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***Azra-ye Khalvatneshin*, Taqi Modarresi's Last Novel**

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Abstract

In this paper Taqi Modarresi's life and his works are discussed briefly. He is one of the early Persian writers in diaspora who left Iran decades before the Islamic Revolution. His novels have been published both in English and Persian. *Azra-ye Khalvatneshin* [The Virgin of Solitude], which was published posthumously in an English translation in 2008 and in the original Persian in 2010, both in the United States is his last novel in which he explores the theme of identity in the modern globalized world.

Keywords: Taqi Modarresi, *Azra-ye Khalvatneshin*, Modern Persian novel

Among the Iranian writers who had already gained some recognition and who had immigrated to other countries decades prior to the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Taqi Modarresi (1932-1997) holds a special place. He wrote his first novel, *Yakolia va Tanha'i-ye U* [Yakolia and Her Loneliness], which was published in 1953 when he was a student in the College of Medicine at the University of Tehran.¹ The language, subject matter, style, and other novelistic aspects of this work, which won *Sokhan* Magazine's literary prize, attracted much attention and established him as a promising creative literary artist.² Modarresi then left Iran in 1959 to continue his medical education in psychiatry in the United States, where he wrote his second novel, *Sharif Jan, Sharif Jan*,

published in 1961, which revolves around the life of a traditional family of landowners in a small rural town.³ For the following two and a half decades, Modarresi devoted his time to his profession of psychiatry, became a university professor, and married the later renowned American novelist Ann Tyler, in 1963.⁴ His next novel, *Ketab-e Adamha-ye Ghayeb* [The Book of Absent People], appeared in 1986 in Persian and English in Iran and the United States, followed by *Adab-e Ziyarat* [The Pilgrim's Rules of Etiquette] three years later, in 1989, about a decade after the Islamic Revolution and the immigration of an increasing number of Iranians to the country in which Modarresi had been living at the time for some thirty years.⁵ With the publication of the English versions of these two novels, which Modarresi translated himself, he gained a degree of recognition as a novelist in his adopted country. In the final years of his life, during part of which he was being treated for cancer, Modarresi wrote his last novel, *Azra-ye Khalvatneshin* [The Virgin of Solitude], which was published posthumously in an English translation in 2008 and in the original Persian in 2010, both in the United States.⁶

Modarresi's novel, *The Virgin of Solitude*, can perhaps be described as a Bildungsroman. The protagonist, Nuri, is a young boy from an affluent family. After the untimely death of his father, his mother decides to emigrate to the United States, leaving Nuri and his sister Ladan in the care of their grandparents. The grandfather is a senator, who is mostly preoccupied with politics and the concerns of being reelected; and the grandmother, an Austrian by birth, is an opera enthusiast who in her old age is vicariously living out the dream of her adolescent dream of becoming a singer through young Nuri, whom she tries to raise as a cultured person with European values. But as he grows up, Nuri, despite his European looks, does not seem, in the grandparents' eyes, to adhere either to his grandmother's values or to the old-fashioned Iranian values and ways of his grandfather. His youthful, and to the family embarrassing, love affair with an older girl with psychological problems forces the grandparents to send him to the United States, where his mother has been living for many years, to continue his college education; but Nuri has a difficult time coping with the new environment and returns to Iran during the final days of his grandmother's life. But in Iran, as well, he is unable to adjust and once

again returns to the United States, this time more familiar with the culture and perhaps with a sense of belonging.

In *The Virgin of Solitude* Modarresi explores the theme of identity in the modern globalized world. Indeed, he delves into the dilemma of a shattered identity, not only for the protagonist of the novel but for others, as well, including Nuri's grandmother, who is gradually attempting, albeit not quite succeeding, to be even more Iranian than Iranians, even converting to Islam and learning the rituals and prayers, but unable to cast off her European upbringing. To the end of her life, she seems to be suspended between the two worlds, without quite belonging to either. Similarly, on the one hand, Nuri's mother, who has emigrated to New York and lives with a "hippie-type" unemployed musician, cherishes the sense of freedom that she has free of the scrutiny of others in a traditional society; on the other hand, she feels a sense of loss of the security she has left behind in Iran.

The Virgin of Solitude is a rather unusual novel for Modarresi. He is known as a novelist who generally deals with philosophical and sometimes mystical themes. For example, in his first novel, *Yakolia and Her Loneliness*, which has a Biblical setting and characters, the themes of loneliness and alienation are explored in a philosophical context. Yakolia, the daughter of the king of Jerusalem, falls in love with a shepherd and is banished by her father, who considers her love to be a diversion from devotion to and worship of God.⁷ Similarly, Modarresi's post-revolutionary works, such as *The Book of Absent People* and *The Pilgrim's Rules of Etiquette*, all basically follow such themes. In contrast, in *The Virgin of Solitude*, he seems to pursue social and psychological themes; and relying on his knowledge and experience as a psychiatrist, he examines the dilemma of loss of identity and the possibility (or impossibility) of forming a new identity.

A wide variety of characters are found in this novel, some with psychological depth and others merely as necessary caricatures that help advance the plot and provide the subplots. Mostly, however, there is a mixture. Characters such as Nuri, his grandmother, and his mother are well-rounded and developed. As readers, we become intimately familiar with Nuri's thought processes and what makes him tick, so to speak. On the other hand, although we do not have direct access to the grandmother's mind, through her conversations with Nuri and others, we get to know her quite well. The

grandmother is perhaps the most memorable character in this novel. Other characters including the grandfather are mostly well-portrayed caricatures that, like actors in a supporting role, contribute to a better understanding of Nuri and others.

As a novel, even though *The Virgin of Solitude* is specifically Iranian and deals with Iranian characters and issues, it is universal in its appeal, since Modarresi's themes are also of general human concern. Perhaps in a sense, Modarresi's concerns and interests still revolved around philosophical issues to the end of his life. In a globalized world, the question of identity is a universal ontological question. The American poet laureate and literary critic, Robert Pinsky, once wrote, "The cosmopolitan is local," perhaps implying that localism and cosmopolitanism essentially could be or need to be two sides of the same coin.⁸ Modarresi's exploration of this question, similar to his delving into the human dilemma of loneliness and alienation, even when he writes from the perspective of a specific culture at a specific juncture in history, are universal and appeal to our sense of understanding of ourselves and humanity in general.

Notes:

1. Taqi Modarresi, *Yakoliya va Tanha'i-ye U*, Tehran: Entesharat-e Nil, 1964.
2. For a more detailed discussion of these aspects, see Hasan Abedini, *Sad Sal Dastannevisi*, Vol. 1. Tehran: Tandar, 2nd ed., 1989, pp. 245-250.
3. Taqi Modarresi, *Sharif Jan, Sharif Jan*, Entesharat-e Nil [1965].
4. For a detailed biography of Modarresi, see Nasrin Rahimieh, "Modarresi, Taqi," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, (<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/modarresi-taqi>).
5. Taqi Modarresi, *Ketab-e Adamha-ye Ghayeb*, Tehran: Entesharat-e Bozorgmehr, 1989; published in English as Taghi Modarressi, *The Book of Absent People*, New York: Doubleday Books, 1986; and *Adab-e Ziarat*, Tehran: Entesharat-e Bozorgmehr, 1989, published in English as Taghi Modarressi, *The Pilgrim's Rules of Etiquette*, New York: Doubleday Books, 1989. The spelling of Taqi Modarressi's name in English does not follow the transliteration system commonly used by scholars of Persian studies.
6. Taqi Modarresi, *Azra-ye Khalvatneshin*. Bethesda, Maryland: Ibex Publishers, 2010. The English translation of this novel by Nasrin Rahimieh appeared in English as Taghi Modarressi, *The Virgin of Solitude*, Syracuse University Press, 2008.
7. For a discussion of *Yakolia and Her Lonliness*, see Mirsadeqi, Jamal, *Qesseh, Dastan-e Kutah, Roman, Motale'eh'i dar Shenakht-e Adabiyat-e Dastani va Negahi Kutah beh*

Dastannevisi-ye Mo'aser-e Iran, Tehran: Entesharat-e Agah, 1981. This critic describes *Yakolia and Her Loneliness* and similar novels such as Sadeq Hedayat's *Buf-e Kur* [The Blind Owl] as examples of novels that "do not pay attention to real life and mostly focus on supernatural anxieties, fears, and worries" (p. 182). Also see Hasan Abedini, *Sad Sal Dastannevisi dar Iran*, p. 245.

8. Robert Pinsky, "Eros Versus Esperanto," in *For Love of Country*, ed. Joshua Cohen, Boston: Beacon Press, 1994, p. 86.

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