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Unveiling the Domestic Mind: Persian Women Poets on the Self and the Other

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Introduction

Poetry has been the heart of Persianate culture for a long time. More than any artistic media, poems have shaped and manifested Persian mental life for about a millennium.[1] Female poets, however, are mostly absent from that long history. Women certainly wrote poems in local dialects all over the Persianate world, as lullabies, songs for occasions such as weddings, and lamentation verses all indicate. However, those examples are regarded as outside of the poetic canon, since they do not follow the formal rules of what is officially called Persian poetry. In most official Persian poetry, the female voice is subdued, as is also the case in other intellectual activities such as science or philosophy. Of course, this situation is not exclusive to Persian-speaking lands, as almost everywhere in the world was such before women gradually found their voices.

It is tempting to single out the present moment as unique, as distinct from all the past. In many cases, such temptation turns out to be misleading as the similarities outweigh the differences. In the case of female Persian poetry, however, the present is a radical break from the past. Today, separating female and male poets seems as outdated as the Persian word for poetess, shāʿirah. Three already classic female poets of the twentieth century are more than enough to make up for centuries of domestic marginalization and to claim an eternal status for women poets in the pantheon of Persian literature.

Behind the safe gate of the present moment is a long trail of marginalized poets. The history of Persian female poetry is not a place for professional female poets as much as it is a habitat for child brides, distressed housewives, wives undergoing the humiliation of polygamy, and a flock of harem dwellers who compensated for their royal idleness by dabbling in poetry.[2] For instance, Pādshāh Khātūn (also called Lālah Khātūn), the ruler of Kerman (southeast of present-day Iran) in the seventh/thirteenth century, allegedly wrote poems under the male pen name Hasanshāh.[3] Zīb al-Nisāʾ (1048-1118/1638–1701), daughter of India's Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, was a patron of poets but concealed her own poetry from her pious father; she even called herself Makhfī, meaning 'hidden,' in her poems:

در سخن مخفی شدم چون بوی گل در برگ گل

میل دیدن هر که دارد، در سخن بیند مرا

I've hidden myself in the words as the scent in the rose petals

Anyone wishing to see me watches me in my words.[4]

This pen name was suitable for her status as a poet and also for many other female poets who did not share her opportunity for literary lives. Pen names denoting chastity or covered bodies and domestic life, such as Nahānī, Makhfī, Hijābī, Mastūrah, Mahjūbah, ʿIffatī, or ʿIsmatī, were common among female poets, at least in certain times and places.[5]

Modern Persian female poets, by contrast, do not hide, and seek their share of social space. In 2023, for instance, an eighteen-year-old girl addresses an unborn cousin with these words:

Someday, I will tell you about the memories

How our days were tarnished with fear,

[1][The author wishes to express her gratitude to Farideh Hassanzadeh, Ellen Moody, Nahid Keshavarznia, Bahareh amel Nogani, and Aida Golnesayi.] This refers to the emergence of New Persian poetry; however, if we begin with Zarathustra's songs, then the history of Persian poetry dates back more than three millennia.

[2]See Fakhrī Hiravī, Rawzah al- salātīn va Javāhir al-ʿajāʾib, ed. Hisām al-Dīn Rāshidī (Hyderabad: Anjuman-i adabī-i Sindī, 1968), 124; Ahmad Dīvānbaygī, Hadīqat al-shuʿarā, Adab va farhang dar ʿasr-i Qājāriyah, ed. ʿAbd al-Husayn Navāyī (Tehran: Zarrīn, 1365/1987), 3:2148, 2197, 2208; Banafshah Hijāzī, Tazkirah-yi andarūnī, sharh-i ahvāl va shiʿr-i shāʿirān-i zan dar ʿasr-i Qājār (Tehran: Qasīdahsurā, 1383/2003).

[3]Sharaf al-Dīn Abdullah Wassāf al-hazra, , Tārīkh-i Wassāf, ed. Muhammad Mahdī Isfahānī (Tehran: Kitāb′khānah-yi Ibn-i Sīnā and Kitāb′khānah-yi Jaʿfarī Tabrīzī, 1959), 292.
[4]Sharaf al-Dīn Abdullah Wassāf al-hazra, , Tārīkh-i Wassāf, ed. Muhammad Mahdī Isfahānī (Tehran: Kitāb′khānah-yi Ibn-i Sīnā and Kitāb′khānah-yi Jaʿfarī Tabrīzī, 1959), 292.

[5]See, e.g., Fakhrī Hiravī, Rawzah al- Salātīn va Javāhir al-ʿAjāʿib, 130, 132, 137–38; Dīvānbaygī, Hadīqat al-shuʿarā, 3:2199–200. Several authors have already noticed this; for example, see Māgah Rahmānī, Pardah-nishīnān-i sukhangūy ([Kabul?]: Anjuman-i Tārīkh, 1331/1952), 1; Pūrān Farrukhzād, Nīmah′hā-yi nātamām, Nigarishī naw dar shiʿr-i zanān az Rābiʿah tā Furūgh [The unfinished halves; A new perspective in women's poetry from Rābiʿah to

Furūgh], (Tehran: Kitāb′sarā-yi Tandīs, 1380/2001), 76–78; Hijāzī, Tazkirah-yi andarūnī, 17. Cf. Muzhgān Farāmanish, introduction to Mahjūbah Hiravī, Chārdīvārī [Room] (Tehran: Āmū, 1399/2019), 8, who interprets the same names as acts of objection that the female poets chose deliberately. However, my reading of the history does not necessarily agree with this.

[6]Sabā Sādiq, "Pīsh az Panāh," in ʿArūsak-i sukhangū [The talking doll], 340 (Shahrīvar–Mihr 1402/September–October 2023): 51.

If we wanted to want what we wanted

[…]You should hold your right to be a girl

As the right to living

Even if

The whole world doesn't want that. [6]

This is the work of a poet who wants to be seen, not hidden behind a male disguise or behind walls or veils. The difference is remarkable. Something has changed, and the path of that change is from an identity hidden in poetry to an identity announced in poetry.

This article compares, contrasts, and discusses poems by women from across the millennium of Persian poetry. It foregrounds the differences while not presuming any ontologically stable contrasts. It also does not claim to identify any underlying sociopolitical or economic factors behind these changes since such claims would lead to repeating common knowledge or making uneducated guesses. This article instead focuses on how the Persian female poet has become not only possible but normal.

The discussion is based around the following concepts: female poet as female, female as poet, female poet in relationships, spiritual outlooks of female poets, and female poet in the sociopolitical sphere. The contrasts between these poets and their works are examples and not meant as an exhaustive list, but are intended to demonstrate some of the divergent worldviews among Persian women poets.

Many changes have occurred in the time between the first named Persian woman poet and modern authors, and these changes are not linear. About two centuries ago, poems by women were filled with self-loathing enclosed in pious contempt for the ma-

terial world, while centuries ago, there was no trace of such attitudes in the lively poems by female poets. Some periods feature no considerable poems by women, while others boast whole books. Therefore, this article does not attempt to force a plot, nor does it adhere strictly to an elitist consensus, so that discourse-makers and dilettantes can be examined side by side. What this article concentrates on is a very recent change that has become the status quo for present generations but appears to have satisfied no one.

[7]Muhammad ʿĀwfī, Lubāb al-albāb, ed. Edward Browne (Leiden: Brill, 1903), 2:61.

Figure 1- from left: Portrait of Parvīn Iʿtisāmī ,Furūgh Farrukhzād, Simin-i Bihbahānī , and Tāhirah Saffārzādah

Female Poet "Despite Being Female"

The first Persian-speaking woman recorded as a poet is Rābiʿah of Balkh (Bactria) from the fourth/tenth century. ʿĀwfī, the author of a famous anthology of Persian poetry, Lubāb al-Albāb (written in 618/1221), opens his entry on Rābiʿah with this statement: "Even though she was a woman, the daughter of Kaʿb would laugh at world's men with her erudition."[7] After a few sentences praising her literary prowess, he sees himself obliged to mention her relentless lovemaking. This digression is brief, however, and is followed by samples of her exquisite poems.

The zest for gossip is seldom absent from other anthologies with regard to 'poetesses,' particularly in the eras of decadence. Another celebrated anthology, Dawlatshāh Samarqandī's Taz-

kirah al-shuʿarā (finished in 892/1487), mentions a later famous poetess, Mahsatī of Ganjavī (5–6/11–12th centuries), at the end of the list of poets in the time of King Sanjar, as the king's beloved, citing one panegyric quatrain.[8] Another poet referred to as "the beauty of the times" is the subject of a couplet by the satirist ʿUbayd, which claimed that men in India hearing her ghazals would say they were "composed by the vulva."[9] The twentieth-century historian of Persian literature, Zabīh Allāh Safā excuses himself from citing this uncouth remark but does endorse ʿUbayd's overall assessment covered in his irrelevant jest: her poems are mostly about her womanly amorous feelings, including complaints about an unfaithful man.[10]

Many tazkirahs (biographical dictionaries), whether entirely dedicated to female poets or not, find it necessary to mention these writers' appearances,[11] and many stoop to detailing sexual tales.[12] In short, the attitude of many such books is worse than silence. At best, they put needless emphasis on the chastity of female poets;[13] at worst, they only make lewd comments.[14]

There are also back-handed compliments: expressions like "such wonderful words by a woman" appear too many times when talking about women poets. Fakhrī Hiravī, the author of a tenth/sixteenth-century anthology of women's poetry titled Javāhir al-ʿAjāʾib, gives this reason for the title: "Since such gemstones [i.e. poems] were strange to come from such mines [i.e. women], I called it such."[15] This judgement encapsulates a long history of intellectual apartheid.

Those are the times that need to be owned, not whitewashed. Our philosopher of ethics, who is also a prestigious figure in the history of astronomy and trigonometry, advises against teaching girls reading and writing.[16] For centuries, women were treated as if they were flocks of birds, valued solely for mating and reproduction. On the other hand, several centuries earlier, another scientist writes an astronomy textbook for a girl in Khwārazm.17 Although there must be an explanation for such a discrepancy,

[8]Dawlatshāh Samarqandī, Tazkirah al-shuʿarā, ed. Edward Browne (Leiden: Brill, 1900), 65.

[9]Samarqandī, Tazkirah al-shuʿarā, 289.

[10]Zabīh Allāh Safā, Tārīkh-i adabiyyāt dar Īrān (15th repr. ed., Tehran: Firdaws, 1367/1987), 3/2:1048.

[11]See, e.g., Fakhrī Hiravī, Rawzah al-salātīn va javāhir al-ʿajāʾib, 122, 125, 137; Muhammad Muzaffar Husayn Sabā, Tazkirah-yi rūz-i rawshan, ed. M.H. Ādamiyyat (Tehran: Kitāb′khānah-yi Rāzī, 1343/1964), 196, 786, 857.

[12]See, e.g., Mīr Nizām al-Dīn ʿAlīshīr Navāyī, Tazkirah-yi majālis al-nafāʾis, ed. ʻAlī Asghar Hikmat (Tehran: Kitāb′furūshī-yi Manūchihrī, 1363/1984), 327; Fakhrī Hiravī, Javāhir al-ʿAjāʾib, 138. For the English translation of the verses, see Dick Davis, The Mirror of My Heart: A Thousand Years of Persian Poetry by Women (New York: Penguin, 2019), 103.

[13]See, e.g., Ahmad ʿAlī Hāshimī Sandīlavī, Tazkirah-yi makhzan al-Gharāʾib, ed. Muhammad Bāqir (Lahore: Dānishgāh-i Punjab,1329/1970), 2:78, 420, 715.

[14]For critics, see Farrukhzād, Nīmah′hā-yi nātamām, 83; Hijāzī, Tazkirah-yi andarūnī, 16; Farzaneh Milani, "Love and Sexuality in the Poetry of Forugh Farrokhzad: A Reconsideration," Iranian Studies 15, no. 1–4 (1982): 117–18.

one must also remember not to judge a culture on its lowest points: the vulgar attitude of many late tazkirahs should not be taken as the archetype of the Persian literary mind.

For a long time, many women poets were practically amateurs, even despite their vast literary output. Many women related that their poems were mostly lost because they were never collected.[18] The few extant books by pre-modern women poets often show an apologetic tone, as if the writers are asking permission not only for their poetry but for their own being. Jahān Malik makes excuses for making and collecting her poems by mentioning religious figures and previous female poets.[19] Bībī Hayātī, a Sufi woman from the 12–13/18–19th centuries, invokes a religious hadith cited by her Sufi husband, which declares devout women as "really men," thus authorizing women to write poems.[20] Even in the twentieth century, we find the curious case of Shams-i Kasmāyī (1262–1340/1883–1961) who was an advocate for modernist literature and made innovations in the form of Persian poetry, yet died in isolation without her poems being collected.[21]

From the viewpoint of the present moment, that looks strange. For decades, being a poet was considered, rather stereotypically, a proper activity for ladies; a woman poet surprises no one in Iran. The change has happened so definitely that a few remember those days when male experts dismissed the works of female poets as feminine[22] and refused to make constructive criticisms. Even in modernized Iran, women poets encountered patronizing not long ago: shoddy works were published, and no expert male bothered to offer any constructive criticism.[23] That has since changed to a large extent: many women poets show technical prowess; mastery of words, form, and rules is no longer exclusive to male poets or an exception among women poets. That is true even though the whole picture may be disheartening, because some part of the new attitude rises from the two equally prejudiced and ill-informed notions that women are sentimental and poetry is an activity concerning feelings.

[15]Fakhrī Hiravī, Rawzah al-salātīn va javāhir al-ʿajāʾib, 116. However, his tone and tales are very respectful, suitable for a book dedicated to a dignitary lady. See Fakhrī Hiravī, Rawzah al-salātīn va javāhir al-ʿajāʾib, 114.

[16]Nasir al-Dīn Tūsī, Akhlāq-i Nāsirī, ed. Mujtabā Minuvī and ʿAlīrezā Haydarī (Tehran: Kārazmī, 1356/1977), 229–30.

[17]Abūʹrayhān Bīrūnī, al-Tafhīm, ed. Jalāl Humāyī (Tehran: Majlis, 1316–1318/1937–1939), 2.

[18]See, e.g., ʿAtā, Zanān-i sukhansurā dar pūyah-yi adab-i darī (Kābul: Kumītah-yi dawlatī-i tabʿ va nashr, 1365/1986), 117; Talʿat Bassārī, Zand-Dukht: Pīshāhang-i nihzat-i āzādī-i bānuvān-i Īrān (Tehran: Kitābʹkhānah-yi Tahūrī, 1346/1968), 21.

[19]Jahān Malik Khātūn, Dīvān, eds. Pūrāndukht Kāshānīrād and Kamāl Ahmadnizhād (Tehran: Zavvār, 1374/1995), 3.

[20]Jahān Malik Khātūn, Dīvān, eds. Pūrāndukht Kāshānīrād and Kamāl Ahmadnizhād (Tehran: Zavvār, 1374/1995), 3.

[21]See Muhammad Shams Langrūdī, Tārikh-i tahlīlī-i shiʿr-i naw [Historical analysis of new poetry], (Tehran: Markaz, 2nd edition, 1378/1998), 1:86–90. However, as Muhammad Huqūqī notes, her innovations were not at the intellectual level. See Muhammad Huqūqi, Shiʿr-i naw az āgāz tā imrūz [New poetry, From the beginning till today] (Tehran: Rivāyat, 1992), 1:93–94.

[22]See, e.g., Dīvānbaygī, Hadīqat al-shuʿarā, 3:2201.

Literarily speaking, the miracle in the reception of Persian women's poetry comes with Parvīn Iʿtisāmī (1285–1320/1907–1941) who is now regarded as such an icon that the centuries of silence before her seem almost implausible. That her poetry is favoured by the clergy and other conservative father figures has made it hard to appreciate her modern streak. The fact that only two decades after her, the Persian language gained its greatest modernist female poet in Furūgh Farrukhzād (1313–1345/1934–1967), makes it harder to appreciate the intellectual break Parvīn made with the immediate past.

From a sociopolitical perspective, the turning point happened around the Constitutional Movement era at the beginning of the twentieth century, simultaneously with the fights for women's rights.[24] With Parvīn, after centuries of forced marginality, a female poet not only enters the literary arena, but remains and thrives. Following her were two other significant names: Furūgh, who died young in 1345/1967, after publishing her discourse-changing poetry, and Sīmīn Bihbahānī (1306–1393/1927–2014), who lived to a mature age and was able to see her accomplishments.

All three of these trailblazers set examples for both male and female poets. Before the establishment of the woman poet's identity, even the enlightened poet laureate Bahār would emphasize Parvīn's gender when admiring her poetic skills.[25] The astonishment of Parvīn's contemporary male readers about her mastery has no modern equivalent, because nowadays women of varied backgrounds publish poems and work as professional literary critics. The long-frustrating lack among women poets of access to literary critique[26] has been gradually remedied, in part through public education and more recently also through access to the internet.

In an interview published in 1975, Bihbahānī equates authenticity with novelty and uniqueness,[27] acknowledging her metrical innovations in Persian *ghazal*[28] and pointing to her signa-

[23]Bihbahānī alludes to this behaviour; see Sīmīn Bihbahānī Yād-i baʿzī nafarāt [Remember some individuals], (Tehran: Alburz, 1378/1999), 623.

[24]See Janet Afary, The Iranian Constitutional Revolution 1906-1911: Grassroots Democracy, Social Democracy, and the Origins of Feminism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), Ch. 7.

[25]See Bahār's introduction to Parvīn Iʿtisāmī, Dīvān [Collection of poems], (Tehran: Abū al-Fath Iʿtisāmī, 1356/1977), 14.

[26]See Farāmanish's introduction to Mahjūbah Hiravī, Chārdīvārī, 9–10. It is a shame that women in Afghanistan still suffer the same limitations.

[27]Bihbahānī, Yād-i baʿzī nafarāt, 573.

[28]Bihbahānī, Yād-i baʿzī nafarāt, 576. Many critics acknowledge Bihbahānī's impact and confirm her rightful claim. For instance, see ʿAlī Muhammad Haqshinās, "Nīmā-yi ghazal: Sīmīn," [The Nīmā in ghazal: Sīmīn], Maqālāt-i adabī-yi zabānshinākhtī [Literary-linguistic articles] (Tehran: Nīlūfar, 1361/1991), 153–68; Farzaneh Milani, "Simin Behbahani: Iran's National Poet," Iranian Studies 41, no.1. (2008): 3–17; Ziyā Muvahhid, "Simin-i Bihbahānī dar shiʿr-i muʿāsir" [Simin-i Bihbahānī in contemporary poetry], Dirūz va imrūz-i shiʿr-i Fārsī [Past and present of Farsi poetry],

ture poetic style.[29] Constructive competition is another aspect of the professional identity of women poets: Bihbahānī admits that with Furūgh's death, she lost someone who could make her run.[30] Furūgh herself talks frankly about other poets and their places in the competition.[31] That sense of identity is not exclusive to renowned poets: young women of varying degrees of literary talent show the same ease while conceiving themselves as poets with ambitions and without the cognitive dissonance tangible in previous poets. The female poet is an established notion.

Androcentric Language versus Female Identity

Most classical Persian poetry is gender-neutral, in principle, in part due to genderless pronouns and in part due to a culture of subtlety. Therefore, a female poet could participate in many poetic genres alongside male authors. Traditional Persian poetry is reminiscent of the Persian art of illumination (tazhīb), with its use of stylized patterns and fixed shapes. Similarly, Persian traditional poets of all genders make use of a fixed collection of similes, tropes, and metaphors. It is common to criticize traditional female poets for using masculine language, but in many cases what is called masculine is that gender-neutral shared heirloom. Parvīn Iʿtisāmī's poetry is a significant example of such a misunderstanding.[32] Nevertheless, many poems by women have featured masculine, androcentric, or even misogynistic language. Sometimes poetesses envision themselves looking through the eyes of men, even when looking at the beloved, reinforcing the prevalence of the male gaze. For instance, the eighth/fourteenth-century poet Jahān Malik Khātūn uses 'man' for human,[33] which was normal for her time, but also uses more blatantly misogynistic words in passages such as this:

> Every man suffering an adversity
>
> Be assured that is because of women's deeds.[34]

(Tehran: Hermes, 1391/2010), 273–80; Farzaneh Milani, Words, Not Swords: Iranian Women Writers and the Freedom of Movement (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2011), Ch. 6.

[29]Bihbahānī, Yād-i baʿzī nafarāt, 574.

[30]Bihbahānī, Yād-i baʿzī nafarāt, 582, 680–83. See also 593, 754–55.

[31]Furūgh Farrukhzād, Dar ghurūbī abadī: Majmuʿih āsār-i mansūr-i Furūgh Farrukhzād [In an eternal sunset, Collection of prose by Furūgh Farrukhzād], ed. Bihrūz Jalālī (Tehran: Murvārīd, 1376/1997), 196.

[32]For example, see Farāmarz Sulaymānī, Bārvartar az bahār: Naqd va barrisī va nimūnahʹhāyī az shiʿr-i zanān [More fertile than spring, Analysing samples of poems by women], (Tehran: Dunyā-yi Mādar, 1371/1991), 7, 13, 15; M.R. Pāshāyī, Z. ʿArabnīzhād, and H. Āryān, "Bāztāb-i jinsīyat-i mardān dar dīvān-i shāʿirān-i zan, bar asās-i dīvān-i Parvīn Iʿtisāmī [Reflection of male gender in collected poems by women poets, Analysing collection of poems by Parvīn Iʿtisāmī , Furūgh Farrukhzād va Sīmīn Bihbahānī," Shiʿrʹpazhūhī (Būstān-i adab) 53, no. 3 (Fall 1401/2023): 62, 70ff.

[33]Jahān Malik, Dīvān, 16, line 15.

[34]Jahān Malik, Dīvān, 82. It is possible that a male copyist may have added that line to the otherwise healthy ghazal. Cf. Jahān Malik, 86: "He cannot be called a man; he is even less than a woman."

Using masculine language sometimes creates comical lines, considering who the speaker is:

I shall not turn my head away from the beloved

He is not a man who breaks promises.[35]

Compared to the above, the extant poems of Rābiʿah and Mahsatī contain no masculine language even though some of the poems attributed to Mahsatī[36] display a masculine persona.[37] Mahsatī's poems describing young craftsmen (the so-called shahrāshūbs)[38] are in line with conventional male-love poetry as well, but they can be interpreted as free expressions of feminine feelings. All in all, her occasional use of a male persona does not exclude the feminine voice from her poetry. In a quatrain, for instance, she describes the female custom of henna painting.[39] Mahsatī and Rābiʿah have no 'defensive' poetry either; nothing in the poems attributed to them discloses any self-consciousness about being feminine.

Unlike Mahsatī's poems, Jahān Malik's cited verses suggest no masculine persona though they rely on masculine language due to the absence of a feminine voice.[40] Similarly, Zīb al-Nisāʾ Makhfī uses 'man' for human.[41] However, her use of terms such as 'manly' to mean courageously (much like 'virile' in English),[42] and lines such as "will not embrace the bride of happiness,")[43] are harder to justify. Zīb al-Nisāʾ refers to traditionally male imagery such as kings' crowns,[44] but when such symbols are attributed to the speaker, they fail to convey a distinctly feminine voice.

Another instance of male language in these poems is their citation of male literary figures such as Farhād or Majnūn as epitomes of love, something in which Jahān Malik and many other women poets regularly engage.[45] Although this is understandable considering the tradition of Persian literature, it is curious that none of the female poets considers female lovers for the

[35]Jahān Malik Khātūn, Dīvān, 108; see also 30, 122, 170, 286, 402, 424, 432.

[36]Not unlike those of Omar Khayyam, many poems attributed to Mahsatī are difficult to authenticate.

[37]Mahsatī, Dīvān-i Mahastī Ganjavī, ed. Tāhirī Shahāb (3rd repr. ed., Tehran: Kitāb′khānah-yi Ibn-i Sīnā, 1347/1968), 54, no. 98. Also see 58, no. 113, 60, no. 121.

[38]See, e.g., Mahsatī, Dīvān, 32, 36–38, 40, 45, 48–49, 59, 61–63, 76.

[39]Mahsatī, Dīvān, 47, no. 66.

[40]Jahān Malik Khātūn bares her soul only in her impressive elegies for her daughter, which appear at the end of her Dīvān.

[41]Zīb al-Nisāʾ, Dīvān, 27.

[42]Zīb al-Nisāʾ, Dīvān, 95, 131.

[43]Zīb al-Nisāʾ, Dīvān, 127. نو عروس عافیت هرگز نگیرد در کنار

[44]Zīb al-Nisāʾ, Dīvān, 144.

[45]See Jahān Malik, Dīvān, 184; Zīb al-Nisāʾ, Dīvān, 97, 103, 121.

same purpose, given that literary characters were available for that purpose. Rather, Zīb al-Nisāʾ, for example, saves female characters to denote clichéd attributes such as coquetry.[46] Thus, the agency of love is still the domain of men, even when women write poetry. Such use of masculine and even misogynist language is still present in modern-day women's poetry, even in works advocating equality. For instance, Zhālah Qāʾim-Maqāmī (1262–1326/1883–1947) whose poems mostly deal with women's concerns, writes inconsistent poems by using traditional language and concepts.[47]

In the following passage by a young modern poet, the symbol of the passive beloved gains autonomy through a language that does not hide the speaker's identity:

> Layli is me
>
> I've drawn aside shame's opaque curtains
>
> Naked with dishevelled hair I've come to your doorway
>
> […]I chose you
>
> To be the Majnun for the waves of my tress.[48]

This stark contrast is much more obvious when we consider the semiotics of female clothing, cosmetics, and overall 'feminine' objects in Persian poetry. Hierarchies assigned to genders bring with them value judgements on the attire men and women wear. In the seventh/thirteenth century, Pādshāh Khātūn talks about her virtues evoking a conventional dichotomy between male and female clothing:

> Under my [womanly] headdress I have so many [men's] crowns.[49]

At the dawn of modernity in Iran many poets, whether male or

[46]Zīb al-Nisāʾ, Dīvān, 222.

[47]ʿĀlamtāj Qāʾim-Maqāmī (Zhālah), Dīvān, ed. Ahmad Karamī (Tehran: Mā, 1374/1995), 33, 91, 124, 132–33. For examples from later poets, see Parvīn Dawlatābādī, Ātash va āb [Fire and water] (Tehran: Chāpʹkhānah-yi Bahman, 1352/1974), 70–72; Sipīdah Kāshānī, Parvānahʹhā-yi shab [Butterflies of night] (Tehran: Padīdah, 1352/1973), 134. Bilqays Qādisī (Tak), Dīvān-i Bilqays Qādisī (Tabriz: Āzarābādgān, 1979), 50–51, 80, 101, 204; cf. Qādisī, Dīvān, 89–94 for speeches about women's rights; ʿIshrat Qahramān (Nakīsā), Dīdār [Meeting], (Mashhad: Mashhad University Press, 1363/1984), 46–47; Zhālah Isfahanī, Majmūʿah-yi ashʿār [Collection of poems] (Tehran: Nigāh, 1384/2005), 253, 267, 641, cf. 294–96, 395, 554–55.

[48]Mahtāb Qurbānī, Hanūz [Yet] (London: Mihrī, 2017), 33.

[49]Nāsir al-Dīn Munshī Kirmānī, Samt al-ʿulā li al-hazrat al-uliyāʾ, ed. Muhammad Qazvīnī and ʿAbās Iqbāl (Tehran: Shirkat-i Sahāmī-i chāp, 1328/1949), 70; Dīvānbaygī, Hadīqat al-shuʿarā, 3:2191.

female, use the same hierarchy to stir patriotic emotions.[50] Two provocative pieces by the late nineteenth-/early twentieth-century writer Nīmtāj Salmāsī ridicule men for showing no virility in defending their homes:

Our hat-wearing [men] have chosen [domestic] seclusion

May the wind take our veils and put them on their heads.[51]

The above passage demonstrates internalized misogyny by using women's headwear as a symbol of ontological demotion to remind men of their duty. That same mentality is also present in the following passage, which regards house labour such as darning as women's work, and fighting for one's honour as men's work:

Your [lack of] zeal tore the cloth of Iranians' honour

Bring it now to women for mending it.[52]

Around the same time, Zand-Dukht Shīrāzī (ca. 1288–1331/1909–1953), a women's rights activist, asks the following questions:

Why isn't commerce a woman's job?

Why isn't industrial work my profession?

Why shouldn't a woman make women's shoes?

Why isn't a woman a surgeon and a physician?[53]

As the women's rights discourse developed, poets began to criticize clothes associated with the marginalization of women: first the facial veil, and then the chādur (head-to-toe covering). Zhālah Qāʾim-Maqāmī, for example, wrote:

[50]For analyses of the rhetorical tactics and the overall atmosphere at the times, see Afsaneh Najmabadi, "The Erotic Vaṭan [homeland] as Beloved and Mother: To Love, to Possess, and to Protect," Comparative Studies in Society and History 39, no. 3 (July 1997): 442–467; Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism and historiography (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave, 2001), 127–134.

[51]Hijāzī, Tazkirah-yi andarūnī, 26, 229.

[52]Hijāzī, Tazkirah-yi andarūnī, 229.

[53]See Bassārī, Zand-Dukht, 71. Translation quoted from Eliz Sanasarian, The Women's Rights Movement in Iran: Mutiny, Appeasement, and Repression from 1900 to Khomeini (New York: Praeger, 1982), 1.

If the chādur and face veil are the emblem of our inferiority

I will take a hostile fire to the veil and the chādur.[54]

Parvīn Iʿtisāmī rejects the chādur in celebration of the governmental act banning hijab,[55] an attitude that has also been present in more recent poems. The objection in the case of the later poems, however, is to the covering imposed after the Revolution of 1979 in Iran, not to its now faded associations.[56]

Another noticeable contrast in attitude toward femininity concerns everyday objects. Qāʾim-Maqāmī frequently mentions mirrors, but she sometimes makes generalizations about female vanity.[57] For many other female poets of the past, objects connected to the feminine are almost always associated with a hidden shame or pointed to with a defensive tone. On the other hand, Shīvā Arastūyī, the rebel novelist and poet (born 1340/1961), takes a more natural and neutral, even favourable, attitude to feminine clothing and objects:

No matter how much you say I'm prettier without makeup

I shall not become like you

It's me, putting on my rouge

[…]My beauty will not decrease

I'm from the tribe of disobedient moustache-less people.[58]

Similarly, Afsānahʹsādāt Husaynī, refers to women's clothes and accessories in her poems either positively or casually:

With my scarf in the wind, I teach branches to fly

I shake out butterflies and pennyroyals from my skirt on the carpet's garden.[59]

[54]Qāʾim-Maqāmī, Dīvān, 124.

[55]Iʿtisāmī, Dīvān, 154. The poem is censured in the reprints of her collected poems in Iran after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. It should be noted that the story of hijab and its connotations is more complicated than what the simplistic 'modernism vs. tradition' binary implies. For two different interpretations of the same tradition, see Azar Nafisi, Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books (New York: Random House, 2003), and Fatemeh Keshavarz, Jasmine and Stars: Reading More than Lolita in Tehran (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007). For a study of the governmental Act and its meaning, see Fātimah Sādiqī, Kashf-i hijab: Bāzkhānī-i yik mudākhilah-yi mudirn [Unveiling; Rereading a modern intervention], (Nigāh-i Muʿāsir, 1392/2013). For a study of the different meanings of hijab for different generations of women writers, see Farzaneh Milani, Veils and Words: The Emerging Voice of Iranian Women Writers (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1992).

[56]For examples, see Mahbūbah Kūshkakī, in Bahārah ʿĀmil Nawghānī (ed.), Panjirah-yi shiʿr-i zanān-i imrūz-yi Īrān [A window to the poetry of today's Iranian women],(Tehran: Mihr va Dil, six volumes, 1400–1403/2021–2024), 1:69; Najmah Sārīkhānī, in ʿĀmil Nawghānī (ed.), Panjirah-yi shiʿr-i zanān-i imrūz-i Īrān, 2:82; Hila Sedighi, in Mojdeh Bahar (ed.), Song of the Ground Jay: Poems by Iranian Women, 1960–2022 (Fredricksburg, PA: Mage, 2023), 315–317.

These examples show that, unlike many of their older counterparts, contemporary poets do not see female outfits and cosmetics as signs of shame. This difference of attitude is also present in poems about relationships as much as in poems about objects.

The Female Poet, Family, Love, and the 'Other'

The few honest poems recorded in pre-modern anthologies about married life present a gloomy picture. Mihrī Hiravī (8–9/14–15th centuries), for example, composed two quatrains about imposed marriage to an old man.60 Grievance against ill-matched husbands is a relatively common motif in pre-modern women's poetry.[61] Perhaps the most notorious verses on that topic are those of Zhālah Qāʾim-Maqāmī, whose poems express the terror of a teenager matched with a forty-year-old man.[62]

However, when free love and equal marriage become possible, the attitudes change, and a young poet can write a love song for an older man:

> Even though to the eyes of strangers
>
> Nothing is of the correct size between you and me,
>
> And love does not fit either my young stature
>
> Or your decade-full figure,
>
> My love story is cut from a different cloth.[63]

Equal marriage also makes truthfully lyrical poems possible, as Farīdah Hasanzādah demonstrates in her address to her husband:

> Neither sea upon sea of your love letters
>
> In the velvet chest of memories

[57]Qāʾim-Maqāmī, Dīvān, 40.

[58]Shivā Arastūyī, Biyā tamāmash kunīm [Let us finish it] (Tehran: Qatrah, 1382/2004), 56.

[59]Afsānah′sādāt Husaynī, Afsānah′khānī (Karaj: Ihām,1402/2023), 29. Also see 11, 13, 19, 39, 52, 68.

[60]Fakhrī Hiravī, Rawzah al-salātīn va javāhir al-ʿajāʾib, 126. For the translation, see Davis, The Mirror, 99–100.

[61]See, e.g., Dīvānbaygī, Hadīqat al-shuʿarā, 3: 2167; Hijāzī, Tazkirah-yi andarūnī, 125.

[62]Qāʾim-Maqāmī, Dīvān, 36–38, 53–58, 109–10, 113, 125–27.

[63]Qurbānī, Hanūz, 36–37.

Nor paper bags upon paper bags of fruit-filled orchards

Nor the safe haven of your embrace on evenings when you return home

[…]The only testament of your pure loving heart

The worn-out red bin, heavy with everyday trash

That no matter how tired, every night

You take it, step by step, down four flights

Without even a glance

At the repeated offer of my sleepy hands.[64]

The relationship between the lover and the beloved in Persian poetry is too complex to be covered in a project of this length. It is safe, however, to recognize a certain servitium amoris in pre-modern Persian poetry. The Persian canon contains numerous examples of the pleading lover/cruel beloved dynamic, and the humble lover is a common figure in both men's and women's poetry. Jahān Malik, for instance, uses the same language Sa'dī and Hāfiz use.[65] And gradually what I call the 'mystic turn'[66] makes the ambiguously earthly beloved into a figure of divine love. From the very real objects of desire in earlier poetry to the periods of fully exhausted mysticism between the fourteenth and twentieth centuries, the omnipotent character of the beloved rarely changes; it is merely glib talk in flirtatious ghazals or simply Persian habitual etiquette. However, when it is connected to the theology of an unquestionable almighty, the beloved becomes a despot who is worshipped by a hopeless lover. In a further twist, the inhumanly perfect features of the divine beloved are gradually reflected in poems about human relationships, as hero worship emerges from religious-Sufi divine love. For instance, Furūgh looked for a man to complete her

[64]Hasanzadeh, in Bahar (ed.), Song of the Ground Jay, 125.

[65]Jahān Malik Khātūn, Dīvān, 13, 16.

[66]Davis calls this the "Sufification of the vocabulary" of Persian poetry. See Davis, The Mirror, 17. The controversial woman poet of the Qajar era, Tāhirih Qurrat al'Ayn (ca. 1231–1268/1814–1852), whose religious-political significance has been highlighted more than her poetry has been studied, uses such language in her poems. For an interpretation of her literary work, see Rizā Farukh'fāl, Zanī ārāyish-i- rūzgār: Dar hālāt-i shi'rī-i Tāhirih Qurrat al-'Ayn [A woman grace of her time: On the poetic modes of Tahereh (Tahirah) Qurrat al-'Ayn] (Santa Monica: Bunyād-i Taslīmī, 2022).

heart's incomplete half,[67] while Maryam Haydarzādah wrote many verses in this vein, in which she called the beloved everything good while estimating herself nothing without him.[68]

The poet's personality is a determining factor in this case: Rābiʿah and Mahsatī deviate much more from the later canon, while the religious modernist poet Tāhirah Saffārzādah (1315–1387/1936–2008)[38] shows no thirst for love and demands respect for her ideals from a potential partner.[69] Yet, it can be asserted as a general rule that, contrary to a long tradition, the contemporary poet/lover is equal to the beloved. Even the revolutionary hijab-clad Fātimah Rākiʿī (born 1333/1954) addresses the beloved as "friend, confidant."[70]

Almost a century ago, Zhālah Qāʾim-Maqāmī mourned her fate, Zand-Dukht condemned and questioned injustice, and Parvīn Iʿtisāmī expected equality, rebuking both men and women for the situation. Seeing too few changes, decades later Furūgh wrote "I wanted to be the voice of my being, alas I was a woman,"[71] and Saffārzādah declared:

On my first visit to my birthplace

I will clean my mother's shameful look

From the walls

[…]I confess that in my light hands

There is no lust for becoming a fist and pounding

I do not brawl

I do not have the honour of murdering humans

Because I have not been fattened

[67]Furūgh Farrukhzād, Majmūʿah-yi ashʿār [Poetry collection], (Germany: Navīd, 1368/1989), 354.

[68]Maryam Haydarzādah, Parvānah-at khāham mānd [I will remain your butterfly] (Tehran: Dārīnūsh, 1377/1997), 11–13, 17–19, 25–27, 34–35, and passim. Her more recent work shows almost the same attitude despite some changes. For example, see Haydarzādah, Qahvah-at yakh nakunad [Don't let your coffee get cold], (Tehran: Muʿīn, 1399/2020), 14, 27, 36–37, 137–39, 152.

[69]Tāhirah Saffārzādah, Harikat va dīrūz [Movement and yesterday], (2nd repr. ed., Shiraz: Navīd, 1366/1987), 7–8.

[70]Fātimah Rākiʿī, Āvāz-i gulsang [The song of lichen] (3rd repr. ed., Tehran: Itilāʿāt, 1385/2006), 18.

[71]Farrukhzād, Majmūʿah-yi ashʿār, 227.

On the table of the superiority of male people.[72]

In the present day, equal status is a given, even among the most needy girls, and this is reflected in contemporary poetry:

Once again, I stare at your cravat

Your brown shoes, your light-coloured eyes

You are facing me, and I'm looking at your body's sunny colour

[…]You are the same person who easily passed by love

[…]There will be no other chances for you

Come and be grateful for your second chance.[73]

Another visible contrast in poetic worldviews concerns bodily aspects of love. Rābiʿah and Mahsatī, for example, demonstrate the same naturalist taste as the male poets of their times; their love is as much physical as it is in their souls.[74] For Mahsatī, the body is the centre of pleasure. In a unique quatrain describing the female sex organ, she shows that she is not ashamed of her sex:

Vagina is an agate well that gives you refuge

And a resting place on a silver cushion

When you pour nine drops of quicksilver into it

After nine months it will give you a full moon [i.e. a beautiful baby].[75]

For many poets of both genders, however, the flesh equals the abject.[76] From harem women of the Qajar dynasty in the eigh-

[72]Saffārzādah, Tanīn dar diltā [Resonance in delta] (2nd repr. ed., Shiraz: Navīd, 1365/1987), 106–7.

[73]Māriā Salmānī, Sāl-i kargadan [The year of rhino] (Karaj: Īhām, 1401/2022), 15–16.

[74]For examples from Rābiʿah's poems, see Ahmad Idārah′chī Gīlānī, Shāʿirān-i hamʿasr-i Rūdakī [Contemporary poets of Rūdakī] (Tehran: Mawqūfāt-i Duktur Mahmūd Afshār Yazdī, 1370/1991), 93–94.

[75]Mahsatī, Dīvān, 42.

[76]See, e.g., Dīvānbaygī, Hadīqat al-shuʿarā, 3: 2150; Dawlatābādī, Ātash va āb, 60, 67-68; Rākiʿī, Āvāz-i gulsang, 90.

teenth to the twentieth centuries to emancipated women of the Pahlavi era (1925–1979) and the revolutionary poets of the IRI, numerous poets disdain the body in order to attain some ready-made redemption.

Furūgh re-introduces the corporeal lover, an aspect of her poetry that has already been discussed extensively.[77] Modern poets show inclinations toward normal relationships against the strong streak of ascetic rejection or at least downgrading of bodily love. Unless they cover it in symbolic obscure language, writers under the Islamic government rarely publish anything resembling erotic poems; hence, expatriate writers exhibit a higher frequency of bodily love expressions compared to poets within Iran. While Katāyūn Āzarlī devotes all of her book Temple of Body to fleshly love,[78] Partaw Nūrī ʿAlā depicts the four seasons of the female life cycle, including the first period, the first act of lovemaking, giving birth, and menopause, all resolutely and in a positive light.[79] Even so, bodily love is a noticeable theme among the younger generation of poets in Iran. Realistic descriptions of the partner's body or habits are common in poems, and the absence of mystical terminology by itself discloses the physical nature of love.[80]

Alongside the dignity they have reclaimed for womanhood and female sexuality, women poets value motherhood. Unlike in traditional poetry, motherhood is a focal point for a remarkable number of contemporary female poets. Parvīn, who had no children of her own yet frequently portrayed kind mothers, was influential in this regard. More importantly, she introduced wise mothers: almost all of the sages in her poems are female, whether young or elderly,[81] and since her poems are intended to be edifying, those orators of morality are not rare. The result is a sense of veneration for women throughout her work, though some critics have said that this is not enough.[82] Furūgh, meanwhile, emphasizes the positive bodily aspects of motherhood with imagery such as the following:

[77]For a biographical account of Furūgh's radical poetry, see Milani, Words, Not Swords, 135–40; Farzaneh Milani, Furūgh Farrukhzād: Zindigīnāmah-yi adabī, hamrāh bā nāmahʹhā-yi chāp nashudah [Forugh Farrokhzad: A literary biography with unpublished letters], (Toronto: Persian Circle, 1395/2016), Ch. 3. For a critical review of the topic, see Milani, "Love and Sexuality in the Poetry of Forugh Farrokhzad."

[78]See Katāyūn Āzarlī, Maʿbad-i tan [Temple of the body: Collection of poems] (Oslo: Āftāb, 1396/2017).

[79]Partaw Nūrī ʿAlā, Chāhār rūyish [Four springs: Selected poems] (Los Angeles: Sindbād, 1383/2004), 177–82.

[80]See, e.g., Samānah Kahrubāʾiyān, Vali bih īn dīrī [But this late] (Tehran: Fasl-i Panjum, 1394/2015), 17; Rāzīyah Mūsavī, Tishnah-yī va kavīr dar khānah ast [You are thirsty and there is a desert at home] (Tehran: Nasīrā, 1400/2020), 11–12, 55; Salmānī, Sāl-i kargadan, 17, 29–30, 34, 48–49; Husaynī, Afsānahʹkhānī, 33–34.

[81]See, e.g., Iʿtisāmī, Dīvān, 71–73, 79, 146. Considering the young Parvīn's awareness of the plight of uneducated women, such emphasis seems deliberate. See Parvīn's valedictory speech in ʿAlī Dihbāshī (ed.), Yādʹnāmah-yi Parvīn Iʿtisāmī [A memorial to Parvīn Iʿtisāmī] (Tehran: Dunyā-yi mādar, 1370/1991), 52–55.

I bring unripe ears of wheat to my breasts and feed them.[83]

Earlier, in a morbid poem, Zhālah Qāʾim-Maqāmī compared the stages of conceiving, delivering, and feeding her child to what a dog would go through.[84] In another poem, she asks her unborn baby not to come into her mother's miserable world.[85] Contemporary poems on motherhood step into interesting realms; for example, Afsānah′sādāt Husaynī encapsulates all the positive feelings about motherhood in her verse:

I'm a poet mother, even the night is sleeping on my lap[…]

One hand shaking the cradle, another shaking the world,

I've been created as a flower in order to

Nurture even the spring under my protection.[86]

Another poet of the post-Revolution generation, Malīhah Akbarī, describes more of the bodily aspects of motherhood, quoting the psychoanalytical theory of growth stages as words of someone speaking to the narrator who is addressing her baby:

Your eye colour was like mine, my body was leaking milk

… (The baby should let go of you itself

Don't take your breasts by force

Otherwise, the need will remain in the baby's body

And the baby will grow up to be a smoker

Sucking is a silent need.[87]

All of the examples quoted above help to trace the evolution in Persian women's poetry from hierarchal relationships to more

[82]See, e.g., Firishtah Dāvarān, "Shiʿr-i ghayr-i shakhsī-i Parvīn Iʿtisāmī" [Non-personal poetry of Parvīn Iʿtisāmī], Irān′shināsī 1, no. 2. (Summer 1989): 285–309.

[83]Farrukhzād, Majmūʿah-yi ashʿār, 438.

[84]Qāʾim-Maqāmī, Dīvān, 61.

[85]Qāʾim-Maqāmī, Dīvān, 49.

[86]Husaynī, Afsānah′khānī, 29.

[87]Malīhah Akbarī, Maʿshūqah′hā-yi muzāhim [Bothersome mistresses] (Tehran: Fasl-i Panjum, 1402/2023), 26–27.

equal ones.

The female poet and spiritual outlooks

The poet's relationship with the deity goes almost in the same direction as the relationship with her significant others. Traditional Persian poems portray an almighty being who controls the fate of all people; for instance, Qāʾim-Maqāmī names God as the cause of women's misery.[88] In pre-modern mystical-oriented poems, God is the absolute other, as religion dictates, but is also the absolute beloved whose love overshadows any human love.[89] Remnants of that picture are noticeable in poems produced both before and after the 1979 Revolution in Iran. In the revolutionary atmosphere, poets long for a divine love greater than human love:

> My gaze is on an image of love
>
> Your eyes and eyebrows are just an excuse
>
> Our love is beautiful but
>
> Alas, it is confined to a nest
>
> Confined to this nest
>
> I'll be only bothered with food and water
>
> Fly wing to wing with me
>
> Love has a vast expanse.[90]

The revolutionary poet also peppers her poetry with spiritual love songs addressed to the Leader:

> Who is that full moon covered in a robe

[88]Qāʾim-Maqāmī, Dīvān, 90.

[89]See, e.g., Jahān Malik Khatūn, Dīvān, 5.

[90]Rākiʿī, Āvāz-i gulsang, 16.

That is good-looking as Messiah?

[…]Earth is lost in his greatness

Heaven is evident in his height.[91]

In modernized Iran, religious language is common among female poets, whether in the Pahlavi era or in the revolutionary years; especially in the 1980s, many poems were riddled with positive references to religious concepts such as sin, penance, salvation, harām, and halāl. Kubrā Saʿīdī venerated the prophet in a poem and wrote "I am as innocent as the Kaʿba" in another,[92] while Tāhirah Saffārzādah re-narrated the history of Islam to mould an ideal past and future at the same time.[93] Religious sentiments and holy name-dropping are frequent among pre/revolutionary poets.[94] Objects associated with faith, such as "prayer's candles" (shamʿ-i duʿā)and "tiles of the mosque's dome," (kāshī-yi gunbad) appear everywhere.[95] In 1981, the leftist poet Zhālah Isfahānī praised the religious upheaval of the time:

Strong call of Azan, the power of faith,

Imam's name, jihad, movement and revolt

Thousands of slogans on the walls of the city

The city is at work after the Revolution.[96]

The Revolution idealized religion as the remedy for modern maladies. Before that, religion was venerated as an heirloom, a tradition, an invisible rope tying the poet securely to her kind faithful grandmother with an air of nostalgia. Sipīdah Kāshānī, for instance, contrasted the virtuous mothers of the past, "chaste as Virgin Mary," with "today's naked mothers."[97] Both revolutionary poets and those of previous generations either judged phallocentric readings of sharia as heresies[98] or ignored them in

[91]Rākiʿī, Āvāz-i gulsang, 75–76; see also 33–39, 78.

[92]Kubrā Saʿīdī (Shahrzād), Bā tishnigī pīr mīshavīm: Sih kitāb-i Shahrzād [We grow old with thirst; Three books of Shahrzad] (Tehran: Ādah, 1402/2022), 230, 243. Saʿīdī started as an exotic dancer and later became a filmmaker. The former was forbidden according to religious law, and the latter was not a typical career for any woman accepted by the religious community. For other examples, see Saʿīdī, Bā tishnigī pīr mīshavīm, 155, 162, 172, 173.

[93]Sahar Amīnīfar, in ʿĀmil Nawghānī (ed.), Panjirah-yi shiʿr-i zanān-i imrūz-yi Īrān, 5:42.

[94]For some examples, see Dawlatābādī, Ātash va āb, 60; Kāshānī, Parvānahʹhā-yi shab, 51; Saffārzādah, Safar-i panjum, 25, 41, 67, 74, 76, 87; Saʿīdī, Bā tishnigī pīr mīshavīm, 210, 243.

[95]Kāshānī, Parvānahʹhā-yi shab, 16, 100. For other examples, see Dawlatābādī, Ātash va āb, 15; Shādāb Vajdī, Yik rūz-i dīgar [Another day] (Tehran: Rawshangarān, 1371/1992), 30.

[96]Zhālah Isfahānī, Agar hizār qalam dāshtam [If I had a thousand pens] ([Tehran]: Haydar Bābā, 1360/1981), 235.

[97]Kāshānī, Parvānahʹhā-yi shab, 150–52. See also Qādisī, Dīvān, 182, who complains about social vices such as miniskirts.

[98]Qāʾim-Maqāmī, Dīvān, 63–64.

favour of the revolutionary momentum in Islam, supposedly the ideal model of liberté, égalité, fraternité and the emancipatory force against brutal industrialization, fascism, and imperialism, which, in addition to their other vices, objectified women.[99] The revolution also combined the monumental mystical potential of Persian culture with a mixture of anti-imperialism, mysticism, and religiosity. The result was a militant Sufism that was apparent in the wills that numerous young men wrote before departing to go to "the fronts of the battle between good and evil"; namely, the eight-year war between Iraq and Iran. This worldview divided the globe into the materialist West plus the materialist Eastern Bloc against the army of spiritual forces.

However, the distance between dreams and reality eventually became unsurpassable. In effect, the frequency of religious words decreased and excited expectations were replaced by disillusioned regret, as in the following passage:

> The flood has uprooted everything
>
> And faith
>
> – so indecisive and wandering –
>
> Is standing on the ruins and the corpses, thunderstruck.[100]

Idealized references to religious and theological concepts are strikingly scarce in post-Revolutionary women's poetry, though a remarkable twist in these poems is how modern features appear in the relationship between the poet and the deity. Despite the collective nature of the mysticism advertised in the IRI, the mystic approach turns the notion of God as the holder of cosmic order into the personal audience. Thus, with the collapse of the tradition and of the revolutionary authorities, what remains is the individual. The poet who criticizes her parents openly does not exempt the prime authority either;[101] even when she has a poor self-image, she condemns the world for its injustices. Po-

[99]Saffārzādah, Safar-i panjum.

[100]Vajdī, Yik rūz-i dīgar, 79. Also see 106–8, 114–15. For other examples, see Bihbahānī, Majmūʿah-yi ashʿār, 595ff; Kāmyār ʿĀbidī, Marvā Nabīlī: Shāʿir va sīnimāgar [Marvā Nabīlī : Poet and cinematographer] (Tehran: Murvārīd, 1402/2023), 139.

[101]See, e.g., Malīhah Akbarī, Mīkhvāstam shāʿir shavam ammā ghazāyam sūkht [I wanted to be a poet, but I burnt my food], (Tehran: Ānīmā, 1398/2019), 73; Akbarī, Maʿshūqahʹhā-yi muzāhim, 7, 73–76, 79.

ets who were too young to have been involved in the Islamic Revolution demonstrate transformations of, if not outright disbelief in, past values. Their new outlook can manifest itself in unorthodox interpretations of the dogma, as in this poem:

> I read the whole history: To become a lover
>
> No one asks for permissions or orders or fatwas
>
> […] I'm not afraid of Him because He knows well what I'm saying
>
> I love Him, no, my God isn't a monster
>
> […] He neither stares at my body over his glasses
>
> […] Nor is He a clergyman.[102]

The fall of previous authorities can also manifest as negative allusions to religious history,[103] or as unambiguous challenges.[104]

These examples show how theological views are crucially affected by sociopolitical conditions. For the women poets raised after the Islamic Revolution, that connection becomes more complicated and entangled with their identity as women.

The female poet in Agora

Although political concerns among female poets are nothing new, the extent to which Persian women's poetry reflects sociopolitical life is still under-studied. Many of the poems attributed to Mahsatī, for instance, contain social criticisms that could be interpreted as political as well.[105] However, the political aspect of women's poetry has become more apparent in the modern era. Poets of the Constitutional era in Iran, for instance, used poetry in political activism to emphasize care for the motherland and objection to foreign interferences.[106]

[102]Shukūfah Sālih, in ʿĀmil Nawghānī (ed.), Panjirah-yi shiʿr-i zanān-i imrūz-yi Īrān, 6:76–77.

[103]Sahar Amīnīfar, in ʿĀmil Nawghānī (ed.), Panjirah-yi shiʿr-i zanān-i imrūz-yi Īrān, 5:42.

[104]Maryam Mihrī, in ʿĀmil Nawghānī (ed.), Panjirah-yi shiʿr-i zanān-i imrūz-yi Īrān, 5:119.

[105]Mahsatī, Dīvān, 38, no. 27, 41–42, no. 44, 46, no. 64-65, 60, no. 121, 61, no. 125.

[106]See, e.g., Davis, The Mirror of My Heart, 165–66, 171.

The Persian language was spread over centuries across different lands, from Anatolia to the Indian Peninsula. It is today, albeit on a smaller scale, the language of various ethnic groups and nations, including the people of Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Female poets in these countries too, despite different local concerns, are more or less in line with global sociopolitical changes; they are also aware of their common problems and the need for a dialogue between the Persianate lands. The best-known example of this awareness is the work of Gulrukhsār Safievā (born 1947), a prominent poet of Tajikistan, for whom the notion of a homeland beyond the political borders is a theme of her work. Through her love for the Persian language, she frequently writes about Greater Iran and its culture.[107]

Some Persian women's poems not only deal with political topics, but can be regarded as political acts in themselves. For example, Bihbahānī's "Till my last breath I will attack the aids of injustice" is a response to "The Aids of Allah," a hardliner pressure group.[108] More recent poets draw similar connections between social and political critiques, as in the following poem dedicated to a celebrated filmmaker:

I'm not from your generation of serene afternoons and cinemas[…]

In my era, on the charge of breathing

They put handcuffs on fresh girls…

My age is the age of you giving up and losing to the times,

You dear lovely legend[…]

I fight

And I fall after getting shot in the back by a machine gun.

[107]For just a few examples, see Gulrukhsār Safivā, Majmūʿah-yi ashʿār [Collection of poems], (Tehran: Nigāh, 2016), 46–47, 50, 62, 122, 142, 153, 296–98, 346, 377, 437.

[108]Bihbahānī, Majmūʿah-yi ashʿār [Collection of poems] (Tehran: Nigāh, 1384/2005), 1142–43. For an analysis of one of Bihbahānī's political poems, see Hūrā Yāvarī, "Az kīnah-i shuturī tā khashm-i inqilābī" [From grudge to wrath of revolution] in Zindigī dar āyinah: Guftārʹhā-yī dar naqd-i adabī [Life in mirror; Discourses on literary criticism] (2nd repr. ed. Tehran: Nīlūfar, 1390/2010), 209–25.

Death by the shiny blade of a knife

Face to face

those simple splendours

Those belong to your pretty age.

I'm […] the dark one with no nostalgia

For you it is too late.[109]

Themes of poverty and social wrongs recur in many works by twentieth-century women poets, whether from the left as in the writings of Zhālah Isfahanī,[110] or not, like the three great poets.[111] Although such political concerns are still significant topics in Persian poetry, those by and addressed to women take on an additional dimension. When the ideology makes the female body problematic, social criticisms take the form of outspoken protests against discrimination:

Experience is the street that passes by you at three in the morning

And doesn't find out you are a woman.[112]

Similarly, as Rāzīyah Mūsavī writes in despair and at the same time with scorn:

You're studying and you'll be a mother someday

But you'll become different at home someday

In an unfair return from Descartes and Kant

You'll become one with your tea glasses

[109]Qurbānī, Hanūz, 40–42. See also 7–19.

[110]Isfahānī, Majmūʿah-yi ashʿār, 66, 77–107, 185–86.

[111]Iʿtisāmī, Dīvān, 79, 82–83, 97, 99, 108–10, 129–31; Farrukhzād, Majmūʿah-yi ashʿār, 429–35; Bihbahānī, Majmūʿah-yi ashʿār, 21–39, 44–46, 50–52, 56–66, 74–79, and passim.

[112]Arastūyī, Biyā, 37–38.

You don't go easy on Hegel or Nietzsche but

You'll be fooled by simple promises someday

My mother used to say a woman's nest is at home

Even if you're a falcon you'll become a dove someday

In a country in which women are symbols for teapots and tea

You'll become a modern sketch of a samovar someday.[113]

A noticeable feature of poems such as these is their confrontational tone as they address various aspects of life in post-Revolutionary Iran:

I apologize for my ears

For hearing the axe,

Yet not coming back from my roots[…]

I'm sorry for utterances of freedom

And […] for talks about something other than the weather.[114]

Another poem protests:

We opened our eyes in war

We close them in poverty

[…]What should history tell about us?

The generation that[…]

puts their tears and anger only on their personal pages.[115]

[113]Rāzīyah Mūsavī, Sī sāl zan būdan jahānam rā ʿavaz kard [Being a woman for thirty years changed my world] (Tehran: Ānīmā, 1397/2018), 11–12.

[114]Āydā Gulnisāyī, Samāʾ dar sangistān: Majmūʿah-yi shiʿr (Tehran: Murvārīd, 1400/2021), 42.

[115]Maʿsūmah Qurayshī, in ʿĀmil Nawghānī (ed.), Panjirah-yi shiʿr-i zanān-i imrūz-yi Īrān, 3:48–49.

The following poem invites the reader to act:

Instead of one by one tear drops, take two knitting needles

[…]Make your helplessness into a scarf

It's raining predetermination; put on freedom of will

[…]Sometimes there is only you and yourself

With a fist, stand up, start a revolution.[116]

This confrontation of values is also present in a seeming trend among younger poets: the problematization of the female body. Many such poems concentrate on the speaker's body, either as a truthful expression of the speaker's view of herself or as a desire to break social or governmental taboos by attracting reactions from readers.

Many Persian women poets specifically object to the system of values manifested in the Islamic Revolution. One example of such values is a work of Fātimah Rākiʿī who dedicated her book, in which the following passage appears, to "the girls of the Revolution" who reveal "God's kindness on earth":

I swear to my warm tears shed with no reason

To my poetic pains

[…]that the hand of heaven still doesn't reach

To my girlish pride.[117]

The poet's intention was probably to bring dignity back to the girls who were allegedly reduced to dolls by Western lifestyles. A generation of revolutionary women apparently had the same attitude. Yet the paradoxical situation of reactionary laws that

[116]Muhaddisah ʿAvazpūr, in ʿĀmil Nawghānī (ed.),, Panjirah-yi shiʿr-i zanān-i imrūz-yi Īrān, 5:87–88.

[117]Rākiʿī, Āvāz-i gulsang, 8–10.

marginalized women coexisting with extensive women's education and propaganda that encouraged their participation in social and political spheres inevitably created a broken consciousness, that persisted in later generations. After all, this is the country that nurtured the first female Fields medallist but does not give women passports without official permission from their fathers or husbands. Those from more traditional backgrounds can become more confused as they internalize the implicit messages that are contrary to their intuitions.[118]

Many of these self-contradicting poems are written in the traditional form, obeying the rules of meter and rhyme, and thematically are often torn between feminist wishes and sad reality, wavering between demands for equality and a broken spirit. Many such poems scream the pain of being a woman but at the same time express petty feelings such as jealousy or vanity while looking proud to be irrational,[119] or provide details of kitchen work while complaining about a conflict between house labour and literary life.[120] That mindset is by no means prevalent among young poets. The more Iranian women distance themselves from the ideals of the past, the more confident their poetry sounds.

A more interesting reaction to the passé ideology is parodic in nature. The salient characteristic of post-Revolutionary women's poetry is its humorous tone, a trait that has a long history in Persian women's poetry. Mahsatī uses a carefree wit,[121] while even Jahān Malik shows occasional humour according to the established lines of formal Persian literature.[122] The presence and extent of humour varies from one poet to the next depending on their temperaments; for example, Parvīn Iʿtisāmī is solemn even when writing satiric poems.[123] However, in general, a special kind of humour is noticeable among the new generation of female poets that becomes significant when compared to those of previous generations: Furūgh's mockery of modern society, of pseudo-intellectuals and patriotic claims, has a bitter tang to it,[124] and Zhālah Qāʾim-Maqāmī gets sarcastic and sometimes

[118]For example, see Sanam Nāfiʿ, Huqūq-i māhiyānah ʿādat nīst [Monthly salary is not a habit] (Tehran: Nasīrā, 1392/2012), 5, 14 (the poem on this page is censored, but the complete version can be accessed on various pages on the internet), 34, 35. Even though the poet explains away such lines as sarcasm (https://shereno.com/7518/12555/131411.html), the self-sabotage effect is too strong to convey anything else. For other poems with the same aura, see Leili Galehdaran, Fatima Ranjbari, Fatemeh Salarvand, in Bahar (ed.), Song of the Ground Jay, 92–95, 286–87, 294–99.

[119]See, e.g., Akbarī, Maʿshūqah′hā-yi muzāhim, 44; Akbarī, Mīkhvāstam shāʿir shavam ammā ghazāyam sūkht, 8-10, 29–30, 66–67; Mūsavī, Sī sāl zan būdan jahānam rāʾavaz kard, 41–46, 53–54; Mūsavī, Tishnah-yī va kavīr dar khānah ast, 31, 43–45, 52–54, 62–67.

[120]See, e.g., Akbarī, Mīkhvāstam shāʿir shavam ammā ghazāyam sūkht, 8-10, 29-30, 66-67; Mūsavī, Tishnah-yī va kavīr dar khānah ast, 43-45, 52-54.

[121]For example, see Mahsatī, Dīvān, 37, no. 23; 40, no. 36, 41, no. 43.

[122]Jahān Malik, Dīvān, 11, line 9.

[123]Iʿtisāmī, Dīvān, 241.

[124]Farrukhzād, Majmūʿah-yi ashʿār, 374–81.

caustic, without the blue tone that is audible in Furūgh's works, but still with anguish visible between the lines. One such instance can be seen in a poem whose very form connotes mischief since it places the word "however" at the end of a line, rather than its usual place at the beginning of a sentence:

> The hand of [divine] power made heaven to be under the feet of mothers
>
> It closed heaven's door to the face of mothers, however.[125]

Contrary to the grave asceticism or the romantic sensitivity of so many previous poets, the new female poet, such as Shīvā Arastūyī, for example, may speak in a more jesting voice:

> You've taken the world too seriously, mister
>
> Your moustache is just a seagull
>
> Dried over your hawker lips.[126]

Similarly, Andīshah Fūlādvand inserts religious expressions into even the most grotesque poems:

> Participation in an overt murder
>
> 'Is there anyone who will help me?' [a famous religious sentence the poet cites entirely in Arabic]
>
> […]The deceased in the cesspit
>
> The potty mouth is a habit.[127]

The humour visible in modern Persian women's poems is of a kind that surfaces only after everything sacred has been fractured. Even perceptive poets such as Qāʾim-Maqāmī or Furūgh could not imagine such a total collapse of traditional absolutes;

[125]Qāʾim-Maqāmī, Dīvān, 45. For other examples, see 71, 93–94.

[126]Arastūyī, Biyā, 54.

[127]Andīshah Fūlādvand, Shillīk kun rafīq [Shoot, my friend] (Tehran: Sālis, 1395/2014), 38.

their humour is meant to reproach, to reform. The new tendencies for humour, in contrast, are there because the poet is too experienced to long for a cosmic salvation. She knows better than to take anything, including herself, seriously. If one word could represent the new attitude, it is 'absurd.'[41] The following passage demonstrates this tendency to combine protest, sarcasm, and intelligent humour:

I wore my scarves tighter

I reduced the volume of my hair by tying

I've made their lecherous eyes tired

That's how father raised me.

My whole body is full of fear

For me, the whole life consists of lessons

Where did I wander except in myself?

Father raised [me] a forty light years.

[…]We were delighted by extra-long hair

We were a bunch of dumbass wives

We were superior to the whole world

As a hundred houries father raised us.

[…]They've loaded us up with tears and cries

They've loaded us up with the oxymoron

Did they load us up with free-thinking?

To what purpose did father raise [us]?[128]

Conclusion

Women writing poetry was once seen as unusual, and all too many women would use androcentric, even misogynist, language to describe the female body or would regard objects associated with femininity as inferior. The scope of equal relationships resonates in poems about love or married life, and the idea of divinity as a great 'other' is shaped by the differences in the theological outlooks. Also, though women's poetry has always had political aspects of various forms, the sociopolitical experiences of contemporary women has brought distinctive tones to their poems.

From the perspective of Persian poetry, the present is different from the past: Zhālah Qāʾim-Maqāmī had once equated existence with men and non-existence with women,[129] but with the dawn of modernity, Persian-speaking women began to request recognition. Now, every girl demands it, takes it for granted, and dismisses any threat against it. Innumerable lines in poems beginning with "and I" (va man) or including "my poetry" (shi'r-i man) do not merely use pronouns or determiners; rather, 'I' and "my" exemplify the presence of the female poet in the public sphere. The public might not recognize specific female poets as the writers of famous lines they recite in mourning ceremonies, for instance,[130] but the average Iranian could easily name female poets whose names are on schools and streets or whose poems are found in any random anthology. The current situation for Persian women poets is not the state of exile of the past, and the sheer quantity of 'different' – dissenting, protesting, or parodic – poems, whether objecting directly, via sarcasm, or by apparent nonchalance, points to something worth exploring.

Obviously, not all contemporary poets show the characteristics discussed above. Some continue to express a familiar sense of defeatism, either helpless in love or hopeless in the turmoil of

[128]Akbarī, Maʿshūqahʹhā-yi muzāhim, 73–76.

[129]Qāʾim-Maqāmī, Dīvān, 58.

[130]See, for instance, Qāʾim-Maqāmī: "What is our life? What's seen and what is dreamed- mixed together. Comfort and pain, eagerness, weariness- mixed together" (Davis, The Mirror of My Heart: A Thousand Years of Persian Poetry by Women, 184).

divorce and cutting ties with former partners. Many focus on personal, limited problems at the expense of pursuing greater creative endeavours. Some poets still worship at timeworn temples and bring the rosary beads of old spells out to advertise what they conceive as traditional values. However, despite all of that, the general feel among Persian women's poetry is one of change. Even the most traditionalist poems now confirm the identity of their female speakers as poets through their use of personal language such as "my poetry." The faceless masses reduced to their reproductive functions have been replaced by individuals willing to exercise their will, whether to think or to engage in intercourse. For now, these changes are social, occurring among families but not yet in the legal system. Justitia is still behind, but the change is there, and the longer policymakers ignore that change, the more explosive its momentum will become.

To summarize, a look at the three words of the phrase "the female poet" is perhaps in order:

a. 'The'.

For the greater part of the millennium of New Persian poetry, there was no 'the' concerning women, let alone women poets, but that has changed drastically.

b. 'Female'.

The attribute makes all the obstacles. However, as the teenager quoted at the beginning of this article asserts, female identity is nothing to be covered up anymore.

c. 'Poet'.

For most Persian speakers in previous times and places, poetry was, like any other intellectual activities, seen as a masculine work. Nowadays, though, poetry is no longer a male privilege.

Whatever has made those three simple words possible has made the female poet (and not the 'poetess') an established entity. If a woman poet chooses to hide her work, it is not necessarily due to the obstacles her predecessors faced, but is more likely for personal reasons. Also, just as Iranian girls laugh loudly on the streets and swear like sailors everywhere, the space of female poetry today is far away from the neutral embroidery of Jahān Malik, the ladylike poised poetry-making of princesses, or the passive-aggressive struggles and aspirations of the generation of Furūgh. Younger generations of poets proudly unfurl their brash, parody-oriented poetry, though the need to broaden their horizons and venture to look at broader scenes than merely their personal concerns is ever-present. The education and opportunities to ensure such broadening are more or less available for more people than before. In other words, as far as Persian poetry is concerned, the veiled mind has come, fully and unabashedly, from the back room of existence to the front stage.