The lieutenant said: “Maybe the door has been damaged by the bombing,” and she said: “No, it has not been damaged. In fact, it is as tight as the night before.” And lieutenant said: “You have ways of opening doors that I do not know.” The woman said: “Yes, this is true, and of course, you can also learn those ways easily.” Then she continued: “Didn’t I surprise you with my blue?” The lieutenant responded: “You should accept that wearing a blue like this and showing up at a man’s house is not right; it seems like a seduction.” And the woman responded: “I admire you for your honesty, but you have to understand that a woman is a woman and she will have her own ways.” She continued: “I have to tell you, though, I have worn this dress for a specific reason. This dress brings alienation and loneliness to me, and I will not be able to get rid of it; in fact, I have paid a high price for this dress.”<sup>36</sup>

The dialogue illustrates several important points that confirm Sarvan’s shift to the blue state. Zan, without permission, enters Sarvan’s home. The door of the house, which is the barrier between Sarvan and Zan, either has no lock or the lock is removed by Zan’s power. The door also metaphorically stands as a medium between the two states of mind; it represents the last shield between the man and woman. Zan’s entrance to Sarvan’s domain without barriers signifies their unification; the shift which is about to transpire in Sarvan is represented through his home, which no longer has a lock for Zan. The blue state is actualized by removing the boundaries. Hence when Zan purposely removes the door lock, she highlights that their souls are becoming united.

Zan also clarifies the purpose of her visits and why she wears blue. She aims to bring the man to the same level of transcendence and to inspire

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<sup>36</sup>Parsipur, *Aql-e Abi*, 321–23.

him to reconcile with his feminine side. The blue dress symbolizes the woman's journey to transcendence. She emblemizes a spiritual state by embodying it in her blue dress. She sheds light upon the darkness of the night; from darkness, she clamors to reach the light of self-gnosis and self-assertion. Zan, in her nightly visits, aims to liberate Sarvan's soul and invite him to experience the blue state with her. Further, the dress yields her an awareness that consequently estranges her from society. Zan epitomizes women in her society. She states that the dress alienates her, and she cannot ever be without this dress, showing that the dress is a token of awareness from which she cannot detach. She invites Sarvan to accompany her on the journey, and in the alienation she experiences, she warns him about the melancholy and loneliness that this enlightenment will impose on them.

### **Blue and Home: The Safe Domain**

At first, Sarvan's home is the realm where women and men lose their inhibitions and speak freely. However, at this time, Zan enters Sarvan's home autonomously, independent from the man, which signifies one of two resolutions: either that Sarvan accepts and welcomes woman's presence in his home or that his home is a medium that belongs to them both. Further, Sarvan's home symbolizes his subconscious mind; hence, Zan's entrance to the house underscores that she has successfully entered Sarvan's physical and mental domain and assures him that Zan can guide him to salvation and liberation. The private domain can also represent the transcendental space wherein man reconciles with his feminine side. Zan metaphorically uses the anecdote of the door and states, "The hardest locks can still be broken with some skill"; however, she easily opens the door. At this point, Zan uses the symbolic door to show that she has found the key to Sarvan's heart. This is illustrated through his openness to hear the inner voice that is hidden in his unconscious mind. The unlocked door implies to Sarvan that his resistance has been finally diminished, even if that has happened subconsciously.

When Zan sees Sarvan, she explains that the blue dress comes with responsibilities, as it brings awareness as well as isolation. Liberation

detaches her from society's boundaries, while isolation and seclusion refer to the search for the truth, making blue true to its archetypal meanings. Zan's alienation guides her to be an emancipated soul. Zan's dress is ethereal, unlike her physical body, echoing the form of her liberation and emancipation. In fact, this is a key difference between the female protagonist in *The Blue Intellect* and the supernatural female characters from Parsipur's other narratives. The entirety of woman as a corporeal figure is important and unique. In *The Blue Intellect*, she does not need to be ethereal (or dead) and resurrected in order to be liberated, wise, or capable of guiding Sarvan (*Zan goft: "Sarvan sakht-tarin ghofl-ha ra ba andaki maharat mitavan shekast. Amma man baraye baz kardan-e dar-e khaneye shoma faghat dastgireh ra pichandam."*).<sup>37</sup> She refers to the dress as a gift, a prize she received after achieving enlightenment. This connotation highlights and connects the symbolic dress to the archetypal meanings of blue. Blue becomes a motif to show emancipation and alienation. An emancipated soul is personified in the woman with her ethereal blue dress. Hence, the woman's search has found a resolution. She is not dead, but she has both corporeal and ethereal form simultaneously.

### **Zan, the Unblemished but Corporeal Figure**

Zan appears enlightened about the reality of life. She is liberated and seeks to guide and liberate Sarvan as well. Unlike Tuba, Zan emerges with complete awareness; she flows freely in society, aware of the reality of life. She returns at night to meet with the lieutenant and to guide him to salvation, wherein the resolution to the quest and the unresolved issue of search is embedded. Tuba, who all her life yearned to understand the meaning of the night (as the novel's title implies), reappears in *The Blue Intellect* as the emblematic figure (Zan).

In *Tuba and the Meaning of the Night* and *Women without Men*, women reclaim their long-lost power by either sequestering themselves from the outside world or separating themselves from men. In the first novel, Tuba epitomizes her home as a safe place and tries to protect other women by

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<sup>37</sup>Parsipur, *Aql-e Abi*, 321.



keeping them inside; from Tuba's vantage point, if the home is destroyed, the women and their power are destroyed as well. In the second narrative, women separate themselves from men; they move to a garden and create a manless community to find their power and liberty. However, in this last story, Zan is fluid and flowing, mobile and fruitful; she does not remain in the domain of the home. In fact, Sarvan remains in the domain of the home, and she appears every night to visit him. Zan seeks to reconcile with her masculine side and helps the man/Sarvan to do the same.

Furthermore, in the previous narratives, the main figures obtain a supernatural power only after they die and return to life. Tuba is enlightened after her death, and Munis is enlightened after she returns to life as a ghost. Zan, however, is gifted with the power of *andishidan*<sup>38</sup> while still in the corporeal realm. Zan is the prototype of intellect, and she symbolizes the blue intellect. She represents the peaceful mind whose aim is to reconcile with the man. Also, she can be immortal and ethereal even in a corporeal form. Zan embodies all that which Tuba, Leila, Setareh, Mahdokht, both Munises, and Zarrinkolah individually present in their ethereal or worldly form. She is the sum of the parts. Zan has reached a wholeness and perfection in the corporeal form that is beyond masculinity and femininity.

As previously discussed, Munis's primary aim is to liberate herself and other women from male hegemony and to emancipate their souls. She asks other females to ponder *andishidan* and hopes that through this intellectual task, they can emancipate their body and soul from ritual and cultural boundaries. She neither pursues reconciliation with men, nor wants men to guide her or her women. She pursues an understanding of her virginity and believes that by resolving the issue of virginity, she can overcome her sense of hostility. Therefore, Munis believes a woman should disengage from the body and separate from men to be liberated.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>*Andishidan* literally means the ability to think but metaphorically means having special speculation or enlightenment that Sarvan does not have.

<sup>39</sup>This belief is similar to the Sufi practices that one should separate from the body and material world to be enlightened.

In *The Blue Intellect*, Zan exceeds the boundaries of chastity and virginity. She invites both women and men to transcend physical boundaries. She embodies an ethereal and immortal figure in a mortal/worldly form. Zan has an absolute understanding of her nature and her value in the universe. She is comfortable with her feminine side, stating, “A woman is a woman. She has her own feelings and moods” (*yek Zan Zan ast, hal v ahvale khode ra darad*).<sup>40</sup> She understands her body and her psyche. Zan categorizes her gender as the origin of existence, and she views men as her dependent half, not in opposition to her.<sup>41</sup> Zan’s realization is superior to those of all the other women in the other two novels.

### Conclusion

*The Blue Intellect* is in many ways the work of emancipation which leads to resolution. In *The Blue Intellect*, all the narrative tropes and historical insights of the past novels come together to present an ultimate state of liberation. The novel shows the perfected woman, Zan, whose soul and intellect have achieved the serenity of blue. She epitomizes the transcendental level of being above the boundaries of society and politics, as well as the barriers that limit the dynamics of men and women. Zan encompasses all the female figures and represents every dynamic of their quest and search.

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<sup>40</sup>Parsipur, *Aql-e Abi*, 322.

<sup>41</sup>Parsipur, *Aql-e Abi*, 322.