CHAPTER EIGHT

THE OTHER SERIOUS CENTURY: PIRZAD’S SOCIAL WORLD

I Will Put Out the Lights

“Zoya Pirzad was born in Abadan, went to school there, got married in Tehran and gave birth to her two sons, Sasha and Shervin.” This is how the back cover of the Persian edition of I Will Put Out the Lights introduces the author.¹ We also know that she was born in 1951 to an Armenian mother and a Russian father.² What little more we know about her is professional: she began her writing career in 1370/1991 with a collection of short stories, Mesl-e Hameh-ye Asr-ha (Like All Evenings), which was followed by two other collections, Yek Ruz Mandeh be Eyd-e Pak (Easter Eve, 1376/1997) and Ta‘m-e Gas-e Khormalu (The Acrid Taste of Persimmon, 1377/1998).³ In 1380/2001, she published her first novel, Cheragh-ha ra Man Khamush Mikonam (I Will Put Out the Lights) and her second novel, Adat Mikonim (We Will Get Used to It), appeared in 1383/2004. Before emerging as an author she had translated into Persian Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland as well as a collection of selected Japanese haikus entitled Ava-ye Jahidan-e Ghuk: She‘rha-ye Zhaponi (The Sound of the Leaping of Frog: Japanese Poems, 1371/1992).

As Pirzad’s first novel, I Will Put Out the Lights has been a great success – it became a bestseller and won a number of literary awards in Iran: Golshiri, Peka and Yalda literary awards in 2001 and the Book of the Year award of the Iranian Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance in 2002. Moreover, unlike many other Persian novels, it was

¹ Zoya Pirzad, Cheragh-ha ra Man Khamush Mikonam, Tehran, 1380/2001. English translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.
² In Iran “Armenian” is not a national appellation, but religious and signifies Christian.
³ These three were later published in one volume as Seh Ketab (Three Books, 1381/2002).
translated into other languages not too long after its initial publication.4

_I Will Put Out the Lights_ is about a short period in the life of an Armenian family that lives in Abadan, a southern Iranian city and the heart of the oil industry, in the Sixties. The family is composed of the thirty-eight-year-old first-person narrator, Clarisse, her husband, Artush, an engineer working for the oil industry, their teenage son, Arman, and their twin daughters, Armineh and Arsineh. They live in _Bavardeh_, a neighborhood where only people affiliated with the oil company with a certain organizational grade can reside. Artush’s promotion qualifies him and his family for a more exclusive neighborhood but they have not moved yet. The story opens on an ordinary day when Clarisse’s children come home from school, accompanied by a girl Clarisse does not know; she soon realizes that a new family, the Simonians, have moved into the house across from theirs. The new neighbors are a family of three: a grandmother, Elmira, her widowed son, Emil, and her granddaughter, Emily. Clarisse’s mom and sister also live in Abadan and pay them visits quite often.

There are minor characters that appear on various occasions, but the main drama revolves around the new neighbors. Clarisse gradually feels she is attracted to Emil but refuses to admit it to herself: they have a lot in common, exchange books, talk about literature, and plant flowers together. She also develops a paradoxical relationship with Elmira Simonian, a difficult aristocrat. At the end, the Simonians move out of the neighborhood as suddenly as they had moved in, and the narrative ends some days after a locust plague descends on the city and destroys Clarisse’s plants: she is sitting on a swing, looking at the blue and clear sky and thinking that Emil had told her that butterflies immigrate as well.

What makes this novel interesting for us is that while it has been able to capture the popular imagination, it responds to critical investigation very well and builds a richly allusive text which multiplies its significations, inserts it in national and global literary traditions and imagines a position for it in relation to them. As such, it succeeds in communicating and, as far as literariness is concerned, is uncompromising and claims aesthetic quality. Moreover, even though

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