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A Research Compendium

Parvīn I‘tisāmī’s Eloquent Response to Patriarchy*

Zhinia Noorian*

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*I received my PhD in Persian and Iranian Studies from Utrecht University in 2022. My PhD dissertation is published as a book by LUP under the title, *Parvīn I‘tisāmī in the Literary and Religious Context of Twentieth-Century Iran*. I am currently a postdoctoral researcher for the ERC Advanced Grant, *Beyond Sharia: The Role of Sufism in Shaping Islam*, in the department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Utrecht University. My focus is on the concept of femininity and gender transgression within the antinomian Sufi paradigm of Qalandariyya.

Parvīn I‘tisāmī’s *Dīvān* contains a short poem in which she explicitly states that “Parvīn is not a man”:

The heart must be kept polished from the dust of futile thoughts
so that the demon knows there is no room for dust on this mirror.
How do some endowed with virtue and learning consider Parvīn a man?!
It is better to resolve the mystery by saying that Parvīn is not a man.¹



Figure 1: Portrait of Parvīn I‘tisāmī

In the first of these two couplets, I'tisāmī borrows mystical themes from Persian classical poetry to create a powerful image, and then asserts that she is a woman. The mystical metaphor, the mirror, represents in this poem the heart; dust is used to signify futile thoughts, and the temptations of the demon dim the brightness of the mirror. Parvīn's metaphoric language, as seen in much of her poetry, produces layers of signification. On first glance, the first couplet reads as a piece of advice from the poet to herself, or to her readers. I'tisāmī advises the reader not to give in to futile thoughts, to keep the mirror of the heart pure. In the second couplet, she goes beyond her metaphoric language and openly expresses thoughts about her experience of being a female writer who is masculinised. Sarcastically, she refers to those who think "Parvīn" is a man as *barkhī zi ahl-i fazl* (some from among those "endowed with virtue and learning"). Mocking them in the second part of the couplet, I'tisāmī derides such people for their unearned status as virtuous and learned. She refers to the confusion of those assuming her to be a man as a *mu'ammā* (conundrum). Finally, she gives them the key to the conundrum and resolves it by saying, "Parvīn is not a man."

Having read the second half of the poem, the deeper layer of the first half emerges. The first couplet sounds like a self-soothing voice in I'tisāmī's creative mind that advises her to stand her ground against the demons—those who doubt her authorship as a woman. Depicting the futile doubts raised about her authorship as "dust," she encourages herself to keep the mirror of her heart pure. Why did I'tisāmī, who is famous for her metaphoric language and, as Moayyad put it, someone who "hides herself under a cover of animate and inanimate creatures to deliver her message," write such a piece?² What gave her the courage to confront those bestowed with virtue and learning (all of them men) with such heavy sarcasm?

As a woman writing poetry in the early decades of twenti-

¹Parvīn I'tisāmī, *Divān*, ed. Heshmat Moayyad (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Special Persian Language Publications, 1987), 268. For the sake of remaining as close as possible to the original text, my translations in this article are literal.

²Heshmat Moayyad, "Parvin E'tesami's Niche in the Pantheon of Persian Poetry," in *Once a Dewdrop: Essays on the Poetry of Parvin E'tesami*, ed. Heshmat Moayyad (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1994), 163–64.

³Parvīn I‘tisāmī, *A Nightingale’s Lament: Selections from the Poems and Fables of Parvīn E‘tesāmī (1907–41)*, trans. Heshmat Moayyad and Alice Margaret Arent Madelung (Lexington, KY.: Mazda, 1985), xi.

⁴Parvīn I‘tisāmī, *A Nightingale’s Lament*, xiii.

⁵Gholām-Hoseyn Yūsufī, in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, s.v. “Bahār.”

⁶Fereshteh Davaran, “Impersonality in Parvīn E‘tesāmī’s Poetry”, in *Once a Dewdrop: Essays on the Poetry of Parvīn E‘tesāmī*, ed. Heshmat Moayyad (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1994), 75.

eth-century Iran, Parvīn I‘tisāmī experienced a paradoxical reception. She wrote and published classical-style poetry in an Iranian-Muslim culture in which writing and publishing were monopolised as masculine endeavours. However, among her female contemporaries who had the rare opportunity of publishing their work, I‘tisāmī was the one who faced the longest-lasting controversies. Her composition of fine poetry, permeated with mystical themes and motifs, was received with both praise and disbelief. She was even accused of publishing a male Sufi poet’s work under her own name. I‘tisāmī’s controversial reception, therefore, was not merely an outcome of her transgressive act of writing and publishing as a woman. Let us go back to the commentaries that she received as a poet entering the literary tradition of Persian literature. Let us trace back her experience as a Muslim woman, showing outstanding talent in exploiting classical style to express herself, and showing prowess in conveying her spiritual predilections through poetry.

I‘tisāmī was introduced to the world of interaction with a public audience through her father, Yūsuf I‘tisāmī (d. 1938), an intellectual and a man of letters. I‘tisāmī’s extraordinary poetic talent was recognised and nurtured by her father.³ As the poet laureate Muhammad-Taqī Bahār (d. 1951) recalled, she started writing poems at the age of eight.⁴ Yūsuf I‘tisāmī was the founder and publisher of Bahār, a monthly journal for two periods between 1910 and 1922, which published articles on literary, political and social affairs.⁵ He first published his daughter’s poems in Bahār when she was only thirteen.⁶ This rare opportunity of having access to a large public audience was the beginning of her exposure to paradoxical comments.





Figure 2: Portrait of Parvīn I'tisāmī

I'tisāmī was widely praised for her talent in composing poetry in the classical style. Paradoxically however, her readers both applauded the quality of her work and cast doubt on her authorship. Both of these responses happened for the same reason. A woman who could write poetry comparable to that of the most prominent Persian poets was seen as an oddity. For male literary critics and scholars, it was difficult to believe that a woman was the author of such fine classical poetry. One of the earliest messages of patronising admiration was written by Muhammad Qazvīnī (d. 1949), a notable literary historian. In a letter to I'tisāmī's father he praised her poetry, saying that reading more of her *Dīvān* only increased his astonishment. The reason for Qazvīnī's amazement was the emergence of a female poet with such great aptitude, whom he called "the queen of women poets." However, Qazvīnī was not simply awed by the extraordinary talent of this young poet. He was astonished to see a female poet emerge in a time when it seemed that "men of letters and virtue" were long dead.⁷

Another prominent figure praising I'tisāmī while patronising her was the notable poet Bahār. In his introduction to the first edition of I'tisāmī's *Dīvān* (published in 1935), Bahār expressed his admiration for her. He exclaimed that if he had seen such

⁷Abū al-Fath I'tisāmī, ed., *Majmū'ah-i maqālāt va qata'āt-i ash'ār ki bi-munāsibat-i dar'guzasht va avvalīn sāl-i va-fāt-i Parvīn I'tisāmī nivishtah va surūdah shudah ast* (Tehran: Chāpkhānah-yi Muḥammad-'Alī Parvīn, 1974), 19.

⁸Muhammad-Taqī Bahār, Introduction to *Divān-i khānum-i Parvīn I'tisāmī* (Tehran: Matb'ah-yi majlis, 1935), vii.

⁹Muhammad-Taqī Bahār, Introduction to *Divān-i Parvīn I'tisāmī*, iv–v. In this part of the poem, Parvīn merges her figurative use of the four natural elements (dust, water, fire, and wind) with *bar bād dādan*—an expression in Persian meaning ‘to destroy’. Here, *khāk* (dust) represents man’s flesh, and *āb* (water) refers to the Nile; the combination suggests that the river will destroy the child’s body.

¹⁰See Steingass, *A Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary*, s.v. “مرد.”

exceptional poetic talent in a man, he would not have been so astonished. However, a poet of *jins-i zan*, (lit. ‘female genus’), with such knowledge and capability to compose the finest of poems, was nothing less than extraordinary.⁸ Bahār was just one of the male authors who thought that I’tisāmī’s identity as a poet was questionable because she was a woman. In his commentary, Bahār further praised her poem “*Lutf-i haqq*” (God’s Grace) because it was composed in a ‘manly’ manner:

... when Parvīn, concerned about motherly duties, gets tired of such worries, she remembers God’s grace and composes this *qat’ah* in a manly manner and familiarises the reader with more elevated truths and thoughts and meanwhile she does not give up motherly duties and is still a concerned mother ...

This comment concerned the following lines:

When Moses’ mother threw him in the Nile
to abide by the glorious God’s orders
She watched from the shore, overwhelmed with grief
she said, ‘O you little innocent child,
If God’s grace forgets you,
how will you be saved from this ship without a shipmaster?
If God does not remember you,
the water will instantly give your dust to the wind.’⁹

What Bahār meant by using the adverb ‘manly’ in praise of Parvīn’s poetry can be explained by noting the connotations of *mard* (man), *mardānah* (manly) and their applications in the Persian language. These words refer to the biological sex of the human male. However, there is another layer of meaning to them. Metaphorically, *mard* denotes qualities such as brave, bold, heroic and capable of accomplishing things. Similarly, the adverb *mardānah* describes a courageous or vigorous kind of behaviour.¹⁰ In Bahār’s commentary on “*God’s Grace*,” I’tisāmī is identified with Moses’ mother. Then Bahār explains that although I’tisāmī grows weary from motherly concerns, she



writes the poem in a ‘manly’ manner. What can be inferred from Bahār’s words is that I‘tisāmī, the concerned mother, is a timid character. However, remembering God’s grace, she becomes a hero; she gains courage and is capable of composing poetry. This collocation of ‘manliness’ with poetry composition shows that for Bahār and his male counterparts, composing poetry was a masculine act, requiring bravery. Women venturing into this masculine realm were acknowledged only if they were masculinised.

Bahār also seemed to need a reminder, both to himself and his audience, that I‘tisāmī was a woman. By highlighting *mihri mādarī*, (motherly love), he probably meant to offer I‘tisāmī a compliment. However, he seemed to be putting I‘tisāmī back where he thought she belonged.

Situating I‘tisāmī within the conventional boundaries of femininity, he absolved her for crossing the gender limit on writing mystical poetry. Furthermore, when Bahār wrote about I‘tisāmī’s treatment of the “more elevated truths and thoughts,” he used the modifier ‘manly’. Bahār’s word choice implied that in the world of classical Persian poetry, masculinity was the ideal. His emphasis on I‘tisāmī “not giving up motherly duties and still being a concerned mother” showed his opinion of I‘tisāmī: she was a woman, engaged in motherly duties and concerns. Her endeavours were adorned with the epithet ‘manly’ only when she was talking to her audience, to familiarise them with her thoughts and truths. As a woman, however, she was shackled to her main duties: being engaged in the worries of a mother. Both Qazvīnī and Bahār, the earliest scholars and men of letters to write about I‘tisāmī, implied she was not recognisable as a female poet. For them, I‘tisāmī was an intruder in the ‘manly’ arena of classical poetry. For her literary talent to be acknowledged, she needed to be metamorphosed into a ‘manly’ woman.

Bahār was not the only male author attempting to explain the anomaly of I‘tisāmī’s presence in the realm of mystical poetry.

¹¹Iraj Afshar, in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, s.v. “Āyatī, ‘Abd al-Hosayn.”

¹²‘Abd al-Husayn Āyatī. *Kashf al-hiyal*, 3rd ed. (Tehran: n.p., 1947), 2: 68n1.

¹³Moayyad, “Bih yād-i hashtasadumīn sālgard-i tavallud-i Parvīn I’tisāmī,” *Iran Nameh: A Journal of Iranian Studies* 6, no. 1 (Fall 1987): 118.

¹⁴Fazl-Allāh Gurgānī, *Tuhmat-i shā’irī: taḥqīqī dar ahvāl va pazhūhishī dar dīvān-i ash’ār-i Parvīn I’tisāmī* (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Rawzanah, 1977).

¹⁵Sayyid Muhammad Dabīr Siyāqī, “Parvīn I’tisāmī va kitāb-i Tuhmat-i shā’irī bih mā mapasand,” *Kilk* 85–86 (1997), 189.

¹⁶‘Abd al-Husayn Zarrīnkūb, “Parvīn: Zan-i mardānah dar qalamraw-yi shi’r u ‘irfān,” in *Daftar-i ayyām* 1986. (Tehran: Intishārāt-i ‘Ilmī, 1995), 53–62.

¹⁷Ghulām Husayn Yūsufī, “Shawq-i rahā’ī,” in *Chashmah-yi rawshan: Dīdāri bā shā’irān* 1993. (Tehran: Intishārāt-i ‘Ilmī, 1995), 413.

¹⁸Farzaneh Milani, ‘Revealing and Concealing: Parvīn E’tisāmī, in *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers*, 1st ed. (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1992), 108.

Within a few years of I’tisāmī’s death, ‘Abd al-Husayn Āyatī (d. 1953), an author-poet himself,¹¹ claimed that I’tisāmī’s poems were actually written by a male Sufī poet, Muhammad Husayn Rawnaq-i Kirmānī (d. 1889).¹² Later, Shaykh Muhammad-Muhsin Āqā Buzurg Tihirānī (d. 1970) refuted this accusation.¹³ Attempts to deauthorize I’tisāmī reached a climax in 1977 with the publication of *Tuhmat-i shā’irī* (Accusation of Being a Poet), by Fazl-Allāh Gurgānī. In this book, Gurgānī gave many reasons why he thought that a young woman like I’tisāmī could not have written such magnificent poetry.¹⁴ Later, Gurgānī, who was a renowned author himself, apologised for publishing such a book.¹⁵

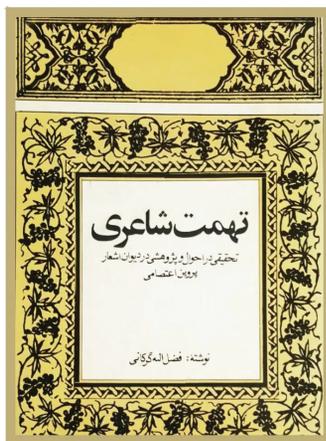


Figure 3: Book cover of *Tuhmat-i shā’irī*, Fazl-Allāh Gurgānī, 1977

Almost half a century later, the epithet ‘manly’ resurfaced in an article by ‘Abd al-Husayn Zarrīnkūb, an admirer of I’tisāmī’s work. Zarrīnkūb wrote a chapter titled “Parvīn: Zan-i mardānah dar qalamraw-yi shi’r u ‘irfān” (Parvīn: A Manly Woman in the Arena of Poetry and Sufism).¹⁶ Another such comment was Ghulām Husayn Yūsufī’s attempt to express admiration for I’tisāmī’s extraordinary poetic talent: ‘... Parvīn’s status in poetry is even more elevated than that of many male poets’.¹⁷ As Milani explains, writing poetry was ‘a masculine act’.¹⁸ The language used by I’tisāmī’s admirers was ‘far from being in-



tended as a slight',¹⁹ but it was strongly gender-biased. These authors and scholars repeatedly asserted the proper place of a woman, and reminded their audiences of the transgression committed. But composing poetry was not I'tisāmī's only transgression. In addition, she used her exceptional talent to express her own spiritual inclinations.

Little is known about I'tisāmī's religious beliefs and affiliations, due to the paucity of information about her personal life. However, among scholars writing on her, Moayyad has expressed noteworthy opinions about I'tisāmī's spiritual predilections. In the introduction he wrote to a translation of selected poems by I'tisāmī, Moayyad mentioned that 'there is no evidence in her *Dīvān* to suggest that she had any faith in Islam or in the Shi'ite doctrine of Islam'.²⁰ He further postulated that I'tisāmī and her father were probably sincere Muslims in their hearts, but they differed from the majority of Iranians in religiosity. The reason Moayyad believed this was that I'tisāmī never referred to the Prophet or his descendants. She did not allude to any hadiths or Islamic holidays, nor did she mention the Qur'ān in her poetry. Moayyad further argued that I'tisāmī referred to the hajj in only one of her poems, in which she juxtaposed the Ka'bah with the heart. Moayyad believed that I'tisāmī had faith in an unknowable creator, whom she loved and referred to in poems such as "Zarrah" (Particle).²¹ However, she dispensed with the custom of using Islamic tenets copiously, a tradition that was widely observed by classical Persian poets. Instead, she borrowed mystical themes and motifs, and used them to express the esoteric aspects of a personal religion.

"Ka'bah-yi dil" (Ka'bah of Heart) is one of I'tisāmī's poems that is permeated with mystical themes and motifs. This poem is a masnavi (rhyming poem) of forty-eight couplets, and it is composed in the genre of debate poetry. The story takes place on Qurbān'Īd, the festival of sacrifices in Mecca during ihrām ('the state of temporary consecration of someone who is performing the hajj and 'umrah').²² Ka'bah and the heart are the

¹⁹Milani, 'Judith Shakespear and Parviz E'tesami', in *Once a Dewdrop: Essays on the Poetry of Parviz E'tesami*, ed. Heshmat Moayyad (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 1994), 145.

²⁰Parvīn I'tisāmī, *A Nightingale's Lament*, xxv.

²¹See Moayyad's discussion on Parvīn I'tisāmī, *A Nightingale's Lament*, xxv–xxvi. I use 'Particle' as an equivalent for the title of the poem, "Zarrah"; Moayyad's translation is 'Atom'. The poem to which Moayyad referred is "Ka'bah-yi dil" (Ka'bah of Heart). For his translation of the poem, see *A Nightingale's Lament*, 200–202. For the Persian version of the poem, see Parvīn I'tisāmī, *Dīvān*, 141–142.

²²For details about ihrām, see A.J. Wensinck and J. Jomier, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition, s.v. "ihrām."

²³Parvīn I'tisāmī, *A Nightingale's Lament*, xxv–xxvi.

main participants, and the narrator, who starts the poem by giving the first couplet, is probably I'tisāmī herself. Then the Ka'bah, personified as a veiled bride, opens the debate by praising itself as the desired beloved of Muslims on the pilgrimage of hajj:

At ihrām, on the day of celebrating Qurbān,
the Ka'bah was telling itself,
'I am the mirror reflecting the light of the Glorious;
I am the veiled bride in the assembly of the union.
The hand of God's friend (Abraham) erected me.
God has held me venerable and renowned.'

The Ka'bah continues its boastful self-praise for twenty-two couplets. Then in the next twenty couplets, the heart rejects the Ka'bah's claims. A few of the couplets that convey the heart's refutations are as follows:

The heart laughed at it, (saying) o friend!
From the virtuous, self-praise is not pleasant
You speak of this mass of mud
As if you are unaware of the Ka'bah of the heart

Mo'ayyad believed that in this poem, I'tisāmī challenged the sanctity of the Ka'bah.²³ Actually however, it is a poem that showcases I'tisāmī's religious predilections. In this debate poem, she personifies the heart and the Ka'bah as opponents, and juxtaposes the esoteric with the exoteric dimensions of Islam. The heart represents the inward piety adopted from Sufi doctrine, while the Ka'bah is a metaphor for the orthodox face of Islam. The following couplets, giving the heart's refutations of the Ka'bah's boastful claims, show the dichotomy:

You are made of dark matter, while we are luminous;
you are made of dust while we are made of pure soul.
Outwardly, we are the monarch of the realm of body;
inwardly, we are the special house of God.



Here, the secret is the secret of the game of love;
any other image except this is an illusionary image.
Those who keep their Ka‘bah of the heart clean,
how could they be fearful of impurities?
Happy are those, who by way of sincerity and supplication,
perform their prayer in the altar of the heart.²⁴

The assumption that women are transgressors in spaces monopolised by men (such as classical poetry and mysticism) is deeply ingrained in Iranian-Muslim culture. One example of treating women as outsiders to male-dominated spaces is found in *Tazkarat al-awliyā’*, the hagiography by Farīd al-Dīn ‘Attār (d. c. 1221).²⁵ In *The Ocean of the Soul*, Hellmut Ritter’s seminal work, we read ‘Attār’s stories of Rābi‘ah al-‘Adawīyah (d. 801), the revered Sufi female saint.²⁶ ‘Attār gives an apology for including Rābi‘ah in a list of seventy-two ascetics, who are otherwise all male. He explains that he uses a prophetic hadith to justify including her among men. The hadith reads as follows: “God does not look at your outward appearance.”

‘Attār further elaborates: ‘What counts is not the appearance, but the intention. If a woman is a man on God’s path, one cannot call her a woman’.²⁷

‘Attār’s radical and subversive spirituality allows him to include the transgressors and the marginalised in his accounts.²⁸ However, when he refers to the prophetic hadith about ‘the triviality of the outward forms’, he symbolically masculinises Rābi‘ah.²⁹ We know that ‘man’ and ‘manliness’ are key concepts in classical Sufi texts. ‘Attār and his Sufi counterparts use such words under the prevailing patriarchal system of their times. When we analyse these words on the basis of today’s standards, their misogynistic connotations stand out. We also know that mediaeval Sufi writers probably did not use these words to cast the female gender as inferior.³⁰ Qazvīnī, Bahār and Zarrīnkūb probably used the epithet ‘manly’ in their commentaries on *I‘tisāmī* in a context similar to that of the Sufi

²⁴Parvīn I‘tisāmī, *Divān*, 200.

²⁵B. Reinert, in *Encyclopædia Iranica*, s.v. “‘Attār, Farīd al-Dīn.”

²⁶Hellmut Ritter, *The Ocean of the Soul: Men, the World and God in the Stories of Farīd al-Dīn ‘Attār* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2003).

²⁷Farīd al-Dīn ‘Attār, *Tazkirat al-awliyā’*, ed. Reynold Nicholson and introduction by Muhammad ‘Abd al-Wahhāb Qazvīnī, 2 vols, 1905. (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Markazī, 1957), 64.

²⁸Claudia Yaghoobi, *Subjectivity in ‘Attār, Persian Sufism and European Mysticism* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2017), 2.

²⁹Yaghoobi, *Subjectivity in ‘Attār*, 51.

³⁰Michelle Marie Quay, “‘God Does Not Regard Your Forms’”: Gender and Literary Representation in the Works of Farīd Al-Dīn ‘Attār Neyshāpuri’. (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 2018), 61–66.

³¹Yaghoobi, *Subjectivity in Attār*, 51.

texts. What is noteworthy, however, is that with a gap of almost eight centuries, the male peers of I‘tisāmī and Rābi‘ah treated both of them similarly. In Yaghoobi’s words, Rābi‘ah, ‘embodied the masculine traits’ that were revered in the mediaeval Sufi world. Rābi‘ah was cleared of her femininity, to maintain the enduring ideals in the male-dominated realm of Sufism. She was seen in the light of her contemporary men, and was depicted as ‘to maintain gender divisions’.³¹ I‘tisāmī experienced the same treatment. Her contemporary male peers attempted to keep gender boundaries in place by disbelieving or patronising her poetic talent. I‘tisāmī, however, did not submit to this patriarchal control. The two-couplet poem in which I‘tisāmī openly opposed being masculinised, and insisted on being accepted as female poet, is an unprecedented incident in the history of modern Persian literature. With this short piece, I‘tisāmī pioneered in breaking with the centuries-long patriarchal gender norms that marginalised women as outsiders to the realm of writing and publishing.

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