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Parvīn Iʿtisāmī, A Major Persian Poet for All Time

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Parvīn Iʿtisāmī, along with Īraj Mīrzā and Poet-Laureate Bahār, was the most prominent poet of early twentieth-century Iran, the form of whose poems was generally in the neoclassical style. And along with the latter two, a major Persian poet for all time. One prominent critic believed that she was even better than Īraj and Bahār, though this view is bound to be controversial.[1]

Figure 1: Painting, Portrait of Parvīn Iʿtisāmī

And, arguably, she was the most prominent female Persian poet from the tenth till the early twentieth century. There were many such poets in Iranian history, but sadly only a few of them are remembered at all, and even then, in some cases, little of their

works is extant.[2] The oldest public female poet in the history of Persian literature is the 10th to 11th-century Rābi‘ah Bint-i Ka‘b, who is also regarded as the very first Persian poet to write mystic poetry. Rābi‘ah, who fell victim to honour killing by her brothers for the sin of love, has a mature and moving qitʿah, the few distiches of which that have survived are worth quoting:

His love, once again captured me,
Tried hard, but could not free myself from it.
Love is a sea whose shoreline is unclear,
No intelligent person would swim its length.
If you wish to try and give up love,
You must see much disgrace atop.
We must see the vile and assume it is virtuous.
We must drink poison and believe it is sugar,
I tried to behave like a rebellious horse,
Not knowing that it would tighten the lasso.[3]

More could be said about this able poet, but there is no scope for it in the present study.[4] The next public female poet, a significant part of whose work is extant, is the twelfth-century Mahsatī Ganjavī—and probably most prominent before Parvīn—who, quite the opposite of Rābiʿah, is particularly remembered for her satirical poems. For example this quatrain:

When the judge’s wife came with child, he cried,
Struck by pain he found it extremely odd.
Saying, I am old and cannot have an erection,
This whore is not Mary, so whence the benediction.[5]

The next well-known female public poet is the fourteenth-century Jahān Malak (sometimes spelled “Malik”) Khātūn, who belonged to a noble family, and whose whole Dīvān is—not surprisingly—extant. She is better known for her ghazals which are evidently influenced by Saʿdī’s love lyrics, even though she was reportedly an interlocutor of Hāfiz and ʿUbayd Zākānī.[6]

[1]See Ehsan Yarshater, “Yād dāsht hā-yi safar,” Sukhan 7, 5 (1335/1956): 225–26; Jāvidānah Parvīn I‘tisāmī, ed. Husayn Namīnī (Tehran: Kitāb-i Farzān, 1362/1983), 30–31.

[2]See ‘Alī Akbar Mushīr Salīmī, Zanān-i sukhan var, vols. 1–3 (Tehran: ‘Ilmī, 1335–1338/1956–1958), Muhammad ‘Alī Kishāvarz Sadr, Zanānī kih bi-Fārsī shiʿr guftah and: Az Rābiʿah tā Parvīn (Tehran: Kāvyān, 1334/1955).

[3]Mihdī Hamīdī, ed., Bihisht-i sukhan, (Tehran: Fīrūz, 1366/1987), 26. See further, “Rābi‘ah,” in Kishāvarz Sadr, Az Rābi‘ah tā Parvīn, 122–29, which includes a shorter version of the above poem, 128.

[4]See further, Zhālah Muttahadah, Ātash zīr-i khākistar: (dar hikāyat-i Dukhtar-i Kaʿb) (Bethesda, Maryland: Ibex, 2018).

[5]See Mahsatī Ganjavī, Dīvān-i Mahsatī Ganjavī, ed. Tāhirī Shahāb (Tehran: Tahūrī, 1336/1957), 28; Homa Katouzian, “Satire in Persian Literature, 1900-1940,” in Literature of the Early Twentieth Century: From the Constitutional Period to Reza Shah, ed. Ali-Asghar Seyed-Gohrab (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 163; Mushīr Salīmī, Zanān-i sukhan var, 2:255–70; and further, for an extensive study of Mahsatī, see Fritz Meier, Die schöne Mahsatī: ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des persischen Vierzeilers (Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1963).

[6]See Pūrān dukht Kāshānī Rād and Kāmil Ahmad nizhād, eds., Jahān Malak Khātūn (Tehran: Zavvār, 1995); Mushīr Salīmī, Zanān-i sukhan var, 1:165; Homa Katouzian, Sa‘di in

Love (Paperback ed., London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2022).

[7]Kishāvarz Sadr, Az Rābiʻah tā Parvīn, 212–41.

[8]See, for example, Kishāvarz Sadr, Az Rābiʻah tā Parvīn, 185–86. John S. Hatcher and Amanollah Hemmat, Poetry of Tahirih (Oxford: George Ronald, 2002); and further, Mushīr Salīmī, Zanān-i sukhan′var, 2:82–98.

There were many more, as mentioned, little of whose works is extant, including a few of Fath ʿAlī Shāh's daughters who, like their father (as well as some of his sons) wrote poetry. One of them, Māh Sharaf Khānum (nom de plume, Mastūrī), even innovated the chār′pārah form that was to be reinvented in the early-twentieth to mid-twentieth century.[7]

The mid-nineteenth century Tāhirah Qazvīnī (Qurrat al-ʿAyn) is particularly renowned for her fervent advocacy of Babism and very close attachment to Sayyid ʿAlī Muhammad Shīrāzī entitled the Bāb, whom he regarded virtually as sinless. She was an active poet, but regrettably little of her works have survived, partly because she was murdered relatively young. The following four stanzas are from a poem that is repeatedly quoted in works on her life.[8]

As soon as my eye falls on you,
View to view, face to face,
I'll speak the sadness of your love,
Point by point, facet by facet.
Longlasting faithful Sāqī!
Pour us wine carafe by carafe.
O singer of pleasing songs,
Sing new songs, new songs…
Mourning your absence, my heart's blood
Is dropping from my two eyes,
Tigris by Tigris, sea by sea,
Spring by spring, stream by stream.
Tāhirah searched her heart,
Not finding anyone but you,
Leaf by leaf, layer by layer
Pardah by pardah, fold by fold.

Figure 2: A depiction known as "The Face of Tāhirah" Qurrat al-ʿAyn (subject to debate).

The Constitutional Revolution (1906–1911) and its aftermath saw a well-known explosion of social and political poetry, including that of modern female poets, though, once again, their works generally are not much remembered. As Matthew C. Smith has observed:

Today we rarely see poets like Fāni or Fatemeh Soltan Farahani ranked alongside their male colleagues though they spoke with equal or even greater vigor in defence of political and social freedom…Highlighting the poetry of authors like Homa Mahmudi, Shams Kasmā'i, and Nimtāj [Khākpur, also Salmāsi] as per their treatment of political and nationalistic topics of the Constitutional era demonstrates the urgent need for expanding the boundaries of what we consider to be transformational literature. As Rakhshān declared in her poem entitled simply "Freedom" (Azadi):

Shout at the top of your lungs this news to those who are lost
Science and learning are the guides to freedom
You will prevail, Rakhshān, with the aid of God
And then you will dance to freedom's song[9]

This, then, is a very short background to Parvīn as a renowned

[9]Matthew C. Smith, "Women and the Canonization of Constitutional Era Poets," in Homa Katouzian and Alireza Korangi, eds., Poetry and Revolution: The Poets and Poetry of the Constitutional Era of Iran (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2022), 60.

poet and the first female poet to publish her Dīvān. However, mention must also be made of the able but not well-known poet, ʿĀlamʹtāj Qāʾim Maqāmī (nom de plume, Zhālah, 1262–1326/1883–1946) who, though older than Parvīn, survived her; but her Dīvān was to be published by her poet son Husayn Pazhmān Bakhtiyārī.[10] Having had a very unhappy marriage, though it only lasted for three years, she mourned in many of her poems her "captivity." A very sad poet yearning for her own and other women's liberation.[11]

[10]Zhālah ʿĀlamʹtāj Qāʾim Maqāmī, Dīvān-i Bānū ʿĀlamʹtāj Qāʾim Maqāmī, Zhālah, ed. Husayn Pazhmān Bakhtiyārī (Tehran: Ibn Sīnā, 1336/1947).

[11]See, for example, Yāsamin Ārang, Bīdār-i khāmūsh, naqd va barʹrisī-i zindagī va shiʾr-i Zhālah Qāʾim Maqāmī, shāʿir-i āyinah'hā (Tehran: Burzfarīn, 1393/2014).

Birth, Upbringing, and Education

Parvīn was born into an advanced and highly cultivated family. Her father, Yūsuf Āshtiyānī, entitled Iʻtisām al-Mulk (later surnamed Iʿtisāmī, 1254–1316//1875–1937), was born in Tabriz to a notable Āshtiyānī family, and married Akhtar al-Mulūk Futūhī Tabrīzī, Parvīn's mother. Born in 1285/1907, shortly before Muhammad ʿAlī Shāh's coup against the constitutionalists, she was too young to have noticed the turmoil in Tabriz even after the constitutionalists' triumph in 1288/1909.

In 1290/1911, Iʿtisāmī went to Tehran as a Tabriz deputy in the second Majlis, and following that, he was elected to the third Majlis for Tehran in 1393/1914. Once in Tehran he quickly joined the circle of young modern writers, poets, and intellectuals such as Poet-Laureate Bahār, ʿAlī Akbar Dihkhudā, Īraj Mīrzā, and Kamāl al-Saltanah (Sabā). Īraj mentions him along with some of his other Tehran friends in one of the Ikhvāniyāt (fraternal poems) of ʿĀrifʹnāmah, which he wrote in Mashhad:

Tell me, ʿĀrif, about our friends in Tehran,
For every night I dream of friends of Tehran.
Tell me how Kamāl al-Saltanah is doing,
What are Dakhu and Iʿtisām discussing?
What was Mister Kamālī pontificating:
That democrat, moderate, revolutionary!
Many good qualities has Kamālī,

But he cannot tell good from bad tea…
Give my best regards to Malik,
Who keeps this and that thing in check…[12]

Iʿtisām is Yūsuf Āshtiyānī, Dakhu is ʿAlī Akbar Dihkhudā, and Malik (al-Shuʿarāʾ) is Bahār.

Apart from publishing the journal Bahār (see below), Iʿtisām published thirty to forty books on various humanities subjects, most of which he translated from French, Arabic, and Turkish, while holding high civil service posts when he was no longer a Majlis deputy. Parvīn, who had one elder and three younger brothers, was her father's favourite.

From the age of six, she was most of the time present in her father's regular meetings with his poet and intellectual friends, absorbing a great deal of literary and social knowledge from that young age. At the same time she had begun to learn Persian and Arabic languages and literatures from her father as well as from private tutors. According to Dihkhudā and Bahār, she wrote poetry when she was seven and eight years old. Clearly a child prodigy, she was eight when she wrote the following piece:

A chickpea told a bean
Why am I round, you, long.
It said, as we both will be cooked
There's no remedy put up with fate…[13]

This is the beginning of a lengthy munāzirah (dialogue or debate) which has been published in her Dīvān. However, it has not been mentioned as one of her ten early poems (see below).

At eleven, she was put in the American school for girls (known as Iran Bethel) where she was taught the curriculum both in Persian and English. She graduated in 1924, aged seventeen, having learned both English language and literature in addition

[12]See Homa Katouzian, Humour in Iran, Eleven Hundred Years of Humour and Satire in Persian Literature (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2025), chapter 7.

[13]Parvīn Iʿtisāmī, Dīvān-i Parvīn Iʿtisāmī, ed. Abū al-Fath Iʿtisāmī (4 repr. ed., Tehran: Abū al-Fath Iʿtisāmī, 1333/1954). Mahnāz Bahman, "Parvīn Iʿtisāmī," in Chihrahʹhā-yi darakshān (Tehran: Muʾassasah-ʾi Farhangī-i Madrasah-ʾi Burhān], 1391/2012), 9.

to Persian which she already knew well; and, according to Miss Schuller, the school principal, she was to teach at the school for a couple of years.[14] However, she and made a remarkable and lengthy graduation speech, titled "Zan-u tārīkh" (Women and history), of which a small sample appears below:

The remedy for the chronic ailment of the East is nothing but education. Genuine education which would include men as well as women, and benefit all the social classes…Our dear country, Iran, has had a considerable share of the East's hardships and tribulations [and] it is clear that in trying to repair past decays, reform present ills, and in the preparation for future happiness, it faces a lot of problems…It is hoped that the effort of people of intellect and ideas will lead to the emergence of the spirit of excellence, and by the education of women important reforms would become possible…[15]

Figure 3: Portrait of Parvīn Iʿtisāmī

When she made this speech she already had been publishing poetry in her father's intellectual journal Bahār for five years (see below). This was the monthly journal that Iʿtisām al-Mulk published in two volumes, separated by ten years: volume 1 in 1289–1290/1910–1911; volume 2 in 1299–1300/1920–1921. And some finding it difficult to believe that the poet was a four-

[14]See Parvīn Iʿtisāmī, Majmūʿah-ʾi maqālāt va qataʿāt-i ashʿār kih bi-munāsibat-i darʹguzasht va avvalīn sāl-i vafāt-i Parvīn Iʿtisāmī, ed. Abū al-Fath Iʿtisāmī (Tehran: Abū al-Fath Iʿtisāmī, 1356/1977), 28.

[15]For the whole speech, see Iʿtisāmī, Majmūʿah-ʾi maqālāt, 23–26.

teen-year-old girl, speculated that they were written by a mature man. Parvīn responded:

The dust of mistaken views must be removed from the heart,
So the demon would know that this mirror will not take dust.
Since some people of knowledge think Parvīn is a man,
Better resolve the problem by saying Parvīn is not a man![16]

However, when her father stopped publishing Bahār, Parvīn, who went on writing poems, did not publish them for the next thirteen years. Evidently, her father thought that the publication of a dīvān by an unmarried girl would meet with public disapproval.[17] Parvīn dearly loved and admired her father as much he loved and admired her. And perhaps this, rather than anything else, made her consent to his suggestion to marry his second cousin Fazl Allāh Iʿtisāmī Garakānī in 1323/1934, who was made prefect of the police in Kermanshah shortly afterwards.

But Kermanshah lasted for Parvīn no more than two months when she returned, broken hearted, to her parents in Tehran. No doubt, having been raised in a clean home, she could not gladly suffer the regular all-male drinking and opium-smoking parties at her home. But worse than that must have been the fact that, having been at the feet of her father and his illustrious intellectual friends and interlocutors since childhood, there was no one for her to talk to. She never spoke or wrote about this disastrous experience, except, perhaps, implicitly in the following piece:

Flower! What did you find in the garden?
What except blame and mischief by thorn?
To the garden you went, only to find a cage,
What else did you find, captive bird?!
Pretty candle! with all the light you glowed,
What except ignoble clients did you find?[18]

It was only then that she was able to publish her Dīvān which she formally dedicated to her father and which, almost imme-

[16]Quoted in Parvīn Iʿtisāmī, Dīvān-i Parvīn Iʿtisāmī: qasāʾid, masnavīyāt, tamsīlāt, va muqattaʿāt, ed. Hishmat Muayyid [Heshmat Moayyed] (Costa Masa, Calif.: Mazda, 1987), davāzdah [xii]. See also, Farzaneh Milani, "Judith Shakespeare and Parviz E'tesami," in Once a Dewdrop: Essays on the Poetry of Parvin E'tesami, ed. Heshmat Moayyad (Costa Mesa, Calif.: Mazda, 1994).

[17]Iʿtisāmī, Dīvān-i Parvīn Iʿtisāmī, ed. Iʿtisāmī, 7.

[18]Iʿtisāmī, Dīvān-i Parvīn Iʿtisāmī, ed. Iʿtisāmī, 268.

diately upon publication, became the talk of the town for artists and intellectuals. In his introduction to the Dīvān, Poet-Laureate Bahār, believed to be the greatest Persian poet of the time, went over the moon, calling it a "soul-flattering bouquet of flowers," and comparing her poems with the works of great classicists such as Nāsir Khusraw, Saʿdī, and Rūmī.[19]

The Most Knowledgeable (ʿAllāmah) Muhammad Qazvīnī wrote from Paris where he lived and worked most of his life, that he read the book "with utmost delight" and was absolutely surprised that in that day and age "such a queen of poets" had emerged in Tehran.[20] He too compared the poems with those of great poets, and said that he was much impressed not only by the form but also by their mature and advanced content.[21] ʿAllāmah Dihkhudā, close friend of Iʿtisām al-Mulk who had known Parvīn since her childhood, was to write in his famous Lughat'nāmah that Parvīn began to write poetry at seven, and her extraordinary talent "always astonished" friends of her father.[22] There were many other positive reviews, notably the extensive appraisal by Ustād Saʿīd Nafīsī in the third reprint of the Dīvān.[23]

It was then that Parvīn was honoured with the Medal of Merit (third degree), which some say she turned down, and others say she accepted but never wore, which sits well with the fact that she never went to official and formal parties. It is also said that she had "obstinately refused to teach language and literature to the Queen" (not clear which of Reza Shah's wives); and—given that Vincent Sheean's book was published in 1927—the offer should have been made to "this thin, severe, bespectacled, little girl" shortly after graduation from the American school. [24] The author who had met Parvīn himself makes certain other claims for her attitude towards the royal court which may not be very convincing. [25]

Shortly after the publication of her Dīvān, Parvīn was appointed librarian to the Teacher Training College (École Normale

[19]Iʿtisāmī, Dīvān, ed. Iʿtisāmī, lengthy but unnumbered Introduction.

[20]For her full letter to her father, see Iʿtisāmī, Majmūʿah, 19–22.

[21]Namīnī, Jāvidānah Parvīn, 96–101.

[22]Quoted in Iʿtisāmī, Dīvān-i Parvīn Iʿtisāmī, ed. Muayyad, bīst-u shish [xvi].

[23]Namīnī, Jāvidānah Parvīn, 81–96.

[24]Vincent Sheean, The New Persia (New York: The Century Co., 1927), 255–57, quoted in Moayyad, Once a Dewdrop.

[25]Sheean, The New Persia.

Superieure) of Tehran. Sīmīn Dānishvar, the leading female Persian writer of the twentieth century, who at the time was a student in the College, used to reminisce about Parvīn's time as the librarian. However, for unknown reasons, it did not last long and Parvīn never went into employment again.

Figure 4: Visit of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi during his time as Crown Prince to the library of the Higher Education Institute in 1937 (1316). On the right is Parvīn Iʿtisāmī, the library's director.

Death

Iʿtisām al-Mulk died in Day 1316/January 1938 at sixty-three, and his death was literally a devastating blow to Parvīn who had lost an age-old teacher, friend, admirer, interlocutor, and companion. She said in the heart-breaking elegy which she wrote for him:

Father! The pickaxe of death which hit you,
Was the pick-axe that ruined my life.
Calling you Yūsuf, they offered you to the wolf,
My Canaanite Yūsuf! Death became your wolf.
The moon in the wheal of letters were you,
Dust became your prison, my captive moon!…[26]

She who had lost the only anchor of her life went back into her

[26] Iʿtisāmī, Dīvān, ed. Iʿtisāmī, 271.

cocoon and never emerged from it. That is why the only poems of hers which survived in manuscript until her own death were the elegy for her father and the following piece, which she had written to be engraved on her tombstone.

This is Parvīn, star of the wheel of letters,
Who is lying here in a dark den.
Although she saw naught but bitterness,
Sweet are her words up to your taste.
She who uttered so many fine words,
Now begs for a prayer to console her soul.
Dust in the eyes erode the soul,
It feels heavy under heavy stone…
Whoever you are and whence you come,
This will be your life's final home…
It is the ancient habit of history,
To give birth, kill and then bury.
Blessed are those who in this miserable place,
Console those who suffer from upset.[27]

Parvīn died in Farvardīn 1320/April 1941. According to the family account which circulated after her death and has been recounted by many afterwards, she died of typhoid over a thirteen-day long illness. It even mentions doctors' negligence.[28] However, a neighbour of theirs in the Sarcheshmeh neighbourhood of Tehran, the late and notable journalist and writer Sadr al-Dīn Ilāhī, said that on the day of the event, the maidservant at Parvīn's family home had told him that she had committed suicide by swallowing a large piece of opium.[29]

[27] Iʿtisāmī, Dīvān, ed. Abū al-Fath Iʿtisāmī, 271.

[28] See, for example, Iʿtisāmī, Dīvān, ed. Muayyad, yāzdah [xi].

[29] This author's conversations with Ilāhī in Berkely, USA, 1996.

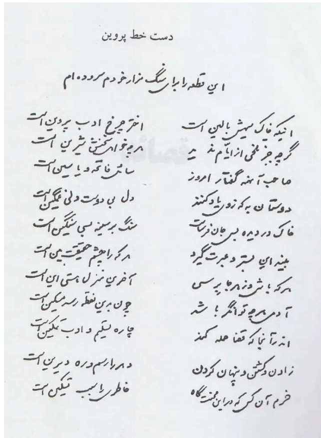

Figure 5: The handwriting of Parvīn, a poem she wrote for her own tombstone

There is no reason why Ilāhī should have made this up in America fifty-five years after the event. Did the maidservant tell the truth? Was it really just an honest report of what she knew to be true? The answer to these questions can never be known. It is however important to note that in such cases in Iran, especially those regarding famous and popular individuals, their close family would try to cover up events of this kind.

Sādiq Hidāyat's suicide could not possibly be denied. Yet, due to some critical remarks in this author's study of his life and works,[30] his close relative launched an attack of character assassination against the serious critic doing his intellectual duty. Muhammad Musaddiq's close relatives also led a similar campaign for the author's faithful reporting in his political biography of the late statesman.[31]

Nevertheless, this is certainly no proof that the family account in the case of Parvīn is false. It is even possible that, having been drained by pain and fever, she had decided to take her life rather than hope for survival. But it certainly does not come as a surprise for her having taken her life one way or another. As mentioned, for three years she had not written a poem (or not any that she would have wished to survive), other than, signifi-

[30]See Homa Katouzian, Sadeq Hedayat, The Life and Legend of an Iranian Writer (2nd ed., London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2021).

[31]See Homa Katouzian, Musaddiq and the Struggle for Power in Iran (2nd paperback ed., London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1999); Homa Katouzian, "The Anglo-Iranian Oil Crisis Revisited: Iran's Rejection of The World Bank Intervention, and the 1953 coup," British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies (September 2022): 1–9.

cantly, the one mourning the death of her father and, even more remarkably, one other for her own tombstone! And that, at a young age.

Poetry

Parvīn began to write poetry at seven or eight, as noted. In 1300/1921, when she was fourteen, she published ten poems in the second volume of her father's journal Bahār.[32] And though she did not publish any more poems for the next ten years, her reputation as a notable poet was established by these ten poems:

(O Little Bird)[33]; (Tear of the Orphan)[34]; (Wishful Child)[35]; (The Injustice of the Rich is Our Thunderbolt)[36]; (The Enlightened Say Art is Alchemy)[37]; (A Few Points)[38]; (The Thoughtful Mother)[39]; (Once again the Plunder of February)[40]; (The Sadness of Poverty)[41]; (Of the Dust of Nonsensical Thought)[42].

These consist of qitʿah, qasīdah, musammat and masnavīs, their length varying from two distiches to over fifty. Their form is impeccable as far as the rules of classical prosody is concerned, but what is sometimes truly amazing is the maturity of thought in their content. It has been suggested by various critics, normally taking the lead from each other, that some of her poems have been influenced by western poems that her father used to translate and publish in Bahār.

However, the examples given seem quite farfetched: it is claimed, for example, that Parvīn's masnavī "God's Weaver" has been influenced by an article by Arthur Brisbane entitled "Joy of [the] Spider," which was translated [from French] and published by Parvīn's father, while the only apparent 'influence' is that both are about a spider![43] Another author believes that the same poem has been influenced by one or two poems of Walt Whitman which are also about a spider (of which more below). It is also claimed that a piece by 'the Italian' [sic, correct Spanish] poet [Francisco de] Trillo called "[The] Three

[32]See, for example, Iʿtisāmī, Dīvān, ed. Muayyad, yāzdah–davāzdah [xi–xii].

[33]Iʿtisāmī, Dīvān, ed. Iʿtisāmī, 84–86.

[34]Iʿtisāmī, Dīvān, ed. Iʿtisāmī, 79.

[35]Iʿtisāmī, Dīvān, ed. Iʿtisāmī, 204–5.

[36]Iʿtisāmī, Dīvān, ed. Iʿtisāmī, 172–74.

[37]Iʿtisāmī, Dīvān, ed. Iʿtisāmī, 15–17.

[38]Iʿtisāmī, Dīvān, ed. Iʿtisāmī, 257.

[39]Iʿtisāmī, Dīvān, ed. Iʿtisāmī, 239–40.

[40]Iʿtisāmī, Dīvān, ed. Iʿtisāmī, 51–52.

[41]Iʿtisāmī, Dīvān, ed. Iʿtisāmī, 81–82.

[42]Iʿtisāmī, Dīvān, ed. Iʿtisāmī, 268.

[43]Wikipedia, "Parvīn Iʿtisāmī."

Drops" has influenced Parvīn's "Gawhar-i ashk" (The gem of the tear),[44] whereas the only similarity is that Trillo's piece includes a teardrop.

As noted, the ten early poems displayed an extraordinary level of maturity for a child poet. The basic story in the following, being one of the ten, has been influenced by a qitʿah of the leading twelfth-century classical poet Anvarī Abīvardī, but it is better than his.

Tear of the Orphan

A king was once passing through a throughfare,
And wails of joy flared up from everywhere.
What's that glowing object on his head,
Asked an orphaned child.
Someone in the crowd said how can we know what it is,
It seems clear though that a pricy object it is.
An old woman came forward and answered the child:
It is my eye's tear and your heart's blood, she replied
He has deceived us, posing as a shepherd
For years has this wolf known the flock.
Look at the teardrop of an orphaned child,
To know whence the gem's glow comes.
Parvīn! it's useless telling wrongdoers about truth,
Have you found anyone that is not hurt by the truth?[45]

The content of the last distich, which is otherwise not the most eloquent of the lot, especially betrays the degree of maturity referred to above.

It was mentioned that when her Dīvān was published the contemporary masters of the profession compared Parvīn's poems with the works of such great classical poets as Rūmī, Saʿdī, Nizāmī, Nāsir Khusraw, etc. And subsequent critics have followed them in these views. It is true that some of her qasīdahs are in the eleventh- to thirteenth-century Khorasani stye, while

[44]Wikipedia, "Parvīn Iʿtisāmī."

[45]"Ashk-i yatīm," in Iʿtisāmī, Dīvān, ed. Iʿtisāmī, 79.

others, and particularly her numerous qitʿahs are normally in the ʿIrāqī and later styles. That is not surprising, because Parvīn and all the classical and neoclassical poets generally follow the rules of classical prosody of which the styles are not a large variety, even if we add the minor Turkistānī style to them. Still, the content of many of her poems is modern in that, unlike such neoclassical poets as the nineteenth-century Fath Allāh Khān Shaybānī, it cannot be mistaken for that of the classical poets.

A few critics have pointed out the fact that Parvīn had not been influenced by Nīmā's modernist revolution. But even assuming that this can be counted as a shortcoming (which is not necessarily the case), the fact is overlooked that most of Nīmā's poems until 1937—for example, the long qasīdah, "Qilʿah-ʾi Saqarim" (We are Hell's castle)—were either within the classical system or new variations on it. "Afsānah" (1300/1921) is to some extent different, and that is mainly due to the fact that its structure consists of a modern-style dialogue between two lovers. Otherwise, its metre is classical (fāʿulun fāʿulun faʿulātun) and it is rhymed as well (ʿIshqī wrote his much longer poem "Maryam" using the same dialogical structure, virtually at the same time). Nīmā's modernist poem 'Quqnūs' (The phoenix) was written in 1316/1937, only four years before Parvīn's death, which is almost certain she never read.[46] Indeed Shafīʿī Kadkanī, a leading contemporary literary critic and poet goes so far as saying that a number of Nīmā's poems—such as "Khurūs-i sādah" (The simple cock), ʿAsbdavānī' (Horse riding), "Parandah-ʾi munzavī" (The reclusive bird), etc.—written between 1306/1927 and 1316/1937 have been influenced by Parvīn![47]

Critics usually emphasize Parvīn's fairly extensive uses of the munāzirah (debate, dialogue, or conversation, depending on the content) genre, which had existed in classical poetry, the best of them being Nizāmī Ganjavī's remarkable conversation between Khusraw and Farhād in his romance Khusraw and Shīrīn:

First he asked him whence he was,

[46]See Majmūʿah-ʾi āsār-i Nīmā Yūshīj, ed. Sīrūs Tāhbāz (Tehran: Nāshir, 1364/1985), 222–23.

[47]See Majmūʿah-ʾi āsār-i Nīmā Yūshīj, ed. Sīrūs Tāhbāz (Tehran: Nāshir, 1364/1985), 222–23.

[48]See Muhammad Rizā Shafīʿī Kadkanī, Bā chirāgh va āyinah (Tehran: Sukhan, 1390/2011), 464.

‘From the land of friendship,’ he replied.
‘What is their business there,’ he asked,
‘They buy sorrow and sell life,’ he replied.
‘Selling life is not in good manners,’ he said.
‘It is not unknown of lovers,’ he replied…[48]

It is however important to point out that this genre makes up a minority of her works, and is usually in the form of masnavī and qitʿah (see below). Quite often, she is also claimed to have been a sūfī or, in the more general term, ʿārif. There is some truth in the latter in so far as some of her poems (usually in masnavī from, in the metre, faʿalātun faʿalātun fāʿalāl, used by Rūmī) have a mystic flavour. But many of her poems are didactic in the style of Nāsir Khusraw and Saʿdī, not mystical in the style of Attār and Rūmī. Her brother Abū al-Fath has related that once she was reading a masnavī aloud and he asked her if it was Rūmī’s; she said no, it is the female Rūmī’s.[49] Assuming the reporting is accurate, it is very doubtful if by that she meant she was a mystic like Rūmī: she said that because the Rūmī-type masnavī (“Khvān-i Karam;”[50] The dinner spread of nobleness) was her own.

This brings us to a close examination of her famous masnavī, for which, as mentioned above, a few ‘influencers’ have been named, even including the Koranic sūrah “Spider”! However, as noted, it has been claimed, extensively and with much elaboration, that the masnavī has been influenced by western poets and writers, especially the renowned American poet Walt Whitman (see below).

This is a very long masnavī in sixty-nine distiches, relating a debate or conversation between a lazy person and a spider, weaving a cobweb or gossamer. Reading it, it becomes clear that in its content is by no means like a poem by Rūmī. The whole story is about work and effort reminding one of Calvinist ethics, rather than Rūmī who, in addition to much else, wrote:

[48]For an English translation of this poem see, Homa Katouzian, Iran: Politics, History and Literature (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2013), 130.

[49]See Iʿtisāmī, Dīvān, ed. Muayyad, 275.

[50]Iʿtisāmī, Dīvān, ed. Iʿtisāmī, 123–25.

This-worldly people, big and small,
May God damn them all!

God's Weaver
A lazy person, lay feeble,
Tired, in bad mood, but well.
They saw a spider busy at work,
Aloof from the good and bad of the world.
Using the loom of enterprise,
Knowing naught but exertion…
Teaching lessons without speaking,
Building ideas with threads of thinking.
Knowing how to, this is how they work,
They play polo so long as there is a ball…
Said the lazy person, what's the use of this,
With this kind of work, the heavens are not pleased.
There are mountains of work in this workshop,
Single straw! No one will ever see you at all.
You weave a string which will be swept away,
You make a frame that will be faulted anyway.
Look for real achievement, if your work matters,
Weave a cloth of silk if you are a good weaver.
You don't know my secrets, it said,
Why then do you laugh at my situation?
Knowledge comes from God, action from us,
Power and help from Him, exertion from us.
You just think of sleeping in this world,
Unaware of this workshop and worldly stall.
It is for the Friend's sake that we are hard at trying,
He is the employer and He is the all-knowing…
If at dawn they demolish this house,
We will make another one at dusk…
This then is our work, what is yours?
If our load is empty what's your load?…
Spider, friend, is God's weaver,
Its wheel turns but is noiseless.[51]

[51] Iʿtisāmī, Dīvān, ed. Iʿtisāmī, 117–20.

Would anyone with some knowledge of mysticism describe this poem as mystical? As for the alleged influence of Walt Whitman, he does have two short poems called "A Noiseless, Patient, Spider" and "Weave in, Weave in, My Hardy Life" in his renowned The Leaves of Grass about spiders and weaving:

[52]Walt Whitman, "A Noiseless Patient Spider," www.bartleby.com/142/208.html

A Noiseless Patient Spider

A NOISELESS, patient spider,
I mark'd, where, on a little promontory, it stood, isolated;
Mark'd how, to explore the vacant, vast surrounding,
It launch'd forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself;
Ever unreeling them—ever tirelessly speeding them.
And you, O my Soul, where you stand,
Surrounded, surrounded, in measureless oceans of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing,—seeking the spheres, to connect them;
Till the bridge you will need, be form'd—till the ductile anchor hold;
Till the gossamer thread you fling, catch somewhere, O my Soul.[52]

And the following in which the word spider has not been mentioned.

Weave in, Weave in, My Hardy Life

Weave in, weave in, my hardy life,
Weave yet a soldier strong and full for great campaigns to come,
Weave in red blood, weave sinews in like ropes, the senses, sight weave in,
Weave lasting sure, weave day and night the weft, the warp, incessant weave, tire not,
(We know not what the use O life, nor know the aim, the end, nor really aught we know,
But know the work, the need goes on and shall go on, the death-envelop'd march of peace as well as war goes on,)

For great campaigns of peace the same the wiry threads to weave,
We know not why or what, yet weave, forever weave[53]

Everyone knows that spiders weave cobwebs noiselessly and avidly, but is this commonly known fact sufficient for the claim that the poems had influenced Parvīn's? And what is mystical about Walt Whitman's poems?[54]

So much for "God's Weaver," but Parvīn has more than 5000 distiches of poetry, many of which commiserate with the poor, the destitute, the helpless, the subjects of injustice. Another curious point which many a critic has raised is that Parvīn was apolitical, whereas her Dīvān is packed with socio-political protest and criticism. Those critics seem to be confused by the fact that she was not a political activist; and who was in her time, except one or two hundred men (almost all of them tribal khāns and Marxists) who were languishing in jails.

If "Tear of the Orphaned Child" quoted above, which she wrote at fourteen, is not political, what is it? Or the following poem whose subject might have been suggested by Nizāmī Ganjavī's qasīdah in his Makhzan al-asrār, which opens with the verses:

An old woman, subjected to injustice,
Stopped Sanjar, pulling his dress.
Saying, o King you have too little shame,
I've seen injustice from you year by year…

And Parvīn's old woman castigates Qubād:

The Old Woman's Grievance

An old woman told Qubād on a hunting day:
The blaze of your sleaze left us but fume and sigh.
Come one day to our hut from the hunt
—It is not a sin to ask how the downtrodden are—

[53]Walt Whitman, "Weave in, My Hardy Life," https://poets.org/poem/weave-my-hardy-life

[54]See, however, the following avalanche: Behnam Fomeshi, "'The Female Rumi' and Feminine Mysticism: 'God's Weaver' by Parvin I'tisami," British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies (September 2021): 1–11; Behnam Fomeshi, "Till the Gossamer Thread You Fling Catch Somewhere: Parvin E'tesami's Creative Reception of Walt Whitman," Walt Whitman Quarterly Review 35 (2018): 267–75; Behnam Fomeshi, The Persian Whitman: Beyond a Literary Reception (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2019), chapter 6.

Come at lunchtime and see our breadless spread,
So you will see that there is no sign of wellness.
The burglar stole my blanket, the shepherd, my cow,
There no longer is protection in your area.
The burden of taxes left us no space to breathe,
The wheat is yours, and ours, naught but the straw.
You issued a false edict and claimed it was right,
You spread corruption and said that it was not
Your injustice ruined every village and living space,
A person like you is no king, he is a plunderer…[55]

And in the following she incited no less than revolution:

O Toiler!

Toiler! How long for will you wade through the sun?
For the sake of bread, sweat in the heat of the sun!
For all your suffering in the sun, the wind, the dust,
What is your return except for blame and bust?
Ask for your rights that are trampled underfoot,
For how long will you fear the khāns and lords?
Shed the blood of all those who suck your blood leechlike,
Then wash your hands and feet red in their blood!…[56]

One other critical observation on Parvīn and her work is that neither of them was romantic.[57] That she is not known to have had a sweetheart may be explained by the fact that, at the time, such things were very much disapproved by the public, especially in the case of women. Nevertheless she has two ghazals (somewhat reminiscent of Saʿdi's love lyrics) which are truly—and indeed highly—romantic.

From a Ghazal

Being without the lover, last night had no dawn,
The burning of my heart and the candle had no force.
The distant sun did not show its face from the east,

[55]Iʿtisāmī, Dīvān, ed. Iʿtisāmī, 167–8.

[56]Iʿtisāmī, Dīvān, ed. Iʿtisāmī, 82–83.

[57]See, for example, Fereshteh Davaran, "Impersonality in Parvin E'tesami's Poetry," in Once a Dewdrop, 69–89.

The moon in the sky's fortress would not move from the west.
The physician did arrive at the sick person's bed,
But it was too late and the treatment was of no use.
Do you know when the panacea for Suhrāb arrived?
At the moment when he was naught but a soulless corpse…
The moth with its passion for the candle did not fear fire,
She could see the flame but was not anxious about her life.
I have nursed my tears like gems,
To show that the eye's sea also has gems.[58]

Wishes

How nice to be at the lover's feet, drunk,
Unbothered from the good and bad of life.
To go wingless to the eagle of compassion,
With the falcon of love be like a pigeon.
Burning like a candle, lighting up the festive set ,
In the lover's memory throwing oneself in blaze.
To nurse tears like rubies with one's blood,
To redden the eye much as amber is red.
To be lost like the moth, where there is light,
Become like a salamander anywhere there is fire …[59]

However, that is not the end of her lyrics and lyricism, even though the lyrics may not be directly romantic. They include four other ghazals which are also entitled "Wishes".[60] Still, there are other moving lyrics such as "Safar-i ashk" (The tear's journey).[61]

Finally, seldom, if ever, has Parvīn been noted as a satirist. Although, it is doubtful that she intended them as satirical poems, the following two, one more than the other, are just that. And they both imply strong socio-political protest.

The Drunk and The Sober

A morality policeman met a drunk and grabbed him,

[58] Iʿtisāmī, Dīvān, ed. Iʿtisāmī, 78.

[59] Iʿtisāmī, Dīvān, ed. Iʿtisāmī, 69. See further, M.R. Ghanoonparvar, "Parvin Eʻtesami's Utopia," in Once a Dewdrop, 103–16.

[60] Iʿtisāmī, Dīvān, ed. Iʿtisāmī, 69–71.

[61] Iʿtisāmī, Dīvān, ed. Iʿtisāmī, 161–62.

The drunk said, ‘Friend this is a shirt not a donkey rein.’
‘You are drunk that’s why you stumble,’ he said.
‘It’s not my fault, the road is not even,’ he replied.
‘I must take you to the Qāzī’s house,’ he said.
‘Come in the morning, for he is not up at midnight,’ he replied.
‘Let’s go to the governor’s house nearby,’ he said,
‘What if the governor is in the tavern,’ he replied.
‘Sleep in the mosque till we call the police chief,’ he said.
‘Mosques are not a place for sinners,’ he replied.
‘Give me a dīnār quietly and I’ll let you go,’ he said.
‘Sharīʿah law should not be bought with money,’ he replied… ‘’
‘The sober man must flog the drunk ,’ he said.
‘Call someone sober, here’s no such person,’ he replied.[62]

[62] Iʿtisāmī, Dīvān, ed. Iʿtisāmī, 241.

[63] Iʿtisāmī, Dīvān, ed. Iʿtisāmī, 130.

The Burglar and the Judge

A policeman took a burglar to court.
Followed by many people of all sort.
‘What wrong did you do,’ asked the Qāzī.
‘What’s the use of hurting the people,’ he replied.
‘A wrongdoer will face retribution,’ he said.
‘Offence is better than bad faith,’ he replied.
‘Tell me your profession,’ he said.
‘I am a thief like yourself,’ he replied.
‘Where’s the money you took,’ he asked.
‘In your hypocritical money-belt,’ he replied…
‘Where’s that glittering stone,’ he asked.
‘Take it out of your pocket,’ he replied.
You constantly violate God’s law.
I steal via the wall, you, via the door.
I steal the wears of a poor bloke.
You take ribā and bribes by force…
They catch the pickpocket, not the gold thief.
Not the Qāzī but only we are seen by the police…
If a burglar is busy stealing at night.
The rulers’ theft happens in daylight…[63]

This then is an account of Parvīn Iʿtisāmī's life and work as a child prodigy and a major Persian poet for all time.