

# Feminist Historical Writing in Postrevolutionary Iran

## *Missing Soluch* and *My Share*

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**ABSTRACT** This article argues that Mahmoud Dowlatabadi's *Missing Soluch* and Parinoush Saniee's *My Share* are landmark works of feminist historical writing in Iran that disrupt official narratives in the country regarding the revolutionary project. Despite the different positions Dowlatabadi and Saniee occupy in the Persian literary field, both *Missing Soluch* and *My Share* reflect the ethos of the 1979 Revolution in some way, one its euphoric beginning and the other its complicated aftermath. The article argues that both novelists pursue an innovative genre of historical writing by contesting official historical-masculinist narratives of their time. *Missing Soluch* offers readers a working-class feminist politics on the eve of revolutionary upheaval. *My Share* constructs a feminist politics critical of the postrevolutionary nation's betrayal of Iranian women's liberation despite women's critical participation in the 1979 Revolution. Dowlatabadi anticipates the tensions between gender politics and the postrevolutionary nation, while Saniee makes that tension explicit as part of a feminist critique of historical erasure.

**KEYWORDS** Iran, revolution, Persian literature, gender

An impoverished peasant woman fights to keep a meager plot of land from being taken over by an industrial farming project in rural northeastern Iran in the 1960s. A middle-class woman in 1970s Tehran, forced into marriage with a Marxist dissident, joins a revolutionary movement yet struggles to claim her share of its victory in the decades that follow. Each story line drives the action of a different novel. At first glance, there is hardly much to compare. The first protagonist, Mergan, struggles for her and her children's survival against the literal disintegration of her way of life and subsistence and her limited inheritance rights as a woman,



of many intellectuals targeted for assassination in the so-called Chain Murders linked to the Ministry of Interior. Over the years some of his works have been refused publication permits (Rastegar 2007: 442). With regard to Saniee, *My Share* was approved for publication initially but banned shortly afterward. At the time, many Iranians were demanding an end to censorship as a sympathetic reformist president struggled against right-wing members of the judiciary who shut down reformist and dissident publications.

Despite the different positions Dowlatabadi and Saniee occupy in the Persian literary field, both *Missing Soluch* and *My Share* are landmark works published after the Revolution. That is, their respective releases coincided with and marked a new era in Iranian politics. They both reflect the ethos of the 1979 Revolution in some way, one its euphoric beginning and the other its complicated aftermath. *Missing Soluch*, published immediately after the Revolution's victory, centered on working-class women who had been marginalized by the shah's modernization policies. It is clearly a revolutionary story in that it could only have been produced out of the deepening chasm between the shah and Iranians, which would explode into a revolutionary movement. In fact, Dowlatabadi, targeted by the shah's regime as a dissident intellectual, conceived of the novel during his two-year term in prison in the mid-1970s. He wrote *Missing Soluch* "in [his] mind" until he set pen to paper after his release at the height of the anti-shah demonstrations (Rastegar 2007: 443). Yet the novel's publication immediately after the Revolution and the fact that it would be read by a postrevolutionary audience raised a glaring question: What would the revolutionary victory mean for women like Mergan? After all, the story concludes with her implied migration to the cities in search of work. That the novel was published amid this revolutionary euphoria left the conclusion starkly open-ended: How would impoverished women, including rural-to-urban migrant women, fare after the Revolution? *Missing Soluch* thus anticipated major questions of women's and poor people's movements that would continue in Iran in the 1990s and the first two decades of this century. The uprising in Iran of November 2019, sparked by austerity and met with unprecedented deadly violence, has made the novel's themes of poor people's popular resistance in the periphery even more prescient.

*My Share*, which came on the scene over twenty years later, conducted an unorthodox retelling of the Revolution. It was published at the height of the reform era, five years after the watershed election of the reformist Mohammad Khatami. Many were disillusioned at the inability of the reformists to make good on their promises to open up political freedoms. These years had seen heightened public protest and political tensions between ruling factions. Following the novel's publication and subsequent banning, reformists experienced defeats in local and national parliamentary elections in 2003 and 2004 due largely to unfair vetting of their candidates, and they ultimately lost the presidency to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005 because many disillusioned voters stayed home (Harris 2017: 183–84, 189).

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These events demonstrated that the political sphere was profoundly contested among both the public and political elites. So was the historical memory of the Revolution. It is in this heightened political context that the reception of *My Share* must be understood. Thus, while there may be other postrevolutionary novels that feature women protagonists, there is a striking comparative ground shared by these novels. Namely, both are landmark works of historical writing that imagine a form of feminist politics, one launched from the vantage point of revolutionary victory and the other from that of reformism's rise and subsequent stagnation. Each novel's ability to poetically capture the political moment contributed to its respective popularity and impact. Ultimately, I argue that Dowlatabadi anticipated questions of gender politics in the postrevolutionary period, while Saniee made such issues explicit as part of a feminist critique of historical erasure.

### **Mergan and *Missing Soluch***

In *Missing Soluch* Mergan is a militant figure who, in her steadfastness and fighting spirit, invokes the female revolutionary of 1970s Iran while being a deeply multi-dimensional character whose internal emotional life lends complexity to the narrative. The novel was in part produced out of a 1970s Third World ethos, leading Amirhossein Vafa to situate Mergan alongside other memorable Third World women protagonists such as Umm Saad, who in Ghassan Kanafani's novel of the same name struggles to regain land lost after Israel's 1967 Six-Day War against Palestinians. If Mergan engenders a feminist "poetics of defiance," as Vafa (2016: 133) argues, I show that she is not a one-dimensional symbol of defiance but a complicated figure, a fighter who also navigates the often contradictory emotional forces of love, intimacy, doubt, and despair. Thus *Missing Soluch* launches a deeply gender-conscious treatment of class struggle that complicates and humanizes the symbol of the militant Iranian woman. Narrative passages that explore this internal emotional life range from themes of desire and sexuality to shifts between love and resentment of Mergan's children, given their naïveté and carelessness when dealing with the new industrial farming project in their village. Seen holistically, Dowlatabadi's representations of militancy, love, and different forms of intimacy all challenge patriarchal constructions of women's docility, obedience, and shameful desires.

From the novel's opening Mergan struggles in a world that is not only changing but disintegrating. Work is becoming scarce in her rural village of Zaminej (a fictional place in Dowlatabadi's home province of Khorasan). Her livelihood, like that of other peasants in the village, depends on unpredictable seasonal work as an *aftab nishin*, or agricultural laborer, literally a "sunward squatter" (Vafa 2016: 134). Petty landowners and some village leaders work with outside developers to convert Zaminej into a large-scale pistachio farm, pressuring residents, including Mergan, to give up the meager plots of land that are their only source of income. Pistachios come to symbolize a civilizing medicine to village residents, to whom the crop is

unknown: “Pistachios. Even the name was unfamiliar. Abbas [one of Mergan’s sons] had never even eaten a pistachio. He’d heard it was something similar to the meat of an apricot pit. . . . But in Zaminej, all that came out of the ground was barley and wheat and cotton” (Dowlatabadi 2007: 307). Outside forces have determined that a new crop will dictate everything about Zaminej — its geography, identity, and culture. The desires and aspirations of village residents must veer toward the gravity of this new crop and operation. While Mergan is one of the residents who staunchly oppose the change, some, including her son Abrau, are enticed by the promises of the landowners and investors. Abrau hopes to find meaning and fulfillment in the work of driving a new tractor. The historical backdrop of the novel is the so-called White Revolution of the 1960s under Mohammad Reza Shah. This series of reforms included a land redistribution program that was billed as an antidote to peasant suffering but actually created a class of petty proprietors and exacerbated conditions for peasants under the direction of a US-backed authoritarian state. Mergan’s husband — the titular yet perpetually absent Soluch — has left Zaminej right before the novel begins to find work in the mines near the city of Shahroud. Vafa (2016: 163) concludes that “manhood is a lost project” in *Missing Soluch*. In other words, Mergan’s son fails to achieve a proper and respectable masculinity by working as the new tractor driver, and the proprietors, along with the national patriarchs from the government and the provincial capital, are also emasculated when the project fails. Afsaneh Najmabadi (1998: 46) shows that the typical story of valiant Iranian nationalism, as early as the 1906 Constitutional Revolution, has in part been a story of male guardians protecting women and children. Iranian women have in subsequent periods made their own claims of what it means to live modern and emancipated lives against the grain of this discourse of protection. But in *Missing Soluch* this notion of protection is inverted, and such a masculinist narrative of nationalism is challenged. The male protector is absent, and Mergan is the main actor in her own story. She both fights men and outsmarts them. In her tenacity, she demonstrates that the men who claim to protect her and her family’s future are really only after their self-interest. Her youngest son goes along with the farming project ostensibly to protect her, but in the end it is Mergan who has read the cards correctly and acted as the true guardian. Avenues of state protection break down as well: Mergan cannot claim the legal support to which a widow is entitled because Soluch is never officially confirmed as dead. In writing a novel whose titular character is absent throughout, Dowlatabadi constructs a literary convention that reveals the destructive gendered dependency inherent in patriarchy. Yet this move clearly also makes the story an emotionally charged illustration of the struggles of single working women.

The protagonist’s first battle comes thirty pages into the novel, when Mergan is forced to defend her paltry possessions from a lender who has come to collect debts incurred by Soluch. Unbeknownst to Mergan, Soluch promised some prized copper household items — a trousseau to Mergan from her brother — to the lender in

exchange for wheat. Spooked by Soluch's sudden disappearance, the lender's son comes to demand repayment in full. In refusing to hand over her trousseau, Mergan sheds light on the breakdown of a system that devalues her wealth even when it is lawfully hers according to the customs of Islamic marriage. A bitter physical confrontation ensues in which she emerges as the victor and the man flees. This episode, the first major dramatic action in the novel, sets the tone for the reader's engagement with the protagonist. Mergan wins a physical battle that emasculates a major figure in the village, one who will come to hold a large stake in the new agricultural operation. She plants her feet squarely in men's supposed terrain, rather than surreptitiously navigating it when they are not looking. It is a tremendous act of overcoming her own fear. In this and other narrative passages, Dowlatatabadi allows the reader to see Mergan's growing courage and staunch defiance not only of the power brokers in her village but also of other impoverished residents in a context where crisis pits neighbors against one another. In these ways, Dowlatatabadi represents what Kamran Rastegar (2007: 441), the novel's translator, calls a "complex ethics of poverty" and "horizontal violence" among the dispossessed, including gender violence within families. Yet Mergan's actions also signal a desire to create horizontal cohesion among the peasants. In fact, by fighting to retain her plot of land, she does her part to keep the fabric of the village from disintegrating into horizontal and class violence through privatization and fragmentation. The novel's focus on women's experience within class struggle demonstrates the difficult position of fighting certain battles on one's own while building solidarity to fight larger structural forces. Mergan is also somewhat masculinized through seasonal work and odd jobs such as whitewashing villagers' walls. The narrator describes her as someone who "could do the work of two men" (Dowlatatabadi 2007: 80). This type of gendering illustrates that as a single working mother, Mergan cannot afford the luxuries of feminine docility and domesticity.

Mergan's tenacity appears to know no limits as a newly empowered clique of landowners working with the Iranian government pressures her to give up her plot of land for the pistachio farm. The plot lies within a section of the village known as "God's Land" (*khudazamin*), ironically so named because the soil is poor and the land mostly fallow, though we learn that it used to be "alive, fertile" (Dowlatatabadi 2007: 366). Dowlatatabadi leaves the origins of the name God's Land open-ended. One interpretation is that the villagers chose it to satirize their misfortune, claiming that only God could make this land fruitful now. The Persian phrase *khudazamin* can also be translated as "Godland," as though the land were being mocked — named as agriculturally superior to all other lands when in fact it is quite the opposite. From another perspective, however, the name God's Land is a way for the villagers to remember that the land was once fruitful and that it is common land, belonging to no individual. Yet conversely, because none of the villagers has a legitimate claim on it, God's Land is a convenient designation that allows the architects of the pistachio farm to further privatize it.

Mergan uses Islamic law to defend her property in God's Land from the landowners and developers. Through her defense of her plot there, Dowlatatabadi also brings to the fore gendered Islamic codes of property and inheritance and the political debates around these issues that continued in Iranian society for decades after the publication of the novel. While he introduces the issue of property with the contested status of Mergan's copper possessions, he further dramatizes property relations in the struggle over her land. Although Soluch has left his wife and children, it is unclear whether Mergan has a rightful claim to the family plot. The newly empowered clique tells her sons that a woman "can't inherit the land. . . . [She] can only have a claim on the house and the household" (Dowlatatabadi 2007: 276). The village elders assume that Soluch is dead, yet because his death has not been confirmed, they will not recognize any financial claims Mergan would have as a widow under Islamic law. Thus Mergan herself calculates her inheritance of the land according to shari'a custom (366). The plot is divided into six sections, two each for the two sons but only one for her daughter, Hajer, and one for herself, because women are entitled to half the portion of male relatives. Yet even while her claim is reduced and fractionalized, she is determined to defend her land from the developers. In seven pages of narrative Mergan drives the action without ever speaking a word. She digs a ditch in her land and stands there, refusing to let clamoring landowners, police officers, and a government bureaucrat from the Land Registry Office acquire her land for the pistachio operation. As in the early scene with the lender's son, she makes her claims according to her interpretation of the law, and she casts her detractors as the unlawful ones. In this scene she is clearly the most commanding presence even though she does not speak. Indeed, her silence speaks more loudly than the bellowing of the men on the ground above her. She is eventually brought face-to-face with her own son, who drives a tractor to the edge of the ditch and wrestles with her (426). For Dowlatatabadi, the confrontation between mother and son, a son whom Mergan loves dearly, also exemplifies a larger severance of the village from its way of life.

Mergan's militancy is often developed through animalistic imagery that verges on the fantastic. These metaphors, sometimes spoken in the voices of other characters, give her a superhuman shade at times. She is described as "a dragon protecting treasure," a "lioness in a cage," a "stubborn mule," and "mother wolf" (Dowlatatabadi 2007: 77, 365, 276, 499). Drawing on these descriptions, a simplistic analysis might claim that Mergan is not a complex character, that though she is not the traditional demure and muted female character, she is an animalistic caricature that is equally one-dimensional. Such a view would agree with the analysis of Azar Nafisi (2003: 994), who has spoken on the supposed merits of the Western novel over what she views as simplistic Iranian literature: "The women in these works are usually patient and strong; their contradictions are mainly external, reflecting the class conflict within the society. They lack what I call 'interiority': the individuality,

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the inner conflicts and contradictions that give Western realistic novels such amazing lights and shades.” But nothing could be farther from the truth than the claim that Mergan lacks interiority or that, as Nafisi suggests, she is merely a vehicle for delivering Dowlatatabadi’s leftist political message (995). In fact, vibrant and forceful prose brings the reader into Mergan’s internal emotional life. Below I analyze the novel’s rich rendering of her complex internal life in passages that illustrate her psychological and emotional struggles, particularly with regard to the meaning of her love for Soluch, her desire for intimacy, and her fraught relationship with her youngest son, who goes along with the pistachio farm.

In one passage, a breathtaking winter snow triggers a daydream in which Mergan wades into pleasant memories of her youth, when the fields were filled with pleasurable sights, smells, and sounds. These pleasant memories cause her to become *digargun*, that is, shaken up, transformed, or metamorphosed. Dowlatatabadi (1982: 121) writes: “*pindar . . . mirgan ra digargun kardah bud*” (these imaginings . . . had transformed Mergan). This shaking up induces her to give herself over to memories of attraction and desire.

Mergan had been renewed with new sensations. The kind of sensations that adolescent girls overflow with, the same ones that Mergan herself had while crossing the wasteland of puberty, drunken and confused some twenty years ago. Those days when she felt she could wrap all the men in the world into a single embrace, when Mergan had spring fever . . . in breasts heaving and hearts filled with joy; the flow of blood in the veins and the occasional taste of love; a love that was hidden, not yet emerging. It was in just being. In being at work, in the home, in bed, in the fields. Being in love . . . in loving everything. The man’s firm shoulders. The sweet scent of underarm sweat. Soluch’s shirt, a mix of sweat and dust. (Dowlatatabadi 2007: 122)

The memory morphs into images of pregnancy and Mergan’s newborn son, laughing. The daydream itself is a metamorphosis from the present Mergan—the embattled and isolated fighter—to a Mergan past, madly in love, heartily working, and joyful at the newness of motherhood. There is almost a pulsating quality to the prose, a lyrical rendering of her joyous spirit, that celebrates her desire for Soluch. These thoughts are narrated in a stream-of-consciousness manner that frenetically mixes the cycles of her life as a lover, mother, worker, desiring woman, and self. Indeed, these aspects of Mergan are inseparable from one another. Despite her resentment and disgust at Soluch’s abandonment, her internal life is complicated by old memories of her desire for him and their passionate love, an ancient yearning of years gone by. These passages contradict Nafisi’s (2003: 995) claim that the reader is told that “love becomes meaningless between people without money.”

Particularly evocative is Mergan’s memory of a type of love ritual in which she gathered wheat for Soluch during a harvest together (Dowlatatabadi 2007: 124). He





These highly evocative renderings show Mergan battling both internal doubts and painful decisions *as well as* external obstacles in her drive to maintain what she sees as her and her family's right and survival.

Dowlatabadi has not been traditionally discussed as a feminist writer. The Raha Feminist Collective (2011), a network of Iranian and Iranian American feminists, included *Missing Soluch* as one of twenty-one "essential readings" on Iranian "political modernity and social movements," the only novel on the list. Vafa's analysis of the novel, discussed previously, also uses feminist approaches. *Missing Soluch* is a novel about class struggle from a woman's perspective during the fall of the Pahlavi dynasty, so those feminists for whom, unlike Raha, class and capitalism do not matter will not claim it as significant for gender analysis or recognize it as a feminist work. Still, it represents class struggle as inseparable from gender politics, indeed as intimately connected to it in areas such as women's legal position vis-à-vis marriage, widowhood, inheritance, and labor. Other scholars have also noted the strongly developed female characters of Dowlatabadi's magnum opus, the multivolume epic *Kelidar* (Emami 1989: 89–90; Rastegar 2007; Yavari 1989). *Kelidar* goes somewhat against the grain of the Persian-centrism of Iranian literature by making Kurdish women characters a driving force in the narrative. As Yavari (1989: 96) argues, these characters are the linking threads between the volumes as embodiments of enlightenment, resistance, and survival. Even still, as a male writer Dowlatabadi's representations of women's struggles cannot come from experience. One limitation of the gender analysis in *Missing Soluch*, for example, has to do with the rape of Mergan later in the story. The event is not given the serious treatment it needs. There is little narrative space devoted to the protagonist's healing from this traumatic experience, beyond simply demonstrating the existence of sexual violence as yet another aspect of power relations in women's lives.

At the same time, it is telling that when Dowlatabadi was a child, his mother sowed the seeds of *Missing Soluch* in his mind, passing down to him a story of a woman in the village named Mergan whose husband had left her and her children, and who would stew lamb fat every night with a bit of dry grass so her neighbors would think she could afford meat and not pity her (Vafa 2016: 150). This childhood memory of his mother's tale, in the context of Dowlatabadi's own upbringing as a farmhand and seasonal agricultural laborer in rural northeastern Iran, are the origins of the novel. The credit thus partly goes to the writer's mother, who passed the story down, knowing that it was worth retelling. Perhaps this is the reason that he included a dedication in at least one Persian edition of the novel, not found in the English translation: "In honor of our mothers" (Dowlatabadi 1982: 4). Decades after his mother recounted this story, the publication of *Missing Soluch*, following the victory of the Revolution and amid a brief period of hope and optimism, paralleled the upheaval in Iran's political world with an upheaval in the literary world, showing what new stories could be possible for Iranian novelists. Such stories would be richly intersectional and politically meaningful without being moralistic or editorializing.



plot. Tehran becomes the site of clashing cultural worlds during an era of increased migration to the metropolis of different people from different walks of life. This periphery-to-center motif appears in both novels though functions in quite different ways. In *My Share* the protagonist has moved from the religious province (Qom) to the secularizing capital (Tehran), symbolizing movement from a solely religious awareness to a direct engagement with political and social affairs, hence Massoumeh's participation in the Revolution. In such a way, her move to Tehran also symbolizes the politicization of religion in the 1979 Revolution and the transformation of Shi'a Islam into a centralized bureaucratic political system. Yet Massoumeh's migration is different from Mergan's implied movement from the rural countryside to the mines of the city of Shahroud. *My Share* begins with its protagonist's migration; it is the story's premise. *Missing Soluch* concludes with its protagonist's migration; it is the story's cliff-hanger. The agricultural project has failed in Zaminej. Mergan has become a pariah to the village elders. The seasonal labor she did as an *aftab nishin* has dried up. If the element of religion and piety is a strong motif in *My Share*, given Saniee's choice to write Massoumeh's family as a pious family from Qom, then the geographic changes in Dowlatabadi's novel deal with capitalist relations and land reform directly, showing the painful dislocations that Pahlavi modernization from above caused for rural communities trying to subsist. If for Saniee movement from Qom to Tehran is meant to symbolize political awareness outside religious life, movement from Zaminej to Shahroud for Dowlatabadi represents displacement as a result of capitalist dispossession. On a surface level both protagonists are economic migrants in some way, though Mergan's economic displacement is more jolting and severe. On a symbolic level, however, one reflects urbanization caused by capitalism and the other reflects the politicization of Islam.

In *My Share* Massoumeh's arrival in Tehran, a city with a different culture from Qom's, places her in a difficult position in relation to her family. She goes to school but is subject to increasing control and beatings at the hands of her brothers, who feel that the more open climate in Tehran is not suitable for a good Muslim woman and are anxious that she not be corrupted by less-pious girls at school. In the narration she remarks that her brothers' actions make it seem "as if the entire population of Tehran was waiting for me to arrive so that they could corrupt me" (Saniee 2013: 4). Some years later her family marries her off to a local man, Hamid, to whom she is indifferent. The years that follow witness the politicization of Massoumeh within the climate of growing social agitation and ferment in the 1970s. Hamid is a member of a clandestine Marxist revolutionary group, unbeknownst to Massoumeh's family at the time they initiated the marriage. Massoumeh experiences a political awakening that is both connected to and independent of Hamid's. In one scene, Hamid expresses his admiration of her knowledge of politics and remarks that it is a shame that she did not continue her education (187). The irony of

the remark is that Massoumeh's education had been interrupted in part by the birth of her first child, Siamak, whom she has been raising largely in the absence of Hamid, whose time has been increasingly demanded by his political activities. She resents his absence in their children's lives. She is also resentful that Hamid and some of his friends in the group have typed her as a provincial, blindly religious woman, "a backward child or an uneducated woman," although she has lived in Tehran since her adolescence. They fail to notice that she is a voracious reader (187). Their assumptions do not align with her self-perception as someone for whom education has been a lifelong goal.

Massoumeh is thus represented as a political being in her own right, even though she initially feels that others see her as an extension of her husband's politics. When Hamid is arrested by the shah's secret police, SAVAK, and becomes one of the regime's political prisoners, she is forced to seek employment to provide for herself and her two children. Through a connection from her father-in-law, she finds work as a secretary in a government agency. Her coworkers begin to lionize her because her husband is a political prisoner, eventually nominating her to a revolutionary committee (Saniee 2013: 249). She initially rejects the nomination and feels that her coworkers admire her not for her actual knowledge or political positions but solely for her status as the wife of a political prisoner. On the one hand, Massoumeh's response illustrates her objections to her coworkers' superficial inclusion of her in political activities. Saniee's critique here can be understood more broadly as a critique of women's superficial inclusion in momentous revolutionary movements. On the other hand, the scene also reveals how she has become a political subject and has inspired the trust and admiration of her coworkers, who demand her leadership. Massoumeh's status as a single mother has up to this point been treated as auxiliary, necessitated by her husband's imprisonment. Yet in this scene, the coworker who nominates her emphasizes motherhood as a revolutionary act in itself: "You have suffered, your husband has spent years in prison, and you have single-handedly managed your life and raised your children. Is all this not a reflection of your sharing his ideologies and beliefs?" (249). It is indicative of the attitude that Massoumeh resents: namely, the idea that she has adopted communist views solely because she has been enlightened by her husband. She knows that, on the contrary, she has developed her own political consciousness through independent study and thought. Throughout the novel she is an avid reader, studying diverse political work in a rigorous manner, although she does not belong to any political group. Yet the contradiction is that Massoumeh still does not see herself as "political." She suffers from an internalized self-doubt, an idea that she is not knowledgeable enough to be a member of any group, let alone to lead a revolutionary committee.

However, the coworker's remark encapsulates many layers of the debate around women's roles as revolutionary subjects. It brings attention to Massoumeh's reproductive labor and work in singlehandedly supporting herself and her children

in the face of intimidation, harassment, and psychological warfare from the authorities. Yet this is a double-edged sword. As many feminists engaged with Third World movements have argued, Third World nationalisms reproduced the patriarchal basis of the nation-state and designated women as the reproducers of the populace and passive caretakers of the national body (Jayawardena 1986; McClintock 1991; Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989). In this light, the observation that Massoumeh has dutifully taken care of her children as her husband engages the political world adheres to those normative nationalist prescriptions. Yet, on closer inspection, the issue is more complicated. A mother who singlehandedly cares for herself and her children, not only in the absence of familial and state support but in the face of outright state violence, must occupy a thoroughly political and insurgent position. The challenge is to retain the analysis of reproductive labor — specifically of child raising — as potentially insurgent and political while shedding the baggage of patriarchal nationalism and gender ideology. In *Missing Soluch*, for example, Mergan fights political battles every day against neighbors, petty landowners, village elders, and government officials from outside her village. Like Massoumeh, she does it while she safeguards her own and her children's survival, which in itself is a challenge to those who seek her demise.

Massoumeh eventually sheds her self-doubt and recognizes herself as a political woman for a time. During the mass demonstrations of late 1977 and 1978, she experiences the meaning of a deeply political and communal sense of love for the first (and last) time in her life. In the throngs of people on the streets, she thinks: "I wanted to hold every person in my arms and kiss them. It was perhaps the first and the last time I experienced such emotions for my fellow countrymen. I felt they were all my children, my father, my mother, my brothers and my sisters" (Saniee 2013: 256). She experiences what it means to transform deep rage into political action and social community.

A significant factor in Massoumeh's politicization is her relationship with Shahrzad, an active member in her husband's clandestine revolutionary group. She admires Shahrzad and sees her as "the symbol of competence, political astuteness, courage, and self-reliance . . . superhuman . . . twice as perceptive and intelligent as my husband, even giving him orders" (Saniee 2013: 198). Shahrzad represents the numbers of militant leftist Iranian women during the 1970s. Her character also reflects how women's leadership and strategic thinking, no matter what faction they belonged to, were indispensable to the revolutionary movement. She and Massoumeh develop a deep and intimate friendship, confiding in each other secrets of both personal and political import unbeknownst to Hamid. Shahrzad, who stays with Massoumeh and Hamid for some months when she goes into hiding from the shah's regime, develops a deep compassion and love for Massoumeh's son Massoud. As the women's friendship grows, they are surprised one day when each admits that she is jealous of the other. To Massoumeh, Shahrzad is "educated, brave, a capable





At the same time, Saniee's narrative seems at times to reproduce the stereotypical trope that all women have maternal desires and instincts. Indeed, later in the novel, Massoumeh implies that Shahrzad's desire for children is attributable to her being a woman (Saniee 2013: 270). How might we reject such a biodetermined narrative while retaining Saniee's critique of the false binary between politics and motherhood? This is the challenge for the presents and futures of revolutionary political work. In the nuanced relationship between Massoumeh (the mother) and Shahrzad (the freedom fighter), Saniee writes two figures who not only love and respect each other but also see a version of themselves in the other, a version they feel has perhaps been lost forever.

*My Share* also lent a more visible and public expression to growing discussions around perceived betrayals of the Revolution. In the novel Massoumeh's older brothers, avid supporters of the Islamist revolutionary factions, disparage Hamid because of his Marxist beliefs. Once he becomes one of the shah's political prisoners and his name is lionized among the ranks of other dissidents, however, they shower him with praise, holding public gatherings for his release in their homes. Massoumeh, who already resents her brothers for their childhood domestic abuse of her and for hastily marrying her off to a man they did not care to meet or know, is angered even more when she witnesses their disingenuous political opportunism as they call for Hamid's release. They eventually betray Hamid after the Revolution. In the decades that follow, they become wealthy, exploiting connections they made during their involvement in the Islamic revolutionary movement and being rewarded by elites tied to government circles. At the time of its publication, the novel gave expression to the disdain of some Iranians for the ultra-enrichment of a very small segment of society. In recent years such public sentiment has become much more widespread. A contemporary expression of this sentiment is *aqazadah*, or "noble-born," a pejorative term for young heirs of the elite sectors who have used their influence to increase their wealth. Ultra-rich young Iranians, often tied to powerful business and political sectors, flaunt their wealth on social media with photos of lavish parties, pet tigers, private jets, and luxury cars in shamelessly named Instagram pages such as "Rich Kids of Tehran" (Cunningham 2019). Like Massoumeh, the majority of Iranians decry this kind of oligarchy status, while they suffer the effects of US economic warfare through sanctions and Iranian government mismanagement. In 2017 Iranians created the hashtag #goodgenes to mock the elite after the son of the reformist Mohammad Aref attributed his wealth and success to good genes (Cunningham 2019). This kind of brazen visibility of wealth has in part led to increased public outcry, including the winter 2017–18 and November 2019 nationwide protests against austerity, which were met with deadly repression. *My Share* was published at a time when this sentiment and the term *aqazadah* had not yet dominated political discourse. Yet its anticipation of such a discourse feels all the more prescient when reading the novel now.



atmosphere of toxic mistrust and disenchantment. The victors sought to create popular cohesion and unity by selectively retelling the Revolution. Yet it had the opposite effect, as censorship suppressed conversations that could air and process mistrust, resentment, and division. *My Share* amplified the popular challenges to that selective state-sanctioned retelling and mobilized historical memory as a tool for healing.

The novel also lends itself to what some scholars have called a postcolonial feminist reading practice. Anna Ball (2012: 3) analyzes Palestinian literature and cinema to argue that a postcolonial feminist politics is “a multi-directional act of ‘writing back’ to not one but many centres of power.” Jessica Murray (2011: 151) also argues that the works of the Zimbabwean writer Yvonne Vera can be understood through the lens of postcolonial feminism, given that Vera’s female protagonists “reveal the complexity of the position occupied by the colonized woman and the sophistication of their attempt to address the layered marginalization to which they are subjected.” Rebecca Gould (2014: 219) argues that postcolonial feminist critics and writers like the Syrian novelist Ghadah al-Samman disrupt the masculine solidarity of postcolonial nation-states. A similar dynamic between anti-imperialism and gender politics is at play in Iran. A radical anti-imperialism engendered a popular revolution, yet now the anti-imperialist narrative has been domesticated by the postrevolutionary nation-state, which shuts down any attempts to align an anti-imperialist politics with projects to transform gender relations. *My Share* similarly complicates the aftermath of anti-imperialist revolution in Iran by launching a critique of the entrenchment of new elites. Yet if we read the novel in conjunction with the works of other postcolonial writers like al-Samman and Vera, we see how anti-imperialism in and of itself could never have been enough to constitute liberation in Iran, let alone for Iranian women, in the way that anticolonialism was not enough to liberate Syrians or Zimbabweans. What relations of power, what internal oppressions, remain after the imperialists are thrown out? These are the questions Saniee engages head on.

If a postcolonial feminist lens sheds light on *My Share* as a critique of gender relations in postrevolutionary Iran, then *Missing Soluch* is a damning critique of the Pahlavi regime that also anticipates the struggles that working-class women would continue to face in the postrevolutionary period. Scholars have not analyzed *Missing Soluch* as a “postrevolutionary novel” for obvious reasons, given that its subject matter is the Pahlavi-era land-reform program of the 1960s. Further, as Rastegar (2007: 441) argues, Dowlatabadi frustrates a neat division of Persian literature into prerevolutionary and postrevolutionary canons as he writes across these periods and their associated preoccupations and sensibilities. Yet despite its subject matter, *Missing Soluch* was, owing to its appearance after the Revolution, read entirely by a postrevolutionary audience. Its analysis must therefore contend with how readers would view the final throes of the Pahlavi era from a postrevolutionary vantage

point. Further, the novel concludes with the implicit question of the fates of impoverished women who, like Mergan, had been driven out of the rural areas and into the cities, fates that would unfold as part of postrevolutionary political developments. In the novel's final pages Mergan is poised to leave the village behind to seek work near the city of Shahroud, asking: "What kind of place are the mines? How are they . . . ? Is there work for women there as well?" (Dowlatabadi 2007: 507). Her final question is the third-to-last sentence of the novel. That the novel literally concludes with a question forms the crux of my claim that Dowlatabadi invites the reader to think of Mergan's future after the book ends. The literal question is "Is there work for women there?" Yet the figurative question is "What will I/we face now?" Placing Mergan's question so strikingly at the end in the context of the novel's publication immediately after the Revolution has the effect of posing an even more dramatic question: What will the Revolution ultimately mean for those in Mergan's position? The massive rural-to-urban migration represented in the novel led to the creation of slums and shantytowns on city outskirts lacking in basic necessities. These conditions led to poor people's movements in urban parts of Iran in the 1980s and 1990s, as Asef Bayat has shown. One protest slogan during these years, for example, was "Na sharqui, na gharbi, na aabi, na barqui" (Neither East nor West; neither water nor electricity) (Bayat 1997: 86). Such a chant parodied the slogan "Na sharqui, na gharbi, jomhuri-yi islami" (Neither East nor West; [we want an] Islamic Republic) by some in government circles, bringing attention to the denial of the most basic necessities to impoverished urban migrants. More recently, the November 2019 protests, sparked by a gas price increase, took place in many peripheral cities, including Shahroud, Mergan's implied destination when she prepares to leave Zaminej at the end of *Missing Soluch* (BBC 2019). Just a year before, in 2018, people in Isfahan and Khuzestan in southwestern Iran took part in water protests against shortages that they attributed to drought and government mishandling of the crisis (Dehghanpisheh 2018). Such droughts seem poised to yet again result in internal displacement and migration. In telling Mergan's story in year zero of the Revolution, Dowlatabadi set the stage for what the postrevolutionary condition would mean for working-class women like Mergan.

The novel was made more poignant for readers in 1979 by the setbacks that the nascent state dealt to women's position in family law with regard to their rights in divorce, marriage, child custody, and inheritance. What would Mergan's struggle to maintain a plot of land in the new society look like? Would she still have to interpret and negotiate the patriarchal legal codes of property and inheritance, made more difficult by her inability to prove that she is a widow? When I read *Missing Soluch*, its representation of a poor woman's claims to a small inheritance made me think of my conversations with contemporary women's movement activists who had organized and led the 2006–8 One Million Signatures Campaign for the Reform of Discriminatory Laws against Women. Internally, activists debated whether changing

family law was a priority for poor and working-class women, responding to simplistic arguments that such women cared about their daily survival and supposedly had very little to inherit. A false binary was created between legal rights in divorce and inheritance and “daily survival.” Under such a view, a middle-class woman like Massoumeh in *My Share* was more likely to benefit from the campaign than women like Mergan. Mergan’s story, however, shows that, far from not needing to worry about the codification of patriarchy in law, impoverished women are deeply affected by the toxic mixture of capitalism and patriarchal legal codes. Even though Mergan had little to inherit (a piece of dry land), getting her claim recognized, even under the codified Islamic customs that gave her less of the land than her sons, was part of her battle for survival in Zaminej. She fought for it dearly in order to stave off her eventual departure for the city. Contrary to those detractors that campaign activists described, these stories necessitated a working-class perspective within the campaign, even though one never substantially materialized.

With *Missing Soluch* and *My Share*, both Dowlatabadi and Saniee ultimately wrote new kinds of stories for Persian literature that contested historical-masculinist narratives and boldly imagined transformative ways forward for gender politics in Iran. These stories are powerfully crafted pleas for historical memory as opposed to historical erasure, and they also demonstrate gender’s centrality in the struggle over how history is recorded and retold. They stand out among Iranian historical novels not only because they offer a counterhistory of women’s participation in political life in the lead-up to the Iranian Revolution but also because they presciently identified major battle lines and social conflicts of the postrevolutionary period that would continue well after each novel’s publication. They both show a nuanced and complex picture of politicized and militant women who are too often lost in one-dimensional pictures that either villainize or idolize the female revolutionary.

The fortieth-anniversary year of the Iranian Revolution, 2019, coincided with major nationwide protests in the face of deadly repression. A rereading of both novels at this moment is thus a rereading of the revolutionary project and its aftermath. At the same time, the political debates in Iran that these writers dramatized forty and nearly twenty years ago respectively — around women’s militancy, patriarchal legal codes, motherhood, desire and intimacy, and, in the case of *Missing Soluch*, women’s stake in class struggle — remain unresolved and as alive as ever.

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