

The Half Human

By Mahsa Mohebbali (Iran)

In my country, a woman is ‘one-half of a person.’ Therefore, if a man happens to murder a woman, he has only killed a ‘half-person’ and won’t even be considered a murderer, since he has not yet killed an entire person. To be considered a murderer in the eye of the law, he has to kill one more woman, one more half-person.

And so it goes: in a court of law, the testimony of two women equals that of one man. In regards to marriage, a man can have four wives at the same time. He can also divorce any one of them at any time he wishes. The woman, on the other hand, cannot divorce a man unless she can prove he is either suffering from an incurable, contagious disease or some mental condition – something that proves the woman’s life is in grave danger.

So we, Persian women, work hard to forget about being only half a human; we get married so that we can at last be attached to a complete person, a man; then we have children, sons preferably. It’s amazing that a half-person can give birth to complete people, sons. We try our best to make at least two or three of the complete human beings. And in the process, we sometimes forget that we are still only half human.

And then, of course, we sometimes turn into feminists. We refuse to have children. We ask ourselves: nine months of labor? For what? So that we can feed the baby and take care of it for years and years to come? We don’t want there to be any difference between us and men. We constantly remind our husbands that we are their equals.

But then, despite being a whole person at home, as soon as we leave the house we are half-people again. If we are killed in a car accident, we will be treated as if only half of a man was run over and killed. So we return to our homes and try to forget about being incomplete. We get to be Barbie dolls at home, we make sure to have nose jobs and breast implants; we inject silicone into our cheeks and lips, we put on too much make-up and dye our hair as blonde as possible. But there’s more: we spend all our time in gyms and beauty parlors, we run the treadmill like crazy to stay in shape and look beautiful for the complete human, our man. We do all of this to forget we are not complete.

And so by now we decide to turn into radical feminists. We get divorced. We shave our heads and change what we wear. We drink, smoke and even swear like men. We want to look and feel like men so that we can pretend to be a whole person.

Then some of us turn to writing stories in order to explain the absence of our other half. We write about this *halfness*. We record it in our novels, stories and poems. Maybe this is why the number of women writers has increased thirteen-fold in my country ever since the Islamic Revolution. This statistics clearly shows that we go to great lengths to attest to our incompleteness. But does a simply creating female protagonist eliminate this *halfness*? Not really. In the stories we write we can even create a heroine who is a whole person. After all this is literature and anything goes. We create imaginary beings so we can forget about being a half of something.

And don’t you go thinking that I live in some faraway tribe recently discovered by civilized men. No, I live in Iran, the great Persia that vied neck and neck with the Greeks and the Romans for so long. Persia with its pompous cultural heritage, with its Persepolis and Chehel-Sotun and all those magnificent carpets everyone wants to buy. Persia with its Rumi and Hafez and Khayyam.

Every morning when I wake up, I look at the reflection of the half-person that I am in the mirror, much like *The Cloven Viscount* of the Italo Calvino novella. The only difference is that this halved Viscount knows his missing half is somewhere out there in this world, but I am a half person whose other half is nowhere at all and I am not to go looking for it. So I don’t. I just wander the earth saying, “Look at me! Look at the halved me!” I walk the streets every day with just one eye, one ear, one hand, one leg, one half of a nose and one half of a mouth, so that you won’t overlook and ever forget that I am only a half person.

Believe me, I won’t forget it either.