Mr. and Mrs. F and the Woman

Personal Identities in Zoya Pirzad’s Like All the Afternoons

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Despite their brevity, the short stories in Zoya Pirzad’s collection Like All the Afternoons (Mesl-e hameh-ye asr-ha, 1991) offer telling pictures of the life circumstances of their protagonists. How they live their lives, respond to their circumstances, and relate to themselves and others are the questions to be explored in this chapter. But before we enter into this discussion, I will locate Zoya Pirzad’s short stories in the Persian literary landscape.

The literary historian Hasan Mir-Abedini opens one part of his annals on Persian prose fiction with observations on a type of neo-realism that came to the fore in the 1990s. He characterizes this neo-realism, which he notices especially in the works of women authors, as a realism that—unlike the magic realism of the 1980s and the earlier socialist realism—does not seek social struggle or the exalted and removed but rather devotes itself to the ordinary lives and experiences of the urban middle class (“Dastan-nevisi-e Iran,” 64). This neo-realism, he explains, “shows signs of a change in the way of looking at life. It rejects the conventional way of looking at the facts of reality. Whatever there is, it is worth looking at, since
it is based on experience that has been lived and felt” (65). This neo-realism has, in other words, elevated the ordinary and banal to the rank of literariness.

One of the authors whom Mir-Abedini presents under the heading of neo-realism is Zoya Pirzad, albeit with her third, not her first, collection of stories titled *Yek ruz mandeh be eyd-e pak* (*One Day Before Easter*, 1998). While he praises this third collection for its persuasive power (“Dastan-nevisi-e Iran,” 66), he is less positive about Pirzad’s first collection, *Like All the Afternoons*, which he characterizes as sketchy and aloof (“Adabyat-e dastani,” 214). Other, less content-oriented critics have judged *Like All the Afternoons* differently. After a second, expanded edition appeared in 1996, Zhinus Azadegan published a subtle review, stating that Pirzad “writes from the depths of the ordinary Iranian city-dwelling woman.” She adds, “What distinguishes these stories is the author’s intelligent expedition into the lives of ordinary people, which induces the readers to appraise themselves and their society” (16). Thus, even if some of the stories do not adhere to realism exclusively in their narrative mode, *Like All the Afternoons* falls under Mir-Abedini’s definition of neo-realism and should, following Azadegan, allow us to sound out ordinary attitudes toward ordinary urban, middle-class lives in convincing literary reflections.

Having situated the literary material on which this study is based, I now turn to the questions of identity, Pirzad’s protagonists, and our approach to them. When discussing identity in the works of Pirzad, scholars have focused on national and cultural identities. But while these issues are inherent in Pirzad’s later works, they have little impact on her first collection. The short stories of *Like All the Afternoons* are not located precisely either in space or in time. They are set in surroundings that are recognizably urban middle class, with neighbouring houses, lanes, streets, crossroads and park benches, with nuclear families, housewives, and wage earners. Some disparate hints at clothing suggest one location more than another—a tie, for instance; stockings or a headscarf—and some personal names and references to food indicate linguistic and cultural surroundings, as does, in one instance, the mention of exile and Oriental carpets. But the settings are generally pinpointed more by the reader’s associations than by explicit designation. Rather than promoting national or cultural issues, the short stories in *Like All the Afternoons* seem preoccupied with the human condition in a specific social setting, and our focus here rests, therefore, not on national nor cultural identities but on personal identities in a sociopsychological sense. Within the limits imposed by the looking-glass of
fiction, I will examine selected protagonists of Like All the Afternoons as sociological subjects in order to reveal the identities they construe for themselves.

Like All the Afternoons comprises fifteen short stories (seventeen and eighteen in the second and third editions, respectively), the settings of which are mostly domestic, either indoors or in the vicinity of private homes. They revolve around the daily routines of the protagonists, most of whom are single, and rather than relating specific events, many of them resemble still lives of the protagonists in their domestic habitats. Several of the stories embrace diachronic themes of individuals and their roles in the succession of generations, but since personal identity is here understood as the temporary result of a continuing process, I have disregarded generational themes in the following discussion. For our purpose, I have selected three short stories in which single protagonists are displayed at a certain stage of their lives. “The Stain,” “Mrs. F Is a Fortunate Woman,” and “The Desired Life of Mr. F” share enough features to allow for comparison and differ enough to make such comparisons profitable. The three stories will be explored with regard to the life circumstances, responses, and individual characteristics of the protagonists, and the cornerstones of their personal identities.

“The Stain”

“The Stain” (“Lakkeh,” Pirzad, Mesl-e 19–22) relates a housewife's late afternoon hours. The story begins with a woman sitting beside a window and listening to the sounds of the children playing outside in the lane. The woman eventually dozes off. At the end of the story, she wakes up, sees her husband coming home, and gets up to complete her dinner preparations.

In the few paragraphs of her late afternoon nap, on one diegetic level, we learn more about the main protagonist, referred to as “the woman” (zan) throughout the story. The woman moved into the present location with her husband when they were married thirty years ago. They have no children. Over all these years, she has followed an unvarying household routine, and nothing has changed except that she has decorated the house with some additional vases and porcelain figures. In the afternoons, she sometimes visits her neighbours, and in the evenings, toward seven o’clock, she awaits her husband’s return. While waiting for her husband, she sits beside the window overlooking the lane, her gaze reaching to the point where the lane opens into a street. At that time of the day, the lane is normally dark and quiet—quite to the contrary of the street. From her point of view, the general
hustle of that distant street, its lights and sounds, melts into one luminous and humungous stain, and she is afraid of it. When she sees it, she is so discomposed that she starts hallucinating: sometimes she sees the stain change shape or approach her as if to swallow her; sometimes she hears its terrible laughter. Although terrified by it, she is forced to look at the stain, because sooner or later her husband’s silhouette would detach itself from the stain in the shape of a blurred black dot, would grow bigger and distinct until he is home in person. With the return of the husband, her fears disappear. The moment of his return is described thus: “This would be the best moment of her day, the moment when the small black dot brings the intimately familiar assembly of her small world to perfection” (22).

What is the woman’s situation and how does she respond to it? The woman has been living her life in her domestic world unchangingly for thirty years. Apart from contact with the neighbours, she has no connections with the outside world. This outside world, condensed in the image of the stain, terrifies the woman, but her husband, a regular wanderer between the outside and domestic worlds, establishes her indirect contact with it and soothes her fears. The husband’s role of the material provider is only implied. In addition to her material dependency as a result of the role allocations of housewife and provider, the woman is also shown as depending on her husband emotionally: her peace of mind is restored daily by his return, the climax in her twenty-four-hour cycle.

The extradiegetic narrator, with his or her limited insight into the woman’s consciousness, offers a picture of the woman’s response to her situation and the workings of her mind. The fact that the narrator enjoys or pretends only limited insight becomes manifest when he or she resorts to speculation, as the word “perhaps” in the quotation below will show. According to this narrator, the woman has a clear preference in life: what she appreciates more than anything is calmness (aramesh). She dislikes unexpected events (ettefaq) and likes to know exactly what to do and what to expect at any time of the day. Such calmness is endangered by any change in her routine: for example, changes caused by illness or the acquisition of new household appliances, the handling of which needs some getting used to. This calmness of hers would also be at risk on an emotional level by having children. Upon learning that she has no children, we read: “She did not complain about this. Perhaps she was even pleased. It was difficult for her to imagine a new living creature in the house. For a child’s sake, one would have to be sad, or one would have to be happy. And she did not like to be sad or happy. Children disrupt one’s calmness of life, and the woman loved this calmness above everything” (21).
So, as long as no emotions are stirred and her calmness is undisturbed or—as in connection with the stain—is restored regularly, the woman lives a life of strict routines and does so uncomplainingly, perhaps even contentedly.

Who is the character underlying such a response to the circumstances described? There are two distinctive features of the protagonist’s makeup. First, she is stripped of individuality by denomination. While peripheral figures such as the children playing in the lane are mentioned one by one by their personal names and momentary actions, the main figure, “the woman,” has no name, nor, for that matter, does her husband, who is referred to throughout the story simply as “her husband” (shohar-ash). Renouncing a personal name in favour of a generic denomination affects the tangibility of the protagonist. The term zan, “the woman,” denotes not only her femaleness but also—as opposed to dokhtar (a girl or unmarried female)—her marital status. Yet, without a personal name, the protagonist could be any married woman. The denomination emphasizes what she has in common with other individuals of the same type rather than what distinguishes her from them.

Second, the story deprives the protagonist of her personal history. The woman’s wedded life is condensed into a twenty-four-hour cycle: since, as the narrator tells us (20), every year, every month, and every day has been exactly like the one before, the description of one single day is sufficient to describe thirty years of married life. As for her life before marriage, the woman hardly recollects anything apart from some faded memories of her deceased parents, and when looking at old pictures of herself, she cannot relate the young woman in the picture to her own present self. According to the narrator, the woman sees her life thus: “To her, life had started on the first day of her marriage; but even that day she could hardly remember. As if she had married on the day of her birth or had been born on her wedding day” (20).

The woman’s lack of recollections is in agreement with the typifying denomination: married women “come into existence” through marriage. Marriage here is equated with the woman’s birth, and not even a physical continuum, the body, has had the power to bridge the gap between the different identities before and after the caesura of marriage. If there was a notion of a self in the woman before marriage, then it was not linked to the body and it disappeared with marriage, while the body was handed over to some other occupant. This other occupant, as it is described by the narrator, seems a zero-realization of a self: deindividualized, with limited emotionality, without history or personal interests beyond an inclination toward calmness. As such, the body’s occupant appears more like a dummy than a
“real” human being. Nevertheless, with this makeup, the woman seems fit to persevere uncomplainingly in her circumstances.

For interpretations of this story, it does not suffice to rely only on the narrator’s account; to penetrate the workings of the main protagonist’s character more deeply, the possible meanings of the stain and the woman’s fear of it must be taken into consideration. Viewing matters from the angle of personal identity, a reading of the stain as a metaphor for the woman’s displaced self seems promising: the alienated self, relegated to the stain, still has the power to stir a memory of her (former) self in the deindividualized dummy. When the dummy is confronted with the stain, it faces a dilemma of longing for its lost individual self, including history and emotionality, and an equally strong longing for calmness. Since the woman faces this dilemma daily, she obviously is—for whatever intrinsic or extrinsic reason—unable to find a way of either resolving this dilemma or resigning herself to the present situation completely. Her daily discomposure is both the consequence of her daily confrontation with the dilemma and—together with the abandonment of her individuality—the price she pays for living in relative peace. In terms of personal identity, the situation of the woman is that of a subject whose balance between the individual and social sides of her identity has been overthrown totally in favour of the latter.

In summary, “The Stain” presents the empty shell of a general type fulfilling its social tasks (with the exception of reproduction) perfunctorily, and the general type appears in the guise of an individual heroine—as suggested by the conventions of this literary genre. Hints at an individual identity of the protagonist can be gathered from the narrative (and are highlighted by the title) and have the potential to make the reader distrust the narrator and his or her picture of uncomplaining perseverance.

The next of Pirzad’s protagonists to be examined here is more palpable, more a creature of flesh and blood, than “the woman” and, unlike her, is not just uncomplaining but—as announced in the story’s title—positively fortunate.

“MRS. F IS A FORTUNATE WOMAN”

“Mrs. F Is a Fortunate Woman” (“Khanum-e F zan-e khoshbakht-i ast,” Pirzad Mesl-e, 51–57) describes the monthly payday events in the private home of Mr. and Mrs. F. Mr. F is an accountant in the wages department of the Ministry of Education, and Mrs. F is a housewife; they have been married for twenty-five years and have two
children, a son called Bardya and a daughter called Yasaman. Every month, Mr. F delivers his salary directly to his wife. While the husband then relates insider news from the ministry, Mrs. F serves him tea, counts the notes, puts the money away, and prepares dinner. At night, when the husband and children have retired, Mrs. F prepares the budget for the coming month and balances accounts for the month past. Three scenarios are shown: (1) if Mrs. F has just about managed to make ends meet, her reaction is neutrally listless; (2) if the expenses have exceeded the income, she is despondent for some days and tries to economize in her housekeeping; and (3) in the rare case of having managed so well that some money is left over, she smiles happily. In this happy third scenario, Mrs. F takes the remaining money to the bank the next day and pays it into the accounts of her children—saving what she can for Bardya’s later education abroad and for a respectable dowry for Yasaman. Very occasionally when profits exceed expenses—after much hesitation and many pangs of conscience and justifications to her husband, her mother, and even her children—she keeps some of the remaining money and buys something for herself: a pair of nylon stockings or a headscarf, for example. She has these items gift-wrapped in the shop and stores them at home in their original wrappings. In moments of leisure, when she has seen to all her duties and is sure that no one is around to disturb or watch her, she sits down solemnly, unwraps the purchases with the utmost care and gazes at them, pondering what a fortunate woman she is. This is the sum of the story.

The monthly events, which recur year in and year out, are related in the present tense. The story is told by an extradiegetic third-person narrator with full insight into Mrs. F’s consciousness and emotions, the pivotal point of which seems to be her financial circumstances. Yet Mrs. F is stirred by more than pecuniary issues.

One such issue concerns a possible alternative lifestyle. When Mrs. F visits the bank, she is always received by Mrs. Taqizadegan. The two women have known each other for many years—since the day Mrs. F first entered the bank to open an account for Bardya. Mrs. Taqizadegan, now director of the bank, was a mere petty employee at that time. She, too, has a son and a daughter, though they are somewhat younger than those of Mrs. F. While the two women sit and chat about their children, Mrs. Taqizadegan answers phone calls and deals out signatures and orders. On her way home, Mrs. F routinely wonders how Mrs. Taqizadegan manages the tasks of a mother as well as those of a bank manager—whether, perhaps, it is not all that difficult and whether she herself might have reached a position with responsibilities if she had not quit work when she got married. But just as routinely, she acknowledges to herself that she was never fond of work and studying.
and that she had gladly submitted to Mr. F’s insistence on her becoming a housewife. Yet acknowledging this does not prevent her from feeling jealous of Mrs. Taqizadegan, a resentment she regularly silences with the belief that “a woman who works outside can never meet the requirements of her husband and children” (55). Thus blocking unsettling thoughts, she unlocks the front door and re-enters her domestic realm.

In spite of these repeatedly arising doubts as to her own lack of career, Mrs. F declares herself a fortunate woman, as we read at the end of the story. Her thought is followed by a list of reasons why she is fortunate:

She has a husband who does not squander money as some men do and who does not take offence at his wife’s extravagance. She has two healthy children, Yasaman, who—as everybody says—is beautiful, composed, and brought up excellently, and Bardya, who is taller than all his coevals in the family, studies eagerly, and wants to become a structural engineer. They have a house that despite its smallness spares them living as tenants and endearing themselves to the owner of the house. What else should a woman want from life? (57)

Her reference to her “extravagance” is revealing. Although the F family live in their own home and lack no essentials, there is no room for extravagance, as can be deduced not only from the “smallness” of the house but also from the holes in Mrs. F’s shoes (53). Indeed, the entire story shows how little material (and temporal) extravagance Mrs. F allows herself—and then, only after the needs of all the others have been met.

Mrs. F’s assessment of her good fortune is no original product of her own deliberation but an extrinsic concept that she has appropriated. The declaration that she is fortunate, made in the title and in the opening sentence of the story, is followed by “everybody says so” (in ra hameh miguyand, 51). The title and first sentence thus express a general opinion. One proponent of this opinion is Mrs. F’s mother, who considers her daughter’s situation so enviable that she burns rue seeds every Saturday morning in order to avert the evil eye, as stated in the opening paragraph. The question of whether Mrs. F actually thinks of herself as fortunate, as is suggested at the end of the story, or simply mimics the general opinion, trying to convince herself, remains open. The story does provide evidence that the latter might be the case. As we have seen, Mrs. F raises the question of what else a woman might want from life, and although she pretends to herself that her own answer is “nothing,” her doubts after the meetings with Mrs. Taqizadegan tell a different
these doubts would not recur regularly if Mrs. F was really convinced by her own self-persuasion. It is more likely that her doubts are merely subdued, her question swept under the carpet rather than answered convincingly. In this story, being fortunate is a concept defined and attributed by a nondescript public and handed down from mother to daughter. Considering Mrs. F’s list of reasons why she must be fortunate, it is evident that good fortune is a concept based on circumstantial factors without reference to a person’s psychological constitution.

How does the fortunate Mrs. F feel in or about her situation? She has a range of feelings connected with the family’s financial circumstances, but the strongest emotions described in the story arise in Mrs. F when she buys something for herself: “When she buys something she wants, she inevitably gets into a state which she does not want anyone to witness” (56). In what follows, I will refer to this state of hers as ecstasy. There are two follow-up effects of these items and the ecstasy that accompanies their purchase: first, merely thinking of these private possessions revitalizes her during her daily chores and helps her to continue with renewed energy regardless of pain and fatigue; and second, she experiences a mix of emotions when she sits down on occasion to unwrap her unused possessions and gaze at them.

When Mrs. F gazes at her purchases, it becomes clear that she does not necessarily want to use them for herself; the stockings, for instance, she might eventually give to Yasaman. The attraction of these moments must therefore lie in something other than the goods themselves or any pride of possession. Although the narration does not make an explicit causal connection, it suggests by juxtaposition that the importance of these moments lies in something immaterial: “These rare moments are the only private moments in her life” (56). The common denominator of this threefold pleasure—the ecstasy at the purchase, the elation while remembering, and the moments of contemplation (rather than consumption)—is privacy, the fact that she is tending to herself rather than to others. But tending to herself has its cost, as we read immediately afterwards: “She feels guilty (ehsas-e gonah mikonad) about the privacy of these moments and about the fact that neither her husband nor her mother or children partake in or benefit from them, but she cannot resist these occasional temptations” (56). Out of this sense of guilt, Mrs. F compensates for her privacy in advance by accomplishing her household chores even more assiduously than usual.

The moments of privacy facilitate Mrs. F’s accomplishment of her tasks as a housewife, mother, and daughter, and there is no hint in the story that the
husband, mother, or children resent her personal purchases. But still, tending to herself instead of to others makes Mrs. F feel guilty. Mrs. F is shown as a character with self-awareness and a desire for self-fulfillment. Her sense of guilt derives from her assumption that the roles of devoted wife and, especially, mother are irreconcilable with any kind of self-interest—the same assumption she uses to dispel her doubts about having a professional career of her own. Nurturing the self, in her view (and probably in the view of others, given the nature of the reasons for her good fortune), is morally questionable: it is a transgression that calls for compensation. Though well accomplished in balancing the budget in a pecuniary sense, she does not regard balancing the care of others with care of her own self as a blameless act of give and take. For Mrs. F, not only is the display of a self in public taboo, but even privacy—that is, the rare moments when this self is nurtured in the absence of others—is objectionable.

In short, Mrs. F is a dutiful mother and housewife who subdues disturbing questions and procures some rare occasions to see to her personal needs. Her seeing to personal needs and individual pleasures is regularly accompanied by feelings of guilt and compensational acts. Contrary to the woman of “The Stain,” whose commitment to wedlock is a deadlock in terms of her individual identity, Mrs. F finds a way to balance her individual and social identities, even if she has to bridge the gap between her ideal view of the social performance and her self-centred deviations from this ideal by a succession of guilt and atonement.

With regard to Pirzad’s novel *Adat mikonim* (*We Will Get Used to It*, 2004), Ma’sumeh Aliakbari proposes that “the female identity . . . is still struggling with her own traditional mindset. She is still stuck looking for a significant other instead of pushing to discover her independent self” (11). Although I do not see the search for the self and for the other as mutually exclusive alternatives—like Keupp (and his predecessors), I perceive individuality and social orientation as inevitably referring to each other (37)—it is worth examining the stories discussed here in the light of Aliakhari’s proposition. On the one hand, the woman in “The Stain” cannot aspire to emancipation because she lacks a self; she perseveres in her isolated world provided for by the husband—her “other,” not unlike an unborn child connected to its mother by the umbilical cord. In her case, Aliakbari’s proposition applies—except that the woman does not seem to struggle (unless when facing the stain). Mrs. F, on the other hand, has an independent self but is reluctant to show or admit it. The image Mrs. F chooses to display in public is that of a woman exclusively devoted to others. In her case, Aliakbari’s proposition applies with regard to the “significant
other,” but the issue in connection with her independent self is that of public disclosure rather than private discovery of self.

If, in Pirzad’s fiction, “the other” is a more prominent concern in female personal identities than is “the self,” one wonders about the concepts or concerns of male personal identity and whether and how this concern correlates with gender issues. Another of Pirzad’s stories offers the chance to look into one of her male protagonists.

“THE DESIRED LIFE OF MR. F”

“The Desired Life of Mr. F” ("Zendegi-e delkhah-e Aqa-ye F," Pirzad Mesl-e, 41–45) narrates the story of Mr. F’s retirement, which is depicted in six episodes. In the first episode, the omniscient extradiegetic narrator relates the events of the very day of Mr. F’s retirement: a celebration at the office, a wristwatch as a gift from his daughter Fataneh, another watch with fluorescent hands from his daughter Farzaneh, and sweet rice as a special treat for dinner, cooked by his wife. His daughters comment on his new leisure to get up as late and sleep as much as he wants to, his wife notices his white hair, and everybody smiles while they are listening to Mr. F’s account of the farewell celebration in the office. The next morning Mr. F wakes up late, listens to the sounds of the already busy household, and imagines what his former colleagues are doing at that moment. Declaring, “From today I will do the things I like” (42), he decides to refurbish the garden.

The next four episodes, spanning almost one (gardening) year, show how Mr. F fares in his new life. When he has finished refurbishing the garden, the family reacts enthusiastically; the completion of his next project, repainting the house, however, is not celebrated with the same enthusiasm but is drowned in the family routine. While his wife and both grown-up daughters pursue their professions and various outside obligations, all Mr. F finds to do until spring calls for renewed activities in the garden is minor servicing of door hinges and taps.

The last episode shows Mr. F dressing smartly and going out to visit his former workspace. He finds the building unchanged; employees bustle in corridors and joke with each other as they did in his time. When he is about to enter his former office, he remembers, just in time, to knock on the door and is invited in. Mr. F enters and perceives the office unchanged. Intriguingly, not even the occupant of the office seems to have changed: the visiting Mr. F takes a seat in front of the desk, behind which Mr. F is busy perusing some documents. The working Mr. F smiles at the
visitor, saying that the work never ends, and compliments him on his blessed repose. After a few moments of sitting, smiling, looking round, and feeling that he is being a nuisance, the visiting Mr. F takes his leave and returns to his empty home.

This is the story of Mr. F’s desired life, the title of which points in two directions: the life before retirement, which is an object of desire after retirement, and the life after retirement, which is an object of desire to those still actively engaged in working life, including Mr. F himself before retirement, as suggested in the final scene in the office.

Two major issues are affected by Mr. F’s retirement: time and a sense of belonging. Being in control of one’s own time is a recurring topic in the story, materialized in the daughters’ gifts of watches. With his retirement, Mr. F has gained control over his time: it is no longer in thrall to his employer. Now, facing the challenge of structuring time himself, he decides to explore some personal interests, such as gardening. But gardening is a seasonal activity and does not fulfill his year-round need for temporal structure, so he resorts to minor home maintenance tasks to keep himself busy throughout the year. While the structuring of time is a challenge that Mr. F appears to take on successfully, the problem of his sense of belonging remains unresolved. On the one hand, his retirement has excluded him from the group of his fellow workers, whom he recalls affectionately as “the children” (bacheh-ha). They are no longer his teammates, as is illustrated by the return to his former workspace in the last episode: the employees joking in the corridors no longer joke with him, only with one another. He has become an outsider. On the other hand, he has not managed to find a new role at home. In the family setting, the pre-retirement Mr. F was the provider and breadwinner with obligations outside of the domestic sphere and was apparently marginal to the immediate running of the household. Now that he is retired, he has forfeited his role in the family setting. Although he probably still contributes to the family’s livelihood with a pension, he is a largely superfluous figure in the home setting. The grown-up daughters need no fathering; the wife perceives him as an old man. While the family welcomes the retiree in a general way, they do not support him in finding a new role among them. The desire for a discernible social identity and corresponding acceptance is therefore, we assume, the incentive for his reminiscences about and eventual return to the office.

Yet Mr. F’s return to the office proves devastating. Let us examine two variant readings of the puzzle presented in the final scene with the two men called Mr. F: the first is that Mr. F meets another man called Mr. F, and the second, that Mr. F
meets himself. In the first reading, the retiree Mr. F, already severely shaken in his personal identity, not only discovers that he is no longer treated as a colleague but he is also confronted with missing singularity. There is nothing that marks him as different from his successor; on the contrary, the identical naming of the two men, without any further comment, suggests that there are no features that distinguish them. If personal identity depends on a sense of belonging and identification, then it also requires demarcation, a sense of difference and uniqueness. In facing the working Mr. F, the retiree is deprived of any sense of uniqueness that he may have derived from his former working position. He returns to the office to discover that he was totally replaceable, an insight that, instead of reinstating his identity, is likely to aggravate his crisis.

Now to the second reading, in which the protagonist is doubled in the final episode: that is, the Mr. F behind the desk is the very retiree Mr. F. If Mr. F returns to the office and discovers that he is already there—or rather, that he actually never left—then one is led to assume that he—unknowingly—left his self behind when he retired. His notion of self has been based entirely on the role he played in the office, as an employee in a certain position with co-workers and corresponding social exchanges, and on his concomitant role at home, as the family provider. In this case, Mr. F is, like the protagonist of “The Stain,” another self-less dummy, his alienated self dislocated to his former working position as its only stronghold, while the retiree just mimics life perfunctorily.

Both readings show Mr. F in a state of crisis, needing to redefine himself after a change of his social position and functions. After retirement, he is looking for new cornerstones for his identity. In the first reading, there seems to be room for hope: given that the retiree has already managed to solve the problem of structuring time and found new occupation at home, why should he—once confronted with the fact of his replaceability in the office—be unable eventually to satisfy his sense of belonging and craft new social bonds? The second reading, with Mr. F facing his left-behind self, seems indicative of an insurmountable crisis. The surprising confrontation with his self (or himself) is only surprising to the reader; Mr. F has no perceptible reaction to his double and the narration does not, at that instant, intrude into his consciousness. Viewed from the outside, the zero reaction of Mr. F to facing his self in the office does not encourage the reader’s hopes that Mr. F will soon reintegrate his alienated and left-behind self.

Returning to Aliakbari’s proposition about the concern with the “significant other” in Pirzad’s stories, I conclude that it can also be applied in the case of Mr. F
and is thus not restricted to female identities. Mr. F does not depend on “the other” for sustenance as do “the woman” and Mrs. F, but he does so in terms of a necessary constituent for his personal identity: with the women of his household economically emancipated (to some degree) and used to his absence from the house, and his work colleagues lost through retirement, he is shaken because he has lost those with whom he can identify and against whom he can set himself off as individual. The self-fulfillment he is supposed to find in being in control of his time and his choice of occupations does not satisfy all his personal needs. Although he is free to indulge his passions, his sense of belonging is frustrated, and this frustration motivates the pivotal action in the story. As with the female protagonists of the other two stories, with Pirzad’s male protagonist Mr. F, the discovery of the “independent self” is disregarded in favour of the search for “the other.”

CONCLUSION

The personal identities we have met in these three stories are predominantly informed by the social positions and functions of the protagonists, on which their self-esteem depends; these social functions and positions are so vital to the protagonists that they serve as a base not only for their social but also for their individual identification. Yet the social positions and functions portrayed are not homogeneous. The society sketched in these stories has modern as well as traditional traits: on the one hand, the traditional division between the private and public domains and the corresponding role allocation for men and women are clearly depicted; on the other hand, they are juxtaposed with characters and events transgressing this division. Mrs. F’s considerations of an alternative lifestyle for herself are inspired by Mrs. Taqizadegan, who has abandoned the traditional role for women: she not only earns her own wages but has moved to a position of responsibility and prestige.

It seems that the modern choices open to Mrs. Taqizadegan would also have been available to Mrs. F, whose reasons for choosing the traditional role instead are compliance with her husband and her own disinclination toward serious study. Nevertheless, she seems to have had a choice and made it. The story does not inform us to what extent the husband would have accepted it had her choice been a different one. It does, however, inform us that additional factors are likely to have been involved in Mrs. F’s choice. As we have seen, Mrs. F is reluctant to admit to her individual needs and interests in public. The arguments she brings forth to end
her considerations regarding mothers who work outside their homes indicate that her moral assessments are rooted in a traditional value system and that she has not (yet) absorbed the diversity of role models for women. As a consequence, being a modern woman is an option that would be contrary to Mrs. F’s (self-)respect.

However, if the entering of women into the public domain is presented in Pirzad’s stories as problematic, a man’s entering the private domain is no less so. When retirement forces Mr. F into new life circumstances, this is neither a modern nor a traditional choice but a normal and foreseeable event in the career of an employee. Neither is his transgressing the boundary from public to private a matter of shame or pride, as the opposite movement of women seems to be. If there is a gender division to be observed in Pirzad’s presentation of personal identity, then it is the line that divides shame from pride with regard to individual identity and self-esteem. While Mrs. F’s clandestine dedication to herself is accompanied by concealment, guilt, and atonement, Mr. F is publicly congratulated on his retirement, and his dedication to himself is the ensuing social imperative. The gender-specific difference consists in the moral evaluation of the coveting of an “independent self,” not in the way it is conducted. A woman’s self-esteem seems endangered by coveting individual distinction, while a man’s would probably gain by it.

The identity crisis faced by Mr. F is rooted in his personal identity being construed predominantly on social relations. Individual identity comes across as a blind spot in these short stories. Mr. F is mostly absorbed with the loss of his social identity; if we put Mrs. F’s individual identity to the test, we find that it, too, is problematic, since it is presented as nothing but the absence of others: either physically or as the object of her care. The life circumstances presented in these stories are those of subjects who seem to be given chances to develop individual identities but who struggle with various obstacles and find a real hold only in their social identities. Viewed from this perspective, the woman of “The Stain” enjoys a privileged position: if individuality is abandoned, then the struggle is at its end.

Recalling the introductory thoughts on neo-realism on which Like All the Afternoons has been predicated, I conclude that the life circumstances presented in these short stories are not eclectic or singular; rather, they show ordinary experiences of ordinary people. But this neo-realism only refers to the sociological content matter. For an evaluation of such ordinary lives as they are depicted, their literary presentations have to be consulted. What are we to make of the dummy that the woman in “The Stain” is seen to be? Whether one chooses to commiserate
or condemn her, she cannot possibly be a prototype for a hoped-for society of any sort. If she were, then the social experiment would come to an end after one generation. The narrative means by which these ordinary urban realities have been put forward is beguiling. On the surface, the protagonists are presented either as contented and fortunate or simply as resigning themselves to their circumstances, but the narratives offer reasons enough to believe that in Pirzad's urban habitat, hidden currents of doubt and discontent swirl beneath this stoic acceptance.

NOTES

1 Unless otherwise indicated, the translations from Persian are my own.
2 In Azadegan's Persian original, “the readers” is singular; I have chosen the plural to maintain the gender ambiguity of the original. The second edition of Like All the Afternoons includes two additional stories, “Malakh-ha” (“The Locusts”) and “Yek joft jurab” (“A Pair of Stockings”), as is indicated in an editorial note opposite the table of contents. The latest edition, incorporated in the collection Seh ketab (Three Books, 2002), adds a third story, “Lengeh bi-lengeh-ha” (“The Unpaired to the Unpaired Ones”), but without editorial comment.
3 In exploring Pirzad's first novel, Cheragh-ha ra man khamush mikonam (I Will Turn Off the Lights, 2001), Nasrin Rahimieh argues that Pirzad’s understanding of Iranian identity is directly opposed to the concepts of purification (from the non-Persian) and unification (in language and religion) promoted in the works of Jamalzadeh and Al-e Ahmad: “Pirzad’s novel makes it possible to imagine reading and conversing across Iran's multiple languages, religions, and ethnicities not in an attempt to construct a unified national identity but rather to abandon the project of purification and unification of the nation” (“Manifestations of Diversity” 31). A study by Elham Gheytanchi offers a sociological reading of the same novel with regard to Armenians as the “eternal Other (gheir-e khodi) in Iranian society” (174).
4 Haqshenas, in his analysis of Pirzad’s style and its development over the course of her three collections, criticizes this feature as a failure to meet with the generic requirements of prose fiction (33).
5 All three short stories are available in English translation: “The Stain” in Basmenji (194–97) and “Mrs. F Is a Fortunate Woman” and “The Desirable Life of Mr. F,” translated by Assurbanipal Babilla, in Aslan (550–58). The translations used here are, however, my own. The page numbers cited in the following discussion refer to the Persian texts.
6 Haqshenas finds fault with this aspect of Pirzad’s story, too (see note 5). He argues that she does not meet the requirement of prose fiction to display individualized protagonists with personal names (33). I argue, however, that the deviation from the generic convention is no shortcoming but a meaningful narratological act.
The namelessness of the husband is congeneric. In this way, the woman and her husband are two dependent parts—“the one” and “the other”—of a single social unit. I thank Pamela Holway for pointing this out to me.


According to Green and Yazdanfar (202), this short story was first published in Chashmandaz 5 (Fall 1988): 126–29, albeit not under the name Zoya Pirzad but Giti Nikzad.

Mr. F is not the only male character in Pirzad’s work whose gender role is scrutinized. Nasrin Rahimieh, writing about Pirzad’s Ta’m-e gas-e khormalu (The Acrid Taste of Persimmons, 1997) notes that the instability of gender roles captured in those stories applies not only to the roles of women, whose image as sacrificing wives and responsible mothers is questioned, but also to the roles traditionally prescribed for men (“Women and Domesticity,” 11–12).

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