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Public Reforms, Private Struggles: The Poetry and Activism of Malakah I‘tizādī

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Malakah I‘tizādī (1306–1367/1928–1989),¹ a writer, seamstress, and women’s rights activist, was a direct descendant of I‘tizād al-Saltanah (1198–1259/1822–1880), the son of Fath ‘Alī Shāh and the first minister of sciences during the Qajar period.² In the 1330s/1950s and 1340s/1960s, she led the newly founded Zū al-Faqār Party, asserting her influence in the political sphere. I‘tizādī stands as a pioneering figure who, in the early decades of the 14th/20th century, authored a critical autobiography that intentionally broke with the customary norms of her time by exposing what was typically concealed about bodily experiences and private aspects of women’s lives. Through her writings and poetry, she boldly defied societal conventions, vividly portraying female desire and its suppression within a patriarchal society. Her aristocratic background places her among other noblewomen of her era, and her courage in revealing personal emotions evokes comparisons to figures such as Tāj al-Saltanah (1263–1315/1884–1936).³ I‘tizādī’s life was eventful, and she left behind a multifaceted legacy.

I‘tizādī’s social and professional interactions with some lower-class and marginalized women, and the way she leveraged these relationships for political purposes, particularly during the Mossadegh premiership (1951-1953), cast a shadow over her entire life, ultimately leading to her gradual exclusion from the public sphere. Most historical and scholarly works that mention I‘tizādī focus solely on her political role during the

Mossadegh period, introducing her as a notorious and politically disruptive woman who led the “prostitutes” in supporting the coup.⁴ This article, however, does not aim to examine the details of that political claim. Instead, it seeks to introduce I’tizādī as a writer through her published works and to argue for her position as both a chronicler of women’s lived experiences and a trailblazer in Iran’s evolving discourse on women’s rights. The article offers a nuanced analysis of the major themes in her writings, including her critiques of legal and gender inequalities, her candid portrayal of female desire, and her engagement with broader social and political struggles. Little is known about I’tizādī’s life after the coup, and the available information is scarce. Therefore, this article will present the brief evidence found in the Sāzmān-i Ittilā‘āt va Amniyat-i Kishvar’s (SAVAK’s) (Organization of Intelligence and National Security) documents, highlighting some of her political and social activities following the coup. It is hoped that this presentation of documents might lead to further clues about her life and its eventual outcome.

Biography and Political Life

The most significant of I’tizādī’s works, notable for its boldness and pioneering approach in expressing the emotional and social struggles of women in Iran during that time, is I’tirāfāt-i man. According to I’tizādī herself, the book is an internal psychoanalysis or “autocritical” work. She describes it as follows:

Unlike most people who, when recounting their life stories, fabricate countless falsehoods and present themselves as virtuous and noble, I have made no attempt in writing this book except in the direction of truth... My disputes with my husband are like any other marital disputes... but my difference from others is this: first, I took the step of writing these confessions for the progress and refinement of my own soul; second, I wrote and published the account of my life to awaken the public and help solve family problems.⁵

¹She was born to Muhammad Bāqir I’tizādī, also known as Afkhām al-Saltanah. Her mother’s name was Aqdas al-Muluk Amīr Ya’qūbī. Uvays, Ilāhah and Pamī ‘ān were her siblings. Also, in the endnotes added to the document referenced in Āyat-Allāh al-‘uzmā Sayyid Muhammad Hādī Milānī bih ravāyat-i asnād-i Sāvāk, the name and birth year of Malakah I’tizādī are mentioned as follows: “Malakah I’tizādī (Malak Afzālī), daughter of Muhammad Bāqir, born in 1306/1928.” See, Āyat-Allāh al-‘uzmā Sayyid Muhammad Hādī Milānī bih ravāyat-i asnād-i Sāvāk [Āyatullāh al-‘Uzmā Sayyid Muhammad Hādī Milānī as narrated by the SAVAK documents] (Tehran: Markaz-i Barrasī-yi Asnād-i Tārikhī-yi Vazārat-i Ittilā‘āt, 1380/2001), 1:271.

²See, Abbas Amanat, “E’TEZAD-AL-SALTANA, ‘ALĪQOLĪ MĪRZĀ,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. 8 (1998), 669–672; available online at <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/etezad-al-saltana>

³Afsaneh Najmabadi et al., eds., *Women’s Autobiographies in Contemporary Iran* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1990).

⁴For example, see Mustafā La’l Shātīrī and Hādī Vakīlī, “Naqsh-i rūspiyān-i Shahr-i Naw dar kūditā-yi 28 Murdād 1332” [The role of the prostitutes of Shahr-i Naw in the coup of August 19, 1953], *Ganjīnah-i Asnād* 26, no. 1 (1395/2016 Spring): 60–81. The mention of I’tizādī’s role in the coup can also be found in other sources, including Ja’far Mahdīnī ‘ā, *Zindigī-yi siyāsī-yi sipahbud Zāhidī* [Political life of general Zāhidī] (Tehran: Pānūs, 1375/1996); Kūrush

Za'im, Jibhah- 'imillī-yi Irān: Az paydāyish tā kūditā-yi 28 Murdād [The National Front of Iran: From its emergence to the coup of August 19, 1953] (Tehran: Irān'mihr, 1378/1999); and Husayn Fardūst, Zuhūr va suqūt-i saltanat-i Pahlavī [The rise and fall of the Pahlavi monarchy] (Tehran: Mu'assasah-'i Ittilā'āt, 1369/1990).

⁵Malakah I'tizādī, I'tirāfāt-i man (n.p., 1335/1956), 154.

⁶I'tizādī, I'tirāfāt-i man, 16.

⁷I'tizādī, I'tirāfāt-i man, 31.

⁸I'tizādī, I'tirāfāt-i man, 126.

This book chronicles key moments in I'tizādī's life, including the death of her mother, her departure from her father's home, her first marriage at the age of 14 to a 30-year-old man, her wedding night, divorce, the loss of custody of her child, her second marriage, the deaths of two children from her second marriage, her return to Iran, and her critiques of Dr. Mossadegh. The book concludes with confessions about her sexual relationships and her reflections on "lustful men."

In this autobiography, I'tizādī describes her first marriage: "Poor little 14-year-old girl, studying in the ninth grade of high school, wearing an expensive wedding dress, and the only pleasure she derived from that moment was that, for the first time in her life, she was allowed to wear makeup."⁶ Her first marriage soon ended in divorce. However, after the divorce, she discovered she was pregnant and was forced to sign a contract stipulating that "after I gave birth, without seeing my child, they would hand her over to her father."⁷ According to her account, when I'tizādī awoke from the anesthesia after childbirth, the newborn was no longer by her side. Two decades later, while writing this autobiography, she had still not been able to see her first child. The book dedicates numerous pages to I'tizādī's pleas to legal authorities and the people of Iran to assist her in reconnecting with her daughter, whose name and family name she only knows as "Firishtah Najmī."

After her divorce, I'tizādī traveled to the United States. During the journey, aboard a ship, she experienced her first kiss driven by love and met another Iranian man, whom she married. Together, they moved to Syracuse, where I'tizādī studied Fashion and Design at the university. After completing her studies in Syracuse, she relocated to California and began an internship as a costume designer for MGM (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer) in Hollywood. She reflects, "Here, I combined my fashion and design knowledge with the traditional and local clothing styles of Iran, and as a result, I achieved many significant innovations in my work."⁸ After completing her specialized studies at MGM in six



months, she returned to Syracuse. Soon after, due to her husband's job, they moved to New York, where she faced increasing financial difficulties. To support herself, she took on a series of jobs: first as a waitress in a café, then as a sanitation and animal care worker at a zoo, followed by a florist, and eventually becoming a secretary for a university professor researching the East. She does not disclose the professor's name. Finally, she secured a position at a tailoring company called Carl Feingold, where she worked her way up through the ranks.

⁹Malakah I'tizādī, *Bīnavā va man* (Tehran: 'Alī Ja'farī, n.d.), 7.

I'tizādī had three children from her second marriage, two of whom died in infancy. After eight years in the United States, she returned to Iran and separated from her second husband. Her daughter, like her first daughter from her previous marriage, remained with her father under the prevailing custody laws. Upon her return to Iran, despite her aristocratic background, I'tizādī distanced herself from the culture of the nobility and formed both professional and personal connections with the disadvantaged and lower classes, though this should not be mistaken for an inclination toward leftist ideologies. As will be discussed later, I'tizādī was a staunch opponent of Marxism.

The book *Bīnavā va man* is a narrative shaped by I'tizādī's personal and real experiences of aristocratic life in Iran during that time. In describing her experiences, she reflects on her personal journey away from aristocratic life: "For some time, I had distanced myself from aristocratic life—I was living with workers. I had taken up publishing books and magazines. Naturally, I spent my days and nights at the printing house, constantly interacting with the workers."⁹ I'tizādī opens *Bīnavā va man* by criticizing the Iranian capitalists (sg., *sarmāyah-dār*) of her era: "In civilized countries, capitalists try to contribute to the productive system of their homeland by expanding their capital. But alas, in the land of Darius, the capitalists strive to convert their capital into foreign currencies (and, as the saying goes, live off the country's wealth). If there is no longer any opportunity for debauchery and pleasure in Iran, they travel to Monte Carlo and

¹⁰I'tizādī, *Bīnavā va man*, 9.

¹¹I'tizādī, *Bīnavā va man*, 20.

¹²I'tizādī, *Bīnavā va man*, 169.

¹³I'tizādī, *I'tirāfāt-i man*, 167.

Venice and pay a visit to the Parisian beauties.”¹⁰ *Bīnavā va man* also narrates the relationship between Parvīn and an aristocrat named Hassan, illustrating his debauchery: “Beautiful, half-naked women surrounded Hassan. One was pulling his hand, another his tie, and eventually, their interaction turned into a struggle. Mr. Hassan had won a 140,000-toman game, and the ladies were asking him for a share of the winnings. Witnessing this scene once again reminded me of Parvīn... Parvīn sat in a comfortable chair, her eyes red with anger, as though they would pop out of their sockets.”¹¹

At the end of *Bīnavā va man*, I'tizādī reflects on the reasons behind her gravitation toward the underprivileged class and the nature of her relationship with them:

Today, I take pride in having honest and sincere friends like Zahrā the Blind, orphans, and the destitute, who have honored me with their friendship. I am proud that I became their leader, and this awakened me from the slumber of aristocracy and cleansed my inner self with their cries. I lived with them even as vile newspapers began to insult me and called me “Queen of the Poor.” Those godless fools didn't realize that they were bestowing an honor upon me, and I even adopted the pen name “Queen of the Destitute” in my poems. The poor and the destitute became the source of inspiration for my writings and poetry. They were my partners and teachers in understanding the essence of sorrow.¹²

I'tizādī's return to Iran coincided with the premiership of Dr. Mossadegh (1330–1331/1952–1953). Politically, I'tizādī was a monarchist and a staunch opponent of communist ideology. She was also a vocal critic of Mossadegh. In *I'tirāfāt-i man*, I'tizādī writes that she considered communism “contrary to the principles of nationality and religion, and the deathbed of freedom and democracy.” Consequently, when members of the Tudeh Party approached her, she kept her distance from them.¹³ During this period, I'tizādī leveraged the relationships she had estab-



lished with the poor to further her political goals, even nurturing the ambition to found her own party, the Zū al-Faqār Party, which aimed “to counter the insecurity and thuggery of those who, under the pretense of supporting Dr. Mossadegh, constantly brought bloodshed to half the city, unfortunately with the support of the police forces of that time.”¹⁴ The Zū al-Faqār Party was pro-monarchy and believed that “only the monarchy of Iran can bring freedom and salvation to Iranian women.”

I‘tizādī’s monarchist sentiments are also evident in her poetry. Gul’hā-yi man, a family poetry collection, includes a final section dedicated to I‘tizādī’s own poems. One example of her royalist views can be seen in the poem “Parcham-i razm” (The battle flag):

بکف پرچم رزم را برگرفتم

بر تیر دشمن سرو برگرفتم

برافراشتم پرچم شه پرستی

در این ره بسی یار و یاور گرفتم

شعارم همیشه «خدا، شاه، میهن»

که درسی خوش است اینکه من برگرفتم¹⁵

I raised the battle flag in my hand,
And stood tall before the enemy’s spear,
I raised the flag of devotion to the king,
Along this path, I found many friends and allies,
My motto is always God, the Shah, the homeland,
For it is a pleasant lesson I have learned.

Another example is found in the following verse from the poem “Pāyanda bād pūr-i Rizā Shāh Pahlavī” (“Long live the son of Reza Shah Pahlavi!”).

¹⁴I‘tizādī, I‘tirāfāt-i man, 168.

¹⁵Malakah I‘tizādī, Gul’hā-yi man (Tehran: ‘Alī Ja‘farī, n.d.), 70.

¹⁶I'tizādī, Gul'hā-yi man, 74.

¹⁷I'tizādī, I'tirāfāt-i man, 191–2.

ما را دوام دولت تو بهترین دعا

ما را «خدا و میهن و شه» بهترین شعار¹⁶

For us, the longevity of your reign is the best prayer

For us, “God, the homeland, and the Shah” is the best slogan.

Newspaper reports provide several accounts of clashes between I'tizādī and her party, the Zū al-Faqār Party, and government forces during the Mossadegh era. According to a report by *Ittilā'āt* newspaper (Farvardīn 18, 1332/April 7, 1953), on the night of Farvardīn 17/April 6 of that year, members of the Zū al-Faqār Party, driving a maroon convertible car with a picture of the Shah on the front, staged a pro-Shah demonstration on Istanbul Street. The demonstration continued late into the night. Officers arrested I'tizādī and Husayn 'Alī Dawlatshāhī, the party's leaders. I'tizādī subsequently went on a hunger strike in prison (*Ittilā'āt*, Farvardīn 20, 1331/April 9, 1953). In I'tirāfāt-i man, I'tizādī mentions that her experience of poverty during the time she spent in the United States, despite her Qajar lineage, gave her the strength to endure the hunger strike.

In I'tirāfāt-i man, I'tizādī details her reasons for criticizing Mossadegh, going beyond her religious beliefs and nationalist, monarchist views. She considered Mossadegh as a source of internal divisions, disapproved of his economic policies, and believed his dismissal of government officials was a grave mistake. She was particularly critical of Mossadegh's “conciliatory approach towards the Tudeh Party.” Summarizing her analysis, I'tizādī asserts: “These actions of Dr. Mossadegh were not merely a series of mistakes; they were, in truth, unforgivable offenses that ultimately led to his imprisonment in later years and his legal condemnation.”¹⁷

While many details of I'tizādī's life up to 1332/1953 are



well-documented, largely due to I'tirāfāt-i man, her personal and political life following the coup that overthrew Mossadegh remains shrouded in mystery. It is known that after Murdād 28, 1332/August 19, 1953, she married for the third time, but this marriage was short-lived. A few documents among SAVAK's files provide some general details about this later period. According to the records on file in SAVAK's individual dossier, I'tizādī volunteered for candidacy in the National Assembly (Majlis) during the 22nd (1346/1967) and 24th (1354/1975) terms. In 1346/1967, she continued to identify herself as the leader of the Zū al-Faqār Party, stating: "At a time when people supported the Tudeh Party, I declared 'Long Live the Shah' in the name of the Zū al-Faqār Party." Additionally, on Urdībihisht 20, 1354/May 10, 1975, she filled out a membership form for the Rastākhīz Party, listing her occupation as a writer.¹⁸

I'tizādī's name also appears in a document concerning a meeting held at former Prime Minister 'Alī Amīnī's residence on Murdād 18, 1346/August 9, 1967. The meeting, attended by fifteen individuals, including employees from the Registry Office and the Telephone Company, as well as other government officials, focused on the controversies surrounding the 22nd National Assembly elections. During the discussion, 'Alī Amīnī defended I'tizādī, "'Alī Amīnī said: 'Malakah I'tizādī had the real vote. As far as I know, she had 40,000 votes.' Sarmast said: 'Yes, she gifted 3,000 of her votes to Professor 'Adl.'¹⁹ Nādirī²⁰ said: 'Malakah I'tizādī has kept the name of the government alive in the southern part of the city. She helps people with whatever they need and truly serves the people.'²¹

Less than two weeks later, during another meeting on Shahrīvar 1, 1346/August 23, 1967, 'Alī Amīnī once again mentioned I'tizādī. In this meeting, attended by Amīnī and several employees from the Treasury and the Ministry of Justice, Amīnī made the following remark: "Two qualities are highly beneficial among the people. One is gratitude toward those who serve them, and the other is national courage. I remember the day I

¹⁸See, Āyatullāh al-'Uzmā, 1:271.

¹⁹Yahyā 'Adl (1287–1381/1908–2003), Iranian surgeon.

²⁰Per the Savak report, this certain Nādirī was working in the Telephone company at the time.

²¹See, 'Alī Amīnī bih ravāyat-i asnād-i Sāvāk ['Alī Amīnī as narrated by SAVAK documents] (Tehran: Markaz-i Barrisī-yi Asnād-i Tārikhī-yi Vazārat-i Ittilā'āt, 1379/2000), 1:233.

²²Hādī Ashtarī held several positions during his life, including the governor of Gilan and was an advisor to 'Alī Amīnī during his prime ministry.

²³See, 'Alī Amīnī, 1:328. On the night before this meeting, on Murdād 31, 1346/August 22, 1967, Malakah I'tizādī had gone to Amīnī's residence to express her dissatisfaction with the election results. According to SAVAK documents, Amīnī stated: "Regarding the parliamentary elections, I hear things about the elections every day that are truly scandalous, and they've done things that make the disbanded parliament seem virtuous by comparison. It seems this situation cannot last, and even His Majesty is upset about it, but due to the formation of the Constituent Assembly, they don't want to declare the elections invalid and flawed. Instead, they are looking for another solution to invalidate it." See, Manīzhah Sadrī, *Tīmūr Bakhtiyār bih ravāyat-i asnād* [Tīmūr Bakhtiyār as narrated by SAVAK documents], 3 volumes (Document no. 16445/20/7/m, Tehran: Markaz-i Asnād-i Inqilāb-i Islāmī, 1393/2014).

²⁴See, "California, Death Index, 1940-1997," database, FamilySearch (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:VPM1-6WK>), Malakeh Etezadi, April 6, 1989, Department of Public Health Services, Sacramento, accessed February 13, 2025.

²⁵I'tizādī, *Gul'hā-yi man*, 68.

was sitting behind the desk of the Ministry of Finance when Mrs. Malakah I'tizādī came to request her sugar and flour quota for a charity she ran in the southern part of the city. I refused her request. She approached my desk and said, 'The people of Iran have placed you behind this desk, and you must meet the needs of the Iranian people.' I said, 'Madam, the newspapers have written that Churchill appointed 'Alī Amīnī as a minister.' Mrs. I'tizādī replied, 'We recognize you as the Minister of Finance of Iran, and we will claim our rights from you.' She did not leave the Ministry of Finance until she had secured what she wanted. Later, Hādī Ashtarī,²² the former minister, said, 'Malakah I'tizādī did a great deal for the country's independence. The country is indebted to her, and even at a young age, she unsettled the position of Mussadiq al-Saltanah.'"²³

Regrettably, further information about I'tizādī's life after the 1340s/1960s remains elusive. However, according to the Los Angeles County death records, she passed away there on Urdībihisht 27, 1368/May 17, 1989.²⁴

Recognition and Influence of I'tizādī's Poetry

I'tizādī was born into a family where poetry was highly valued, not only by the men but also by several of her female relatives. *Gul'hā-yi man* includes not only I'tizādī's own poems but also those of her mother, Aqdas al-Muluk Amīr Yā'qūbī, and her aunt, Zīnat Malak I'tizādī. Malakah I'tizādī writes about how her passion for poetry and literature developed, explaining that it was nurtured from her cradle, as her parents often spoke to each other through the delicate expression of poetry. Over time, she memorized various poems, and later, during her higher education, she expanded her knowledge of poetry, with her father guiding her as she joined the circle of poets.²⁵

Critical evaluation of Malakah I'tizādī's poetry remains scarce, with the only notable acknowledgment coming from Husayn Pizhmān Bakhtiyārī (1279–1353/1900–1974), a prominent



poet and literary scholar. In his introduction to *Gul'hā-yi man*, Pizhmān remarks that the collection reflects “her love and affection for the temple of a woman’s soul, which is the warm center of the family.”²⁶ While he briefly commends I‘tizādī as “a poet with taste and eloquence” (*shā‘irī bā zawq va sukhan-shinās*), he stops short of offering a detailed critique of her literary style or thematic innovations. Instead, Pizhmān focuses on the collection’s familial significance, describing it as a rare glimpse into a poetic dialogue among two generations—the daughter, and her mother, and aunt. This emphasis on relational and cultural contexts suggests a deliberate choice to frame I‘tizādī’s work within its domestic and interpersonal dimensions, rather than situating it within the broader literary canon.

I‘tizādī’s thematic focus on family, personal relationships, and the feminine psyche aligns her work with broader literary currents exploring the intimate and social dimensions of human experience. However, framing her poetry through a domestic lens may have limited its integration into the dominant literary movements of her time, which often prioritized public, political, or nationalistic themes.

Pizhmān’s avoidance of offering a critique of the collection’s literary merits raises questions about the recognition and positioning of I‘tizādī’s poetry in her contemporary literary landscape. Could this omission reflect a broader reluctance to critically engage with women’s writing? Furthermore, the absence of other critical assessments, coupled with the overshadowing of I‘tizādī’s literary career by her political life, highlights a profound neglect of her contributions to literature. This oversight has, in practice, marginalized I‘tizādī’s role in shaping the Persian literary tradition, limiting her contributions to the broader narrative of Iranian literature.

The familial and relational emphasis in her work also suggests that I‘tizādī’s poetry served as a bridge between private and public literary expression, documenting a uniquely gendered

²⁶Husayn Pizhmān Bakhtiyārī, “Muqaddamah” [Introduction], in *Gul'hā-yi man*, by Malakah I‘tizādī, *dāl-zi* [4–7] (Tehran: ‘Alī Ja‘farī, n.d.), vāv [6].

²⁷Malakah I'tizādī, *Bānū-yi Īrān* [The lady of Iran] (Tehran: Bānk-i Millī-yi Īrān Press, 1335/1956).

²⁸I'tizādī, *Bānū-yi Īrān*, 1.

perspective within Persian poetry. By centering the voices and experiences of women, her work offers a valuable counterpoint to the male-dominated narratives of the time and enriches our understanding of the literary and cultural dynamics of her era. In this way, I'tizādī's poetry not only illuminates the role of women in Persian literary tradition but also challenges the boundaries of what was considered worthy of critical engagement, inviting us to reconsider the intersections of gender, genre, and recognition in Persian literature.

Women's Issues in I'tizādī's Writings

I'tizādī's support for and defense of the policies of the Pahlavi era, particularly concerning women's issues, is evident in her prose and poetry. *Bānū-yi Īrān* (first published in 1335/1956), a trilingual work (in Persian, English, and French), focuses on the "progress of Iranian women," which, according to I'tizādī, was remarkable across various fields during that era.²⁷ However, in the English and French texts, she excludes one domain from this progress: politics. In contrast, the Persian translation is more measured, with this omission not being explicitly stated. I'tizādī explains that she wrote this work in response to questions from those she encountered during her time in the United States, who were curious about the status of Iranian women. She writes, "Although little time has passed since women's liberation in Iran, and illegal male domination over the principles of women's lives still prevails, and though it has been a short while since Iranian women gained the right to read and write (which is a fundamental human right), it is evident that, within this brief period, Iranian women have managed to achieve the highest levels of education."²⁸

This commitment to addressing women's issues is a recurring theme in I'tizādī's poetry, where she reflects on the social and legal developments affecting women in Iranian society during her time. Through her verse, she continues a legacy of activism established by her aunt, Zīnat al-Mulk I'tizādī, whose poetry



addressed pivotal social events of the Constitutional Movement and boldly expressed female desire. Malakah I'tizādī's work builds upon this foundation, reflecting both the evolving role of women and the ongoing struggles for gender equality. Her poetry weaves the personal with the political, offering not just a window into her individual perspective but also a voice for collective aspirations toward social change.

This dual function of I'tizādī's poetry is perhaps best exemplified in a piece she contributed to *Majallah-'i Bānuvān-i Īrān* (Journal for Iranian Women) in 1335/1956. Here, her work serves both as an artistic expression and as a commentary on the shifting dynamics of women's roles in Iranian society, reinforcing her role as both a chronicler and a participant in the broader discourse on women's rights.

مقام زن

ای بیخبر ز ارزش و قدر و مقام زن
از چرخ هم گذشت دگر احترام زن
باشد روا مقام زن از چرخ بگذرد
زیرا رسیده است زمان قیام زن
بگذشت وقت خانه نشینی بانوان
اکنون فتاده قرعه نهضت بنام زن
روز خمود و وقت عقب ماندگی گذشت
دیگر رسیده نوبت نشر مرام زن
گر شیر شریزه گشت سرانجام رام مرد
مرد تمام آنکه سرانجام رام زن

نشنیده‌ای ز مدعیان گفته‌ی دقیق
خود بشنو از زبان من اینک پیام زن
دیروز حرف زن اگر از احتیاط بود
امروز شد وکالت مجلس کلام زن
زن دکترا شده است و هنرمند و اوستاد
بنگر رسیده تا به کجا اهتمام زن
زن مادر است و تربیت مرد را ضمیم
ضمیم می‌شود نظام جهان از نظام زن²⁹

The Status of Woman

O, you who are unaware of the worth, dignity, and status of woman,
Her respect now soars higher than the heavens themselves.
It is only right that her status should surpass the very skies,
For the time of woman's rise is upon us.

Gone is the age when women were bound to their homes,
Now, the mantle of revolution rests upon her shoulders.
The days of lethargy and backwardness are behind,
Now dawns the hour to spread woman's voice, her cause.

If the fierce lion is ultimately subdued by man,
Man is truly whole only when, in turn, he is tamed by woman.
You have yet to hear the exact words of the claimants,
So listen now, from my lips, the message of woman.

If yesterday, a woman's voice was cautious,
Today, her speech has become the voice of advocacy in the parliament.



Woman has become a doctor, an artist, a teacher—
See how far her reach extends!

Woman is a mother who ensure man's nurture,
The world's order is upheld by the order of woman.
1334/1956

In both her poetry and prose, I'tizādī critiques the custody laws of her time, which dictated that custody of boys at the age of three, and girls at the age of seven would be granted to the father. She highlights the hardship of women who, after early marriages to fickle men, bear children and are later separated from them at a young age by such laws. She depicts these women's lives, marked by suffering and loss, as bitter and devastating. In one such example, from a poem in the form of masnavī (rhymed couplets), she poignantly conveys the pain of maternal separation:

مادر و فرزند

مادر در چنگ مراسم اسیر

فصل جوانی شده فرتوت و پیر

آنکه دو کودک را آورده بار

بر اثر رنج خود و مزد کار

حق حضانت به غمش درنشانند

از خود و فرزندش تهی دست ماند

خود را در خدمت فرزند کاست

این نه عدالت که سراسر بلاست

وای بر این رسم بدانندیششان

خوب بود این ره بد پیششان

وای بر این رسم دل آزارشان

گرچه همین رسم بود کارشان

[...]

راه به جایی نه که داد آورد

یا که دگر راه به جائی برد

در غم فرزند جگرگوشه اش

اشک بصر بود همی توشه اش³⁰

Mother and the Child

The mother, captive in the grip of traditions,
Her youthful season has turned withered and old.
She who bore two children
Through her own toil and the reward of her labor,
The right of custody has added to her sorrow,
Leaving her empty-handed, from both herself and her child.
She diminished herself in the service of her child,
This is not justice but an affliction entirely.
Woe to this heart-wrenching custom of theirs,
Though this custom was always their way.
[...]

There is no path to justice
Nor any other way to reach anywhere.
In the sorrow of her dear child,
Her only provision was the tears in her eyes.

I'tizādī has also praised certain women's clubs and institutions of her time, notably the Women's Center (Kānūn-i Bānuvān),



in her poetry. She commended Reza Shah for his role in its establishment and lauded Sadīqah Dawlatābādī, pioneer women right's activist, for her role in its expansion.³¹

³¹I'tizādī, Gul'hā-yi man, 93–94.

For I'tizādī, one of the central areas of protest is legal inequality, particularly in relation to women's rights. She advocates for social protest as a means for women to challenge and rectify these inequities. Given her emphasis on the role of the Court and the Pahlavi dynasty in addressing women's issues, it can be argued that she adopts a state-centered approach to resolving women's concerns. However, she also recognizes the importance of grassroots activism, hoping that state initiatives will be supported and strengthened by a widespread women's movement. In this way, I'tizādī envisions a collaborative effort between governmental reforms and grassroots mobilization, where legal reforms are not only enacted but also sustained through the active participation and advocacy of women themselves. As she writes in one of her poems:

زن

چرا آخر زن ناکام و ناشاد

دچار غم گرفتار بلایاست

سراسر این تجاوزهای بی جا

ز این وضع بد و قانون بی جاست

به پا خیز ای زن افسرده خاطر

که دیگر نوبت ما، نهضت ماست

به پا خیز و ز پا زنجیر برگیر

که این نهضت به اقبال تو برپاست³²

Woman

Why, after all, is the woman unfulfilled and forlorn,
Stricken with sorrow, ensnared by misfortunes?
All of these unjust violations,
Are the result of this dire state and unjust laws.
Rise, O woman, weary of heart,
For now it's our turn, our movement.
Rise, cast off the chains that bind your feet,
This movement flourishes on the account of your good fortune!

Malakah I'tizādī's support for Reza Shah's unveiling initiative stemmed from her belief that state-led reforms were essential to improving women's conditions. At the same time, she advocated for the growth of a mass women's movement to reinforce these changes. The unveiling, known as *Kashf-i Hijāb*, was part of Reza Shah's modernization policies, implemented in on Day 17, 1314/ January 6, 1936. This decree aimed to prohibit women from wearing the veil (hijab or chador) in public, intending to encourage their active participation in public life by eliminating what the government viewed as symbols of backwardness and oppression. I'tizādī became a vocal supporter of the unveiling law, seeing it as a major step toward women's liberation and the dismantling of outdated customs, which, in her view, had no true religious basis and were harmful to society. In her poetry, she celebrated the law as a challenge to ignorance and oppression, believing that forced veiling restricted women and their potential. For her, unveiling symbolized more than just the removal of a physical garment; it represented a broader push for social progress, advocating for women's rights, freedom, and equality in public life. The following poem reflects I'tizādī's response to the unveiling initiative, illustrating her views on the cultural and social significance of the law:



هفده دی

هفده دی شد و رسم کهنی داد بیاد
بر سر جهل و ریا ضربت مستحکم زد
کهنه رسمی که نه فرمان خدا بود و نه دین
بلکه در دین خدا صد گره محکم زد

[...]

آنقدر جور و زیان بود در این گونه حجاب
که بشرحش نتوان لب بگشود و دم زد
چه زیان است زنی را که رخ خود بگشود
در حریم دل خود راه بنامحرم زد
شرم و حجب است حجاب زن و می گویم فاش
که بر این قول رقم رای بنی آدم زد
زن آزاده آزاد/منش میداند
کاین روش تا بچه اندازه جهان بر هم زد
هرکه زشتی بزنی روی نپوشیده بگفت
تهمتی بود که بر مرد و زن عالم زد
کاش نابود شود رسم و ره جهل و ریا
که پی عقل زد و راه دل خرم زد³³

³⁴I'tizādī, I'tirāfāt-i man, 208.

³⁵In the first and second editions of this work, there was no photo of the singer Mahvash. However, one was added in later editions, which lead some readers to mistakenly believe that the book's author was the same Mahvash. In reality, the author was Mahvash Rizā'īfard, a different individual from the singer Mahvash, whose real name was Masūmah 'Azīz Borūjirdī. For further reading, refer to: "Rāz-i Kāmyābī Jinsī," Bashgah Adabiyat. accessed March 24, 2025, <https://www.bashgaheadabiyat.com/product/raze-kamyabiye-jensi/>

17th of Day

The 17th of Day arrived, and an ancient tradition was cast away,
A firm blow was struck against ignorance and hypocrisy.
An old custom that was neither the command of God nor religion,
But instead tied a hundred strong knots in the religion of God.
There was so much oppression and harm in such veiling,
That one could not begin to describe it, nor utter a word.
What harm is there in a woman unveiling her face,
And opening the path of her heart to one who is not kin?
Modesty and dignity are a woman's true veil, and I declare openly
That this statement bears the seal of humankind's reason.
The free woman, with a free spirit, knows
To what extent this custom has disrupted the world.
Anyone who claimed ugliness lies in an unveiled woman
Spoke a slander against both men and women of the world.
If only the ways of ignorance and hypocrisy were destroyed,
For they struck against reason and blocked the path to a joyous heart.

Expression of Female Desire

Writing about female desire stands as one of the defining and pioneering aspects of I'tizādī's works. She boldly asserts, "I am the first Iranian woman to confess about women's sexual relations and my own sexual relations with my husbands."³⁴ This claim is worthy of serious consideration. The famous work with this theme, Rāz-i kāmyābī-yi jinsī (The secret to sexual happiness) was published a year after I'tizādī's I'tirāfāt-i man in 1336/1957.³⁵ In I'tirāfāt-i man, I'tizādī candidly reveals her disappointments in marriage, exposing how societal norms and her husbands' inability to meet her emotional and physical needs suppressed her desires and caused emotional distress. This theme of suppressed female longing is also explored in her poetry, as seen in "Havas" (Desire):



هوس

من عاشقم هوای غم و درد میکنم

خود را مدام مهرهٔ این نرد میکنم

گرم محبتم من و آغوش گرم او

یاد آیدم، که این هوس سرد میکنم

[...]

من آن لطیف طبع غزالم که صید من

گر شیر شرز نیست منش طرد میکنم

[...]

آئینه‌ام مقابل روی حریف خویش

من با وی آنچه را که هم او کرد میکنم

[...]

پنهان چرا بگویم و پوشیده تا به کی

زن گشته‌ام هوس مرد میکنم³⁶

Desire

I am in love, longing for grief and pain,
Constantly playing the pieces of this game.
I'm warmed by love, by the warmth of his embrace,
But the memory of this desire turns cold in my face.
I am that gentle-hearted gazelle whose prey,
If not a fierce lion, I turn away.
I am the mirror facing my rival's gaze,

³⁷Malakah I'tizādī, *Nāmah'hā'ī kih hargiz bih ū narisīd* (Tehran: Tābān, n.d.), 7.

I do to him what he does always to me.
Why should I keep it hidden, and for how long?
I was born a woman, and I desire men.

Marriage and intimate relationships are also central themes in I'tizādī's novella *Nāmah'hā'ī kih hargiz bih ū narisīd*. This fictional work is a collection of letters from a woman who, in moments of anger, writes about her marital life and emotions to her husband. "But for some psychological reason, she never sent the letters she wrote in anger to her husband, until, by chance, her husband read the last letter and shot her."³⁷ This tragic ending highlights the dangers of writing about female desire and passion during that era and the courage it took to be a trailblazer in this realm.

Conclusion

While this article does not claim to provide a comprehensive portrait of Malakah I'tizādī, it aims to offer a more nuanced and multifaceted understanding of her life and legacy, challenging the limited and often reductive narratives by which she is remembered. By examining various dimensions of this writer and activist's thoughts—her poetry, autobiographical writings, and political engagements—a fuller picture of her contributions emerges, enabling a more critical and informed engagement with her work and its historical significance.

I'tizādī's legacy is defined by her courage to defy societal conventions and address themes that were often taboo in her time. Her candid exploration of female desire, her critiques of legal inequalities, and her engagement with broader social and political struggles position her as both a chronicler and a trailblazer in the evolving discourse on women's rights in Iran. She challenged societal norms that suppressed women's emotional and sexual needs, offering a rare and deeply personal perspective on the complexities of marriage and societal expectations. This dual focus on public legal reform and private, personal libera-



tion gives her work profound depth. Her boldness in addressing female sexuality and desire not only challenged enduring patriarchal norms but also enriched Persian literature with a voice that was both intensely personal and politically resonant. I'tizādī's writings captured the lived experiences of women in her time and actively contributed to shaping a vision for gender equality and social reform. By bridging the private and public spheres, I'tizādī demonstrated how personal narratives could serve as powerful tools for broader societal critique and transformation.

The implications of I'tizādī's work extend far beyond her immediate context. Her autobiographical writings and poetry provide valuable insights into the intersection of gender, class, and politics in mid-20th century Iran, offering a lens through which to examine the complex dynamics of modernization, state-led reforms, and grassroots activism. Her poetry does not shy away from political commentary, particularly in her support for Reza Shah's unveiling decree, which she viewed as a symbol of liberation from outdated traditions. While her advocacy for state-led reforms aligns her with the modernizing ethos of the Pahlavi era, a closer reading of her poetry reveals a tension between reliance on state reforms and the deep-rooted cultural changes needed to address the emotional and social complexities faced by women. Rediscovering the roles of diverse forces that addressed women's issues across different periods is essential to understanding the ideological and class roots of these debates.

This article also highlights significant gaps in existing scholarship on I'tizādī, particularly the neglect of her literary contributions in favor of her political activities. Such oversight underscores the need to rediscover and reevaluate figures like I'tizādī, whose multifaceted legacy challenges simplistic categorizations and calls for a more inclusive and critical historiography. Future research could further investigate her influence on contemporary and subsequent literary movements, her interactions with other intellectuals of her time, and her impact on the cultural

³⁸At the end of *Bīnavā va man*, the author lists additional works in progress: *Tārīkh-i mud* (History of fashion), *Shu'arā va man* (Poets and me), *Ū va man* (He and me), *Shahrzād va Firishtah* (Shahrzād and Firishtah), and *Khvāhar-man* (Sister-me). However, there is no evidence these works were ever published, as they are not found in the National Library of Iran or other major libraries inside or outside the country.

memory of women's activism in Iran.

Books by Malakah I'tizādī:

I'tizādī, Malakah. *Gul'hā-yi man* [My flowers]. Tehran: 'Alī Ja'farī, n.d.

I'tizādī, Malakah. *I'tirāfāt-i man* [My confessions]. Tehran: n.p., 1335/1956.

I'tizādī, Malakah. *Bīnavā va man* [The destitute and me]. Tehran: 'Alī Ja'farī, n.d. ³⁸

I'tizādī, Malakah. *Nāmah'hā'ī kih hargiz bih ū narisīd* [Letters that never reached him]. Tehran: Tābān, n.d.

I'tizādī, Malakah. *Bānū-yi Īrān* [The lady of Iran]. Tehran: Bānk-i Millī Īrān, 1335/1956.

