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The History of Women's Poetry: From the Beginnings to the Present

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Historicizing women's poetry involves investigation of the evolution of poetry by Iranian women from the beginnings of Persian literature in approximately 900 CE (400 HQ) to the present (2023 CE/1402 HS). This study introduces women poets in each epoch in the context of their socio-political and historical situations as well as their poetic style.

There is no record of any women poets for up to 300 years after the Arab invasion of Persia which caused the demise of the Sasanian Empire. In other words, one cannot find mention of any woman poet in extant records from the Tāhirid (r. 205-259 HQ/821-873 CE) or Saffārid (r. 240-389 HQ/861-1003 CE) dynasties. The reign of the Sāmānids was a prolific one for Persian literature and language, its creativity and richness reaching new heights, along with advances in the sciences, under the subsequent dynasties of the Daylamites, Ghaznavids, Seljuqs, and Khwārazmiāns.

The beginnings of women's poetry reaches back to the fourth century HQ (ca. 930 CE), a period known for the spread of the Khurāsānī and panegyric styles. Some poems from the following female poets between the fourth and eighth centuries HQ (900 to 1400 CE) have survived: Rābi'ah, Kanīzak Mutribah, Parvīz Khātun, Mahastī, Dukhtar Kāshgarī, 'Āyisha Samarqandī, Dukhtar Settī, Fāzilah Samarqandī, Pādshāh Khātūn, Dukhtar Hakīm Kāv, Jalāl Khātūn Samarqandīyyah, Bint al-Bukhārīyyah, Razīyah Ganjah'ī, Firdaws Mutribah, Dukhtar

Sajistānīyyah, Aisha Muqrīyyah, Dukhtar Khatib Ganjah, Dukhtar Sālār, and Sayyidah Bint Nāsir. Of these poets, Rābi‘ah (known for her sonnets) and Mahastī (famous for her quatrains) feature more prominently in literary anthologies due to their ties to contemporary power structures.



Figure 1: A painted portrait attributed to Rābi‘ah Balkhi

Rābi‘ah is the first female poet, some of whose poems have survived from the fourth century HQ. Rābi‘ah was the daughter of Ka‘b Qusdārī of the Qusdār (or Quzdār) region in the Sind Valley and a contemporary of Rudakī, the Father of classical Persian poetry, during the reign of the Sāmānid dynasty. Five sonnets, thirteen quatrains and three couplets are all that survives from Rābi‘ah’s work. Her poems are of a personal and amorous or romantic nature and are reflective of a woman’s inner feelings (cited as an example, the following poem has been selected as the most authoritative from among several extant variants):

Once again love I found
But my efforts did not abound
Love is an ocean boundless
O fool, you cannot rush around
To take love to its destination

¹See Ruhangīz Karāchī, *A History of Women Poets from the Beginning to the Eighth Century HQ* (Tehran: Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies, 2015), 156. Quoted in Abdulrahmān Jāmī, *Nafihāt al-Uns min Hazirāt al-Quds*, edited by Mahmūd Ābedī (Tehran: Mu'asisah Itilā'āt Publications, 1991), 627.

²See Ruhangīz Karāchī, *A History of Women Poets from the Beginning to the Eighth Century HQ*, 214. Quoted in Jamāl Khalīl Shirvānī, *Nuzhat al-Majālis*, edited by Muhammad Amīn Rīyāhī, (Tehran: Zavvār, 1266), 544.

³See Hassan ibn Muhammad, *Ibn Bībī, Al-Avāmīr al-Alā'iyah fi-l-Umūr al-Ālīyah yā Saljūq Nāmah*, edited by Jālih Muttahidīn (Tehran: Institute for Humanities and Cultural Studies, 2011), 120-125. Also see Karāchī, *A History of Women Poets from the Beginning to the Eighth Century HQ*, 370.

Much unpleasantry you must surmount
Disgust you must see as goodness found
Venom you must see as sugar unbound
I was that wild steed, not knowing
Do not pull, the noose won't come unwound¹

Mahastī Ganjah'ī, a sixth century (HQ) poet, was Secretary of the Seljuq Sultan Sanjar's court and a competent composer of quatrains. Her innovation involved the creation of a new style of poetry known as *Shahr Āshūb* within the quatrain metre in which the working class is praised while the flattery and puffery of panegyrist court poets are satirized. In so doing, she was able to influence the future reorientation of panegyristic style of poetry to some extent. Her poetry is reflective of her gender awareness in a restrictive culture:

Last night that gay beloved held my hand
'There's no escaping this enchanted man, come, let us band'
'Tis nighttime, I said, let go of my hand
Or else all will see us here hand in hand²

Dukhtar Sālār was a seventh century (HQ) poet, the first female panegyrist whose praise of the Seljuq ruler of Anatolia, Izz al-din Kaykāvūs, appears in the composite style. She composed the following lines for the monarch from Mosul:

Until I see my beloved and his teasing braid
So many sighs must I breathe I'm afraid
Thou hast left my bosom, where art thou?
How much for a moment, o favourite beloved where art thou?
I am filled with pain and need since we were separated
Until I can have you again, o coquettish beloved where art thou?³





Figure 2: sculpture of Mahsati Ganjavi , source: https://portals.nlai.ir/zanan/index.php?title=%D9%BE%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%86%D8%AF%D9%87:%D9%85%D9%87%D8%B3%D8%AA%D-B%8C_%DA%AF%D9%86%D8%AC%D9%88%DB%8C.jpg

It can be argued that the political history of Iran roughly between the seventh to the ninth centuries HQ (1220-1500 CE) began with the Mongol invasion and lasted – with the inclusion of the Ilkhanids, the Tīmūrīds, and other Mongol successor dynasties – for 250 years. This period was characterised by relentless raids by nomadic tribes who were alien to Iranian civilization and its value systems and who had no other aim than pillage and domination over the region. The result was the collapse of infrastructure in Iran and the subsequent disorder and instability that followed. These chaotic times adversely affected the sensibilities of contemporary artists: the volatile and crisis-ridden conditions in the external world meant an artistic tendency to take refuge in the internal world. Accordingly, the subject matter of poetry changed from descriptions of external beauty to a vehicle for the expression of the poet’s internal feelings, and thus lyrical poetry became a refuge for poetic emotions. What is more curious is that this period witnessed the creation of some of the most delightful love ghazals in this bloodiest and most violent of times. The panegyric ode of the pre-Mongol era transformed into love and mystical ghazals even as the Khurāsānī style metamorphosed into the Iraqi style. During this period,

⁴Jahān Malik Khātūn, *The Divan of Jahān Malik Khātūn*, edited by Pūrāndukht Kāshānī Rād and Kāmil Ahmadnījād (Tehran: Zavvār, 1995), 509.

⁵Bī Nishān, *Divan of Poems* (only extant manuscript, together with the divan of Jahān Malik Khātūn) Microfilm. Scan number 0092 p. 83 of manuscript, Bibliothèque Nationale Paris (supple Persan 1102). My edited volume of Bī Nishān's poetry is forthcoming.

27 women across the expanse of the Persianate cultural world composed their poems: Jahān Malik Khātūn, Bī Neshān, Dawlat Samarqandī, Khāhar Amīr, Mihrī Heravi, Fātima Khātūn Dustī, Bībī Ātūnī, Za'īfī, Ārizū Samarqandī, Āfāq Beyga Jalāyir, Bīdilī Hiravī, Nahānī Kirmānī, Beyja Munajimah, Dukhtar-i Qāzī Samarqandī, 'Ismatī, 'Iffatī Isfarāyīnī, 'Ismatī Asīstī, Zīnat Dukhtar-i Hisām Sālār, Lā Āvar, Dilshād Khātūn, Dukhtar-i Fazlullāh Na'imī, Ārāyish Begum, Awrāq Sultan Begum, Rūzbih, Bībī Hayāt, Hijābī Dukhtar-i Badr al-Dīnn Hilālī, Bībī Tūrān. From among these women's' works some scattered couplets, several ghazals, and two divans of poetry have survived. The most expansive of these are two divans: one was composed by Jahān Malik Khātūn (daughter of Masūd Shah Īnjū, governor of Fars), and the other one is the divan of Bī Nishān. Jahān Malik Khātūn is the first female composer of elegiac poetry and the most distinguished composer of ghazals among women poets. Her prolific output includes 1413 ghazals, 4 odes, one refrain, 117 elegiac couplets, and 375 quatrains. Her elegiac compositions on the death of her daughter are heart wrenching:

My cries of agony have surpassed the seven spheres
The river of my tears flows down the spout
The Sultan of fortune was merry on her throne
Oh why did she suddenly leave but for my misfortune?⁴

Of Bī Nishān's works, 218 ghazals and 16 quatrains have survived:

The world has turned dark, where is my moon tonight?
For away from him my sighs of anguish have reached the heavens tonight
I am like that candle wax dripping silently from the fire of love
Except my warm tears, there is no other witness to my agony tonight⁵

The tenth to the twelfth centuries witnessed the rise and fall of the Safavid, Afshārid, and Zand dynasties. Under the Safavids,



the political, economic, and social structures underwent change and, along with the Shi'ification of Persia, led to the unification and consolidation of the empire. Art styles followed suit. For certain artistic enterprises such as architecture and painting, the change was positive and led to the prospering of those art forms. The Safavid statesmen were not patrons of poetry or literature, however. The Safavid state cherished only religious poetry and elegies. Between the end of the ninth to the end of the tenth centuries (HQ), the Iraqi style of poetry was gradually supplanted by the Indian style, characterized by abstract complexity, ambiguity, and slight imagination (*nāzuk khīyāl*). New forms of poetic expression took shape such as homophile poetry (*shi'r-i vuqu'*), antipathy and withdrawal (*vāsukht*), far-fetched imagination (*tarz-i khiyāl*), coffeehouse (*qahvah khānah'ī*), contradictory parody (*tazrīq*), elegiac, and Shiite religious poetry, none of which became thriving genres but all of which contributed to the transformation of fine Persian poetry from its elaborate classical status into a popular and vernacular vehicle. In this period, religious poetry spread through elegies and religious epics leading to a general disregard for mystical poetry. In this same period, 33 women poets composed poetry: Zawjah Mirza Khalīl, Bībī Yamanī, Khan Khānūm Nayshābūrī, Khadijah Sultan Begum Dāghistānī, Shā'ir Kātib-i Bīnām, Beyjah Nahānī Qā'inī, Nahānī Shīrāzī, Nasā'ī, Fakhr al-Nisā, Khānzādah Turbatī, Shāhmalik Sayyid Begum, Dukhtar-i Ghazālī Yazdī, Partaw Tabrīzī, Hayāt Hiravī, Jamilah Fasīhih, Bent Hisām Sālār, Muhtaram Sarāhī, Zā'irī, Beyjah Shikāfī, Zinā-yi Hijābī, Makh-dūm Latifih, Nahānī Dukhtar-i Mirza Yādīgār, Dukhtar-i Amīr Nizām Astarābādī, Partaw Talākish, Bībī Hidīyih, Bībī Pardih, Nahānī Isfahānī, Hamdamī, Liqā Yazdī, Alavīyah, Parī Beygah, 'Iffat Nisābih Shīrāzī, Haqīqī (Parī Khan Khānūm Safavī), and Nahālī Samarqandī. In this period, several women composed religious poetry for the first time, among whom is Khan Khānūm Nayshābūrī (Bībī Khānūm Begum Nayshābūrī), the composer of the following lines:

⁶Khān Khānūm Nayshābūri, Ziyā al-Mu`minīn (manuscript. Library, Museum and Document Centre of Iran Parliament, record no. 87553, shelf number 14254), 97.

⁷Bībī Yamanī, The Divan of Bībī Yamanī (Manuscript. Tehran University, no. 7777), 2. Microfilm M-000097777, p. 2.

⁸Shahrbānū Begum, Versified Hajj Travelogue, edited by Rasūl Ja`fariān (Tehran: Armed Forces Geographic Institution Press, 2007), 1.

⁹Shā`ir Kātib-i Bīnām, Tarjumat al-Khavās: Exegesis of the First Part of the Glorious Quran, composed by Abu al-Hassan Ali Ibn Hassan Zavvārah`ī (tenth century HQ) (Manuscript. Tehran University Central Library, no. 2765), 25.

Toward paradise with a heart that is merry
Free from affliction, hardship or weary
O khan grab on to His cloak
For thou art in His yoke⁶

Or Bībī Yamanī whose poem reads:

Thy love hast endowed the wayfarers with wings
Thy desire in spiritual seekers hast bred mystical states
O thou for whose longing all hearts have spread their wings
Intoxicated like the moth and the nightingale, in ecstatic states⁷

The first versified travelogue written by a woman was penned in this period by Zawjah Mirza Khalīl (Shahrbānū Begum), in rhyming couplets (masnavī) style:

How hast the Devious Fate made me afflicted
With the pain of separation from my beloved
Tranquil sleep in my bed became a scarcity
Until I saw no choice but to travel of necessity
My nights sleepless, my days a frenzy of barb
Until toward the Ka`bah I put on my pilgrim's garb⁸

Two of these women poets have composed poems recording their most personal womanly feelings. While copying down the book Tarjumat al-Khavās (a Quranic exegesis by Abu al-Hassan Zavvārah`ī, an Imāmīyyah scholar) in the tenth century (HQ), Shā`ir Kātib-i Bīnām composed a 13-line stanza describing her state as a woman:

My heart is agitated, my bosom torn to pieces
From these suckling infants, these masterpieces
Feeling helpless under the burden of mothering
A pen in hand, a foot their cradle shuddering⁹

Beyjah Nahānī Qā`inī addressed her spouse in this manner:



I will get a divorce, I will kick thee out
Two husbands will I take, to put thee out
One shall be a beardless young man
The other a ferocious Turkoman
With the youth I shall make merry and seek pleasure
The Turkoman I shall send to thee, measure for measure¹⁰

Hayātī Kirmānī, who lived near the end of the twelfth century HQ, was a member of the Ni'matullāhī Sufī order and composed mystical poetry:

With coquetry, the beauteous slender cupbearer yesternight
Did bring me a cup of nepenthes revitalizing my might
As I washed with that elixir all impressions of Other
God's own image was reflected in my soul's mirror¹¹

As politics and society changed in the second half of the twelfth century HQ, tired and incomprehensible poetic styles were repulsed resulting in a shift in poetic expression. Poets began to turn away from the complexities of the Indian style and toward a revival of the style of the classical poets (what is known as the 'Return Movement'). The revival of the classical past continued throughout the Qajar era.

In the thirteenth century HQ (1795-1906 CE), during the Qajar period, the balance of political power began to shift [from the East to the West], leading to wars and revolts that result from such shifts in power. Such confrontations involved cultural cross-pollination, leading, in turn, to the gradual realization for the necessity of change in socio-cultural structures and institutions. The Return Movement, which had started under the Afshārids and the Zands, continued under the Qajars. Poets composed panegyric odes, historical epics, and religious poems. This period witnessed a rise in women poets who had ties to the ruling elite or in the royal court. It is conceivable that we might have easier access to information and sources from this period due to its historical proximity to us. The woman poets

¹⁰Taqī al-Dīn Muhammad Awhadī Balyānī, *Arafāt al-Āshiqīn wa Arasāt al-Ārifīn*, edited by Zabihullāh Sāhibkāri and Āminah Fakhr Ahmad (Tehran: Institute for Research on Recorded Heritage and Parliamentary Library, 2010), vol. 7, 4527.

¹¹Hayātī Kirmānī, Bibi Jan. *The Divan of Hayātī Kirmānī*. Edited by Javād Nūrbakhsh (Tehran: Yaldā Qalam, 2001), 17.

¹²Hātaf Isfahānī, Ahmad. *Divan of Hātaf Isfahānī with Poems by Rushhah, Hātaf's Daughter*. Edited by Vahīd Dastgirdī, prefaced by Abbās Iqbāl Āshfīyānī (Tehran: Armaghān Periodical Publications, Fūrūghī Bookstore, 1970), 192.

¹³Mastūrah Kurdistānī (Māhsharaf Khānūm), *The Divan of Mastūrah Kurdistānī*, edited by Ahmad Karamī (n.p.: "Mā" Publications, Bart, 1983), 66.

¹⁴Hayrān Dunbulī, *The Divan of Hayrān Dunbulī*, edited by Rūhangīz Karāchī (Tehran: Chāpār, 2014), 78.

in this period mostly composed love poems. Two such poets are Rushhah (lived in 1241 HQ/1826 CE) and Mastūrah (1220-1264 HQ/1804-1848 CE). Rushhah was the daughter of the renowned Hātaf Isfahānī. According to Qajar-era biographers, Rushhah had a divan of poems containing three thousand couplets. Of these 76 have come down to us and have been published within Hātaf Isfahānī's divan. Rushhah wrote:

As retribution for choosing you over all else
Observe, how much reproach I heard from all else¹²

Of (Mastūrah Kurdistānī) Māhsharaf Khānūm Divānī's work, some 180 ghazals, 29 quatrains, 142 rhyming couplets, composite poems, and a few other scattered stanzas remain. The following are the opening lines from one of her ghazals:

Separation from the Beloved has made my spirit vexed again
I have but one heart bearing a thousand cries of agony and pain¹³

Hayrān Dunbulī is the first female poet with a bilingual poetic record (poems in Persian and Turkish). Her divan of 3588 couplets includes 333 ghazals in Persian, 68 quatrains, 2 *mustazāds* (a form of ghazal), 16 *masnavīs* (poems with rhyming couplets), 8 *musammats* (a form of *masnavī*), 2 composite poems, 3 narrative poems, 5 odes, 2 *ode-ghazals*, and 41 poems in Azeri Turkish which include ghazals, limericks, and composite poems. The following is a sample of her poetry:

How long will you enslave me in your shackles?
Is there a God to undo your shackles?
I know not what I have done that Fate
Would have me fall in your trap headlong straight¹⁴

Some poets, including 'Iffat Qajar and Dawlat Qajar, composed poems in eulogy or elegy of Shi'ite imams, particularly the plight of the third Imam, Hussein, at Karbala. The following is an example by Dawlat Qajar:



Drown thyself in blood for the Caesar of Faith [i.e. Imam Hussein], O heart
Keep thy redness out of my flowing tears, O bleeding heart¹⁵

During this period, the tendency toward membership in Sufi sects was prevalent among couriers and much poetry revolved around mystical and religious themes. More than 68 women poets composed their work during this period, most of whom had links to the royal court or were residents of some Qajar Shahs' inner quarters. It is likely that Mahmud Mirza Qajar's biographic Sweet Assembly (nuql-i Majlis) immortalized the names of these female poets. Arguably one of the most famous female poets of this period was Tāhirah Qurrat al-'Ayn whose fame arose from her religious devotion to, and her promotion of, the Baha'i sect. She wrote thus in praise of Baha':

From envy and ambition cleansed
Many a veiled secret I confessed
To the holy names of the glorious heavens
Entwined, inspired insights offered
So you can see how from Bahā's beauty
Many a glory I disclosed¹⁶

¹⁵Dawlat Qajar, The Divan of Dawlat Qajar and 'Iffat Qajar (Manuscript. Centre for the Great Islamic Encyclopedia) no. 780. Registry no. 95907. No page numbers.

¹⁶Tāhirah Qurrat al-'Ayn, The Divan of Qurrat al-'Ayn (Manuscript. Centre for the Great Islamic Encyclopedia) no. 1421. Registry no. 57443, copied in 1920, 104.



Figure 3: sculpture of Māhsharaf Khānūm Divānī (Mastūrāh Kurdistān)

Other female poets from this period include the following: Malūli Shirāzi, Durrat ul-‘Ulama, Khadījah Kāshīyah, Maryam Khānūm Farāhānī, San‘at Lārī, Shahbāz Dunbulī (Sāhibah Sultan), Hamīdah Qāhānī, Sultan Bastāmī, Shādī, Āghā Kūchak, ‘Ismat Begum Qajar, Malik Qajar, Māhrukhsār Khānūm (Faghr al-Dawlah), Gawhar Qajar, Galīn Khānūm, Qamar Qajar, Khāvar Khānūm, Mahd ‘Ulīyā, ‘Afāf, Hilāl, Sultan Qajar, Tāj al-Dawlah (Tāvūs Khānūm), Munavvar Khānūm, Zīyā al-Saltanah (Shah Begum), Tayyibah Qajar, ‘Ismat Qajar, Dawlat Qajar, Vālīyah (Hasan Jahān Khānūm), Qamar al-Saltanah (Māh Tābān Khānūm), Fakhrī, Mastūrah Zand, Āghā Bāji, Dilshād Qajar, Nūsh Āfarīn, Gawhar Mulk, Shāhdukht Malāyirī, Ruhānīyah Bashārūyah, Tāyir Tihirānī, Hamāmah Kirmānī, Tūbā Shirāzī, Shah Begum, ‘Iffat Nasābah Shīrāzī, Zubaydah Khānūm (Jahān Qajar), Tājmāh Zanjānī, Dilshād, Hamīdah Shaybānīyah, ‘Afāf Qajar, Zīvar Shāmlū, Bībāk, Liqā Abarqū‘ī, Hājīyah Zand, Khān Khānūm Kūchak, ‘Ishrat Shīrāzī, Um al-Salamah (‘Ismat Qajar), Mihr Arfa’ Jahānbānī, ‘Ismat Begum, Esmat Astarābādī, and ‘Iffat Qajar (Humāyūn Sultan Khānūm known as Khānūm Khānūmān, or the lady of ladies.

The historical conditions that led to the Constitutional Era (1324-1344 HQ/1906-1925 CE) [and the Constitutional Revolution in Iran] were shaped by increased political awareness, liberation movements and shifts in the sociopolitical structures of society, all of which led to the signing, by the Qajar monarch Muzaffar al-Dīn Shah, of the Constitution [in 1907]. The Constitutional Revolution had not fully borne its fruits yet when ideological conflict among royalists, constitutionalists and the clergy, as well as quarrel over secular constitutionalism versus religious constitutionalism (mashrūtah vs. mashrū‘ah), derailed the movement. With the transformation in the political system and the tension-filled atmosphere of the time, Persian poetry, with its own history of advocating for liberty, underwent major transformations. Armed with novel ideas, content, and form, the language of poetry began to reflect the language of the age of enlightenment, and poetry’s sociopolitical aspect became more



pronounced. Critical social themes such as the emancipation of women and justice became the subject matter of poetry. The poets began to adopt novel approaches to age-old concepts such as liberty, homeland (vatan), and woman. Some among women poets left behind the love-stricken imagination of traditional poetry and instead embraced a poetics of social awareness, composing their poems on issues such as equal education for women, the homeland, and liberty. Works by some ten women from this period have come down to us. Most of these are didactic and focus mainly on liberty and education for girls. Fātimah Sultan or Adīb al-Zamān Farāhānī (Shāhīn) paid special attention to the education of women:

The homeland is caught in a vortex, without science
It is impossible to save the homeland
If the daughters of the homeland acquire science
For their knowledge, they'll become the mothers of the homeland¹⁷

Mihrtāj Rakhshān founded girls' schools. She was also a Constitutional and post-Constitutional poet (during the reign of Reza Shah):



Figure 4: Portrate of Mihrtāj Rakhshān

¹⁸Karāchī, *Female Composers of Constitutional Poetry*, 112.

¹⁹Alī Akbar Mushīr Salīmī, *Eloquent Woman Writers* (Tehran: Mu'assisah Matbū'ātī Alī Akbar 'Ilmī, 1956), vol. 2, p. 378.

²⁰Yahyā Āryanpūr, *From Sabā to Nīma* (Tehran: Zavvār, 1996), vol. 2, p. 457.

Beware, there shall be no sorrow in the turmoil of the age
A bleeding heart is the price to pay to gain freedom¹⁸

Jannat (Fasl-i Bahār Khānūm), who like Mihrtāj Rakhshān wrote under Reza Shah, composed mostly love poems. Farkhundah Sāvujī and Rubāb Isfahānī wrote poems in praise and elegy of the Prophet of Islam and the Shi'ite Imams. Zīnat Mulk I'tizādī, Hamīdah Sīpīhrī, and Maryam Khātūn Ābādī composed popular poems. Nīmāj Salmāsī composed some critical-social poems, the most well-known of which is the following:

Iranians who divine charisma desire
Must first their inner David acquire
A great man with a greater will is required
With whose command to overcome the quagmire¹⁹

The first and only woman who composed poetry using modern forms (following the styles of Taqī Raf'at and Ja'far Khāminah'ī) was Shams Kasmā'ī. Her collection of poetry has apparently been lost to history, and only eight poems, two of which are in the modern forms, have survived. These were published in the periodical Āzādīstān in 1299 HS (1920 CE). Here is a sampling of her work:

Due to excessive fire of love, caresses, and affection
Because of the intensity of heat and light and radiation
The garden of my thoughts
Became muddy and spoiled, alas
Like shrivelled flowers my ingenious thoughts
Lost their freshness and became despondent
Aye, with muddied robes, I sit with my head on my knees
For I am bound to the land like a half-savage
Neither the power to rise
Nor the pull of shame
Neither arrow nor sword, nor even sharp teeth
Nor able to take flight
I therefore clasp the hands of my own gender²⁰



Under Reza Shah (r. 130-1320 HS/1925-940 CE), the political, economic, and social systems in Iran underwent major transformations. A new order was established that could put the country on the path of development and progress. Remarkable initiatives were undertaken: establishment of state funded schools and universities as well as active encouragement of women's involvement in society were pushed through with state support and, despite opposition from traditional social forces, brought about positive change to the society. Transformations in poetry and prose, which had been set in motion since the Constitutional Era, continued to evolve and both poetry and prose gravitated toward simplicity of style and language. The thirst for innovation in the form and subject matter of poetry was so insatiable that some of the most prominent figures in modern Persian literature emerged in this period. The most representative figure in this trend is Nīmā Yūshīj (1895-1960) and his poetry. Women poets continued to compose poetry using traditional forms in this period. There was a noticeable surge in poems revolving around the homeland and social issues. The most preeminent female poet in this period is Parvīn ī'tisāmī (1907-1941). Her divan includes rich social-critical poetry composed in traditional forms such as qasidah, masnavī and narrative munāzirahs (debate). Parvin had an unmatched mastery over composing munāzirahs. She was rationalist and nonpartisan in her thought. Her innovation was the personification of inanimate objects using the classical medium. Here is an example of her poetry in qasidah form:

The watchman is asleep in bed, the thieves set loose
The path is foggy, the caravan aimless, there's no use

In a munāzirah, she wrote:

The sheriff once saw a drunkard and grabbed him by the neck
"Oh friend, 'tis a shirt, not a rein," said the drunkard unchecked²¹

Badrī Tundarī (Fānī) wrote:

²²Mushīr Salīmī, *Eloquent Woman Writers*, vol. 2, 25.

²³Ruhangīz Karāchī, *‘Ālamtāj Qā‘im Maqāmī, Jālah* (Shiraz: Dāstān Sarā Press, 2004), 17.

Rise so we can tend to the wounds of the homeland
Of suffering, misery and disaster wash our hands²²

Other women writers from this period – Fakhr-i ‘Uzmā Arghūn (Khal’atbarī) and Zanddukht Shīrāzī – were poets and journalists. Tājmah Khānūm (Āfāq al-Dawlah) was a poet and the first female translator of drama. ‘Ālamtāj Qā‘im Maqāmī (Jālah) wrote during the reign of Reza Shah, but her poems were published under the reign of Reza Shah’s son, Muhammad Reza Shah. The defining features of her poetry include expression of lived experiences, realism, novel content [as opposed to classical themes], and opposition to misogynistic traditions:



Figure 5: Portrate of Zanddukht Shīrāzī

The constraints of tradition, religion, custom and chastity,
Are ornaments for women’s feet, not due to men’s capacity²³

The homeland and the question of women were favourite themes among female poets in this era. Some other women poets who wrote during the reign of Reza Shah include Shams al-Zuhā Nishāt, Parvīn Pīr Mārshāl Ghaybī, Mahkāmah Muhassis, and Nūr al-Hudā Manganah.

Under Muhammad Reza Shah (r. 1320-1357 HS/1940-1979



CE) Iran experienced an era of reconstruction, progress, and stability. Due to state support and encouragement, women's role in politics, society and the arts became increasingly more prominent. Iran's traditional society gradually faded even as modernity presented a different aspect of the new Iran. These state supports and the freedoms accorded to women did not last more than two decades, however, due to the challenges they presented to traditional culture. As a result, the new structures put in place under the Shah collapsed with the revolution of 1357 HS (1979 CE).

The reign of Muhammad Reza Shah witnessed the blossoming of Nīmāic New Poetry (shi'r-i naw). Nīmā Yūshīj and his followers were active in this period. Besides Nīmāic new poetry, there were also poems composed in traditional forms, the so-called four-fold stanza (chār pārah), and after the 1340s HS (1960s CE) novel forms of poetry such as White Poetry (shi'r-i sipīd, a designation broadly equating free verse), New Wave (mawj-i naw, a form of prosaic poetry), and Hajm (an evolved form of New Wave). Idealism, social realism, and symbolism were prevalent motifs in the poetry of this time. The foremost woman poet of this period is the celebrated Fūrūgh Farrukhzād (1934-1967). Fūrūgh modernized Nīmāic new poetry in form and language, and by conflating traditional and modern techniques, she composed some of the most arresting poetry in modern Persian. Her poetry is novel, apparently simple, natural, as if conversant with the reader, with imagery composed of subjective and objective visual descriptions, all of which created a new womanly universe in which a woman's innermost sentiments are revealed without reserve. She was the eminent forerunner, and the most popular, of contemporary poets. Below is a sample of her poetry:

I come from the world of indifferent minds and voices
And this world is akin to the snakes' nest
And this world is filled with the sound of the footsteps of a people
who, even as they kiss you,

²⁴Fürūgh Farrukhzād, *Let Us Have Faith in the Dawn of the Cold Season* (Tehran: Murvārīd, 1975), 19.

²⁵īmīn Bihbahānī, *The Almond Plains* (Tehran: Zavvār, 1983), 97.

²⁶Jālih Isfahānī, *Wave in Wave* (Tehran: Alburz, 1997), 161.

In their minds, they weave the noose on which you'll hang²⁴

The leading composer of ghazals in this period was Simin Behbahānī whose works cover the range from love to social poems. During the time of the Islamic revival [i.e. the 1980s], she transformed the metrical system of classical poetry by adding new meters to its existing corpus which would accommodate the versification of social and political thought. Her poetry reached the peak of its classical-style maturity after the Islamic revolution (1979):

I shall rebuild you, o homeland, even if the bricks are this life of mine
I shall keep your roofs in place, even if the columns are these bones of mine²⁵

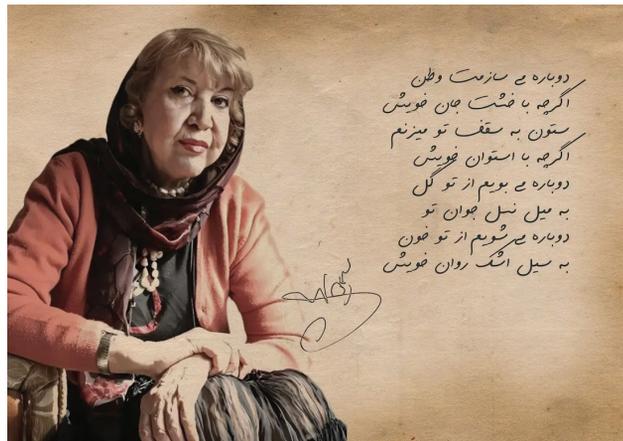


Figure 6: Simin Behbahani's poetry in Persian language

Jālih Isfahānī's poetic career centered around themes of the homeland and of migration:

O migrant birds, my heart feels anxious
Lest your distant journey be drawn out
And when Spring's zephyr comes to the garden, without you
The blossoms of the apple trees will sprout²⁶

Women poets such as Lu'bat Vālā, Parvīn Bāmdād, Munīr Tāhā, Parvīn Dawlat Ābādī, Jālih Isfahānī, Nūr Sayyārah Gīlānī, Dunyā-yi Khurāsānī, Mihan Iskandarī, Māhrukh Pūrzīnāl, Maryam Sāvujī, Āzar Khwājāvī, and Rubāb Tamaddun continued to compose poetry in classical forms, and some chose to write poetry in the Nīmāic or four-fold stanzaic (chār pārah) forms. Maymanat Mīrsādiqī, Shādāb Vajdī, Mīnā Asadī, Mīnā Dastghayb, Mahastī Bahraini, Laylā Kasrā, Parvānih Furūhar, Mahshīd Dargāhī, Fūrūgh Mīlānī, Parvānih Mīlānī, Ruqīyah Kāvīyānī, 'Ātifah Gurgīn, Shāhīn Hanānah, Humā Sayyār, Partaw Nūrī 'Alā, Jīlā Musā'id, and Mahvash Musā'id composed Nīmāic style poems and free verse. In the 1960s, Tāhirah Safāzādīh proposed a new theory of poetry known as Tanīn (reverberation) to balance the explicitly political poetry of that epoch. She experimented with this new style by couching her poetic expression in a modern language and in a critical thought that was simultaneously social, religious, and cosmopolitan. The result was a unique, complex and defamiliarized form of poetry. Tāhirah wrote:

You are the footsteps of the desert
 In the commotion of the thoroughfare of history
 The oppressors have left you to the quandary²⁷

²⁷Tāhirah Safāzādīh, *Seven Travels* (Tehran: Barg-i Zaytūn, 2005), 124.



Figure 7.8, 9: Left to right: Parvīn Dawlat Ābādī, Munīr Tāhā, and Lu'bat

Some poets experimented with newer forms such as free verse, Sipīd, New Wave, and Hajm, including Batūl Azīzpūr, Fīrūzah Mīzānī, Kāfiyah Jalīlīān, Shahrzād (Akbarī Sa‘īdī), and Humāyūntāj Tabātabā‘ī. Some features of Hajm and New Wave poetry included subjective relationships between inanimate objects, surrealistic images, convoluted and incomprehensible language, avoidance of common metrical systems in Persian poetry, evading norms, shunning commitment, and lack of attention to thought and meaning. During this period, many women were not able to publish their poetry due to the political content of their work. Even so, over 150 women poets composed poetry in various forms.

In the period after the Islamic revolution (1357 HS/1979 CE to the present), the collapse of Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi’s dynasty, which had been demanded by various factions within society, was followed by the appropriation of political power by a specific religious faction. Shortly after the revolutionary zeal and excitement abated, the social and political climate began to change. Shifts in political, socio-economic, and religious structures began to impact all aspects of daily life, and the spread of religious beliefs and rules effected many transformations. The poets, too, began to be polarized. Poets with religious tendencies whose poetic subject matter and form were traditional wrote poems on topics ranging from religious elegies and eulogies of religious figures to poems about the Islamic revolution, the Iran-Iraq war and the martyrs of the war. Sīmīndukht Vahīdī, Sipīdah Kāshānī, Fātimah Rākī‘ī, and Naghmīh Mustashār Nizāmī are well-known representatives of this group. Vahīdī’s poem “The Sun Man” (mard-i āftābī) is a eulogy:

Through the lands of winter this man has passed
In the alleyways of thunder and storm he has passed
For years this dauntless travelling man
Fearless and unperturbed, through the stormy nights he has passed²⁸



Of course, some poets wrote ghazals with a different content. Maryam Ja'farī Āzarmānī wrote:

²⁹Maryam Ja'farī Āzarmānī, *Heartbroken Women* (Tehran: Tamaddun-i 'Ilmī, 2019), 23.

After all the wars and politics and oppression, your Maryam in this disarray
Has just found a chance to fall in love and breathe; bid the sorrows to go away²⁹

Kobrā Musavi Qahfarrokhi, Faribā Yusefi, Panteā Safā'i, and many other younger poets have composed their poems in the ghazal/lyrical form.

The works of poets who engaged in ambitious innovations, or in formal, linguistic or semantic revisionism, or those who showed a tendency toward a radical departure from norms did not receive a welcoming reception. Ruzā Jamālī, Āfāq Shuhānī, and Shāhīn Khusravī are among such poets. There are also those poets who – disillusioned with the idealism, symbolism, and lionizations of the previous period – have experimented variously with poetic form, language and aesthetics, materializing in publications in existing or new forms of poetry and following existing or new movements in poetry: Nīmāic, free verse, Sipīd, Hajm, New Wave, Pure Poetry (shi'r-i nāb), Colloquialism (guftār), Post-semantic Poetry (shi'r-i zabān), Simple Poetry, Postmodern, Third Wave, Alternate Poetry (shi'r dar vaz'īyat-i dīgar), Post-new (farānaw) and the like. In recent times, due to various reasons, there has been a surge in the emergence of women poets compared to previous periods, pointing to a social climate in which women have found poetry a safe haven for showcasing their creativity. In addition, women have increasingly received higher education and had virtual access to novel worlds. Further, at the present time due to ideological restrictions for women in certain artistic fields such as music and dance, women have not had a chance to display their talents and have instead increasingly taken to poetry as a safe space to showcase their creativity. The poetry of most poets in this period is in a way the expression of individuality and novel

³⁰Firishtah Sārī, Sacred Love and Republic of Winter (Tehran: Mu'allif, 1993), 10.

³¹Nāzanīn Nizām Shahīdī, I am contemporary to the Winds (Mashhad: Nikā Press, 1998), 26.

³²Rujā Chamankā, To Die in Your Mother Tongue (Tehran: Chishmih Press, 2010), 55.

³³Laylā Kurdbachah, Rhinoceros' Song (Nimāj Press, 2016), 88.

³⁴Girānāz Mūsavī, One Crow and Forty Pieces of Madness (Kabul: Āy Khānūm Press, 2019), 39.

experiments with linguistic and structural innovation in Persian poetry. During this period, in excess of 600 women poets have produced poetry in various forms. Below is a sampling of their works:

Firishtah Sārī:

Tonight I shall fetch the breeze
And erect a flag with it
To proclaim the Republic of Winter³⁰

Nāzanīn Nizām Shahīdī:

Today is the end of times
Before all sound freezes over
I heard all there was to say, through the voicemail
There was not much to say³¹

Rujā Chamankār:

Words arrive out of your non-arrival
They scatter all over my ruins
They cling to my life like a nagging pain³²

Laylā Kurdbachah:

I love you
And how difficult it is to express simple thoughts³³

Girānāz Mūsavī:

I struggle with your eyes
A half-burnt lamp at the end of all departures³⁴

