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From Boldness to Restraint: The Waning Audacity in the Poetry of Munīr Tāhā

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Munīr Tāhā: A Bold and Visionary Poet

Persian women's literature simultaneously reflects three key currents: flawless imitation of the established canon of male-dominated Persian literature; unquestioning submission to the imposed norms of a patriarchal literary community; and a bold expression of candor, sincerity, individualism, and fearlessness. These qualities appear in varying degrees in the poetry of Persian-speaking women. Each, in its own way, is powerful enough to signal to the reader that they are encountering a work distinct from what they have previously known and grown accustomed to. This very distinctiveness evokes a sense of wonder, primarily because it breaks the monotony of repeated patterns and offers the opportunity for a creative work to stand out, to be seen more clearly; indeed, to be seen far more vividly.

Among contemporary women poets, this distinctiveness is especially prominent in the work of Munīr Tāhā, a poet whose very first song aired on the national radio in Iran, sparked a sensation within the morally conservative and patriarchal society of the time, instantly propelling her to both fame and public admiration.

For this reason, it is essential to examine the significance, scope, and consequences of audacity in Munīr Tāhā's poetry. It is important to bear in mind that she was not only the first Iranian

female songwriter, but also the first woman to write with such boldness, publishing her work both in print and in conjunction with music. Considering the cultural and social conditions in Iran during the poet's youth, it is clear that many of her verses, which may seem ordinary today, required great courage to write and publish at the time.

About Munīr Tāhā

Munīr Tāhā, an Iranian poet, songwriter, and scholar of Persian and Italian languages and literatures, was born in 1309/1930 into a family deeply immersed in literature, music, and the arts. She completed her undergraduate studies in Persian language and literature at the University of Tehran and later earned a Ph.D. in Italian language and literature from the University of Rome. Upon returning to Iran, she established the Italian Language and Literature Department at the University of Tehran, where she taught for many years. She also served as the head of the Department of Foreign Languages at the same university. Following the closure of Iranian universities after the 1357/1979 Islamic Revolution, Tāhā left Iran for Italy. Two years later, she emigrated to Canada, where she founded and directed the Rūdakī Foundation in Vancouver.[1]

Tāhā also led a prolific academic life, publishing numerous valuable articles in scholarly journals.[2] Her cultural contributions were widely recognized. In 1382/2003, she was awarded a gold-plated replica of Cyrus the Great's Cylinder of Human Rights designed by Nāsir Uvaysī in honor of distinguished Iranian women by the Center for Iranian Studies at Columbia University.[3]

Tāhā was born in Tabriz into a family where literature and music were part of daily life. Her father was a skilled tārplayer and a connoisseur of music. During her childhood, he frequently took her to concerts by the violinist Rūhallāh Khāliqī (1285–1344/1906–1965) at the National Conservatory of Music. Her

[1]This foundation is dedicated to the preservation and promotion of Persian culture, art, language, and literature and to introducing them to both the multicultural Canadian society and the Iranian immigrant community. See Bahrām Girāmī, "Munīr Tāhā, shāʿir, nivīsandah va nakhustīn zan-i tarānah'sarā-yi Īrān" [Munīr Tāhā, poet, writer and the first Iranian woman songwriter], Ārmān 13 (Spring 1399/2020): 12.

[2]See Munīr Tāhā, "Deledda va nigāhi bih rumān-i Cosima" [Deledda and a look at the novel Cosima], Dānishkadah-yi adabiyāt va ʿulūm-i insāni-i dānishgāh-i Tihrān [Department of literature and human sciences, University of Tehran] 99-100, nos. 3-4 (Summer 1358/1979): 293–299; Murtizā Husaynī-Dihkurdī, "Sahm-i zanān dar āfarīnish va pūyāyī-i shiʿr-i Fārsī" [Women's contribution to the creation and vitality of Persian poetry], Rah'āvard 62 (Winter 1381/2002): 44–48; Munīr Tāhā, "Saʿīdī, yār-i khū'giriftah bā yārān-i dānishkadah-yi adabiyāt" [Saʿīdī, a close companion to the friends of the Department of Literature], Īrān'shināsī 7, no. 25 (Spring 1374/1995): 58–86; Munīr Tāhā, "Duktur Khānlarī va shāgirdānash" [Dr. Khānlarī and his students], Īrān'shināsī 10 (Summer 1370/1991): 244–246.

[3]See Bahrām Girāmī, "Munīr Tāhā, shāʿir, nivīsandah va nakhustīn zan-i tarānah'sarā-yi Īrān" [Munīr Tāhā, poet, writer and the first Iranian woman songwriter], Ārmān 13 (Spring 1399/2020): 11.

mother was also musically inclined, familiar with both the tār and the organ, and had studied with Yilinā Avidīsiyān (1299–1379/1910–2000), a ballerina and one of the pioneers of ballet in Iran. Tāhā recalled her mother fondly: "My mother was beautiful and uniquely graceful in the Shālākhū and Lezginkā dances."[4]

Tāhā's mother came from the distinguished Murtazavī family, which included notable figures such as Manūchihr Murtazavī (1308–1389/1929–2010), a professor of Persian language and literature, the president of Āzar'ābādigān University, and author of the landmark book, Maktab-i Hāfiz [The school of Hāfiz].[5] He had great affection for Tāhā and played a key role in steering her toward literature. In several articles and interviews, Tāhā recounts that she initially enrolled as a philosophy major at the University of Tehran. However, a chance meeting with Murtazavī on campus led him to dissuade her from philosophy and instead encourage her to pursue literature.[6]

After earning a B.A. in Persian language and literature from the University of Tehran, Tāhā entered the doctoral program in the same field at the same university. Her dissertation, supervised by the poet, writer, translator, and English literature scholar Lutf ʿAlī Sūratgar (1279–1348/1900–1969), focused on lullabies. However, she was unable to complete it due to a knee fracture that required surgery in Vienna.[7] After two years in Europe, she returned to Iran but soon received an appointment with the Iranian Cultural Institute in Italy. While working there, she enrolled in the University of Rome. Ibrāhīm Pūrdāvūd (1264–1347/1885–1968), an Iranologist, initially encouraged her to study Latin. However, the renowned scholar in Iranian studies, Ihsān Yārshātir (1299–1397/1920–2018), founder of Dānishnāmah-yi Īrān va Islām (Iran and Islam Encyclopedia), Encyclopedia Iranica, and Bungāh-i Tarjumah va Nashr-i Kitāb (The Institute for Translation and Publication), recognized that Latin might not be the best fit and persuaded her to pursue Italian language and literature instead.

[4]See Parvīz Dāvar'panāh, "Munīr Tāhā, shāʿir, nivīsandah, va avvalīn zan-i tarānah'sarā-yi Īrān, va zan-i mushakhas dar tārīkh-i nihzat-i millī va pūyandah-yi rāh-i Musaddiq" [Munīr Tāhā, poet, writer, and the first female songwriter in Īrān, as well as a distinguished woman in the history of the national movement and a follower of Musaddiq], ʿAsr-i naw (Isfand 18, 1387/ March 08, 2008). https://asre-nou.net/php/view.php?objnr=2510

[5]Manūchihr Murtazavī, Maktab-i Hāfiz, yā muqaddamah bar Hāfiz'shinasī [The school of Hāfiz, or an introduction to Hāfiz studies] (Tehran: Tūs, 1344/1965).

[6]See Parvīz Dāvar'panāh, "Munīr Tāhā, shāʿir, nivīsandah, va avvalīn zan-i tarānah'sarā-yi Īrān, va zan-i mushakhas dar tārīkh-i nihzat-i millī va pūyandah-yi rāh-i Musaddiq" [Munīr Tāhā, poet, writer, and the first female songwriter in Īrān, as well as a distinguished woman in the history of the national movement and a follower of Musaddiq], ʿAsr-i naw (Isfand 18, 1387/ March 08, 2008). https://asre-nou.net/php/view.php?objnr=2510; Ilāhah Khushnām, "Az shiʿr va tarānah: Pāy-i suhbat-i Munīr Bazm'ārā" [On poetry and song: A conversation with Munīr Bazm'ārā], (DW Persian service (Tīr 18, 1392/July 7, 2013), https://www.dw.com/fa-ir/از-شعر-و-ترانه-پای-صحبت-منیر-بزم-آرا/a-16937295; Bahrām

Tāhā successfully completed her doctorate in literature and philosophy at the University of Rome. Upon returning to Iran, she faced two years of bureaucratic struggle before securing a faculty position in the Literature Department at the University of Tehran. She went on to establish the Italian Language and Literature program in the Department of Foreign Languages, where she taught and served as its head for a total of thirteen years. She was also appointed director of the entire Foreign Languages Department for a term. One year after the revolution, when universities were shut down, she left Iran permanently.

Songs

Owing to her literary and artistic talents, Munīr Tāhā came to prominence as a songwriter during the 1330s/1950s and 1340s/1960s, producing works that are still regarded among the most distinguished of the period. She is often remembered as "the first Iranian woman songwriter."[8] Her pioneering role, opening a path which could serve as a model for subsequent generations of women poets, highlights the need to examine not only her academic achievements, but also her literary creativity. Her songs form a vital and distinctive part of the broader narrative of Iranian women's literature.

Tāhā's songs are among the most compelling and melodious compositions of the 1330s/1950s and 1340s/1960s. As the late poet, writer, and scholar of literature and music Nādirah Badīʿī (1329–1398/1950–2019) has observed, among all women who wrote songs, Munīr Tāhā can most confidently be regarded as the most outstanding. Although her body of work is not large in quantity, she collaborated with many of the most prominent composers and vocalists—both male and female—of her time and composed lyrics for songs that have proved to be enduring.[9] Moreover, her boldness and frankness in expressing physical desire and romantic longing in her lyrics were unprecedented in the tightly constrained cultural and social environment of mid-20th-century Iran.[10] This rare openness further emphasizes

Girāmī, "Munīr Tāhā, shāʿir, nivīsandah va nakhustīn zan-i tarānah'sarā-yi Īrān" [Munīr Tāhā, poet, writer and the first Iranian woman songwriter], Ārmān 13 (Spring 1399/2020): 6–18; Nādir Majd, "Dīdārī bā Munīr Tāhā" [A meeting with Munīr Tāhā], Ārmān 13 (Spring 1399/2020): 19–20; Murtazā Husaynī-Dihkurdī, "Du tarānah-yi jāvidānī-i Munīr Tāhā" [Two everlasting songs by Munīr Tāhā], Ārmān 13 (Spring 1399/2020): 21–31.

[7]Munīr Tāhā refers to this episode in one of her poems:
"Remember when I broke my foot,
Yet still I followed you wherever you went."
See Munīr Tāhā, Mazdā (Tehran: Ātash'kadah, 1336/1957), 96.

[8]See Parvīz Dāvar'panāh, "Munīr Tāhā, shāʿir, nivīsandah, va avvalīn zan-i tarānah'sarā-yi Īrān, va zan-i mushakhas dar tārīkh-i nihzat-i millī va pūyandah-yi rāh-i Musaddiq" [Munīr Tāhā, poet, writer, and the first female songwriter in Īrān, as well as a distinguished woman in the history of the national movement and a follower of Musaddiq], ʿAsr-i naw (Isfand 18, 1387/ March 08, 2008). https://asre-nou.net/php/view.php?objnr=2510; Bahrām Girāmī, "Munīr Tāhā, shāʿir, nivīsandah va nakhustīn zan-i tarānah'sarā-yi Īrān" [Munīr Tāhā, poet, writer and the first Iranian woman songwriter], Ārmān 13 (Spring 1399/2020): 6–18.

[9]Nādirah Badīʿī, Tārīkh'chah-ī bar adabiyāt-i āhangīn-i Īrān [A short history of Iranian musical literature] (Tehran: Rawshan'fikr, 1354/1975), 154.

the need for comprehensive study of her life and body of work.

Tāhā was two years old when her parents separated. Thereafter, she was raised by her aunt in Tehran, who became her guardian and educator. An enlightened and well-educated woman, her aunt played a pivotal role in nurturing Tāhā's intellectual and artistic development. Her husband, a violinist trained at the School of Sabā who also possessed a resonant and pleasant singing voice, played a significant role in shaping Tāhā's early relationship with music.[11]

At the age of twelve, Tāhā became a student of ʿAlī Tajvīdī (1298–1384/1919–2005), a composer, musician, conductor, violinist, music teacher, and songwriter. From that point on, singing and playing instruments became a central part of her life. She flourished under Tajvīdī's guidance and, before long, began writing lyrics for some of his most celebrated compositions. She wrote her first song at the age of fourteen, set to one of his pieces. Reflecting on this early achievement, Tāhā once recalled:

> At fourteen, I wrote my first song titled "Shab-i Mahtāb" [Moonlit Night] to a melody by ʿAlī Tajvīdī and went to the radio building, then known as Pahlavī Bī'sīm ["wireless"], to perform it in my own voice. At that time, sound recordings were not made, so the song was broadcast only once and remained unknown.[12]

Following "Shab-i mahtāb," Tāhā wrote another song titled "Shahrzād," which was performed by Tajvīdī's orchestra and sung by Husayn Qavāmī (1288–1368/1909–1989). This song is recorded as the first publicly performed piece with lyrics by Tāhā. Subsequently, she composed lyrics for many of Tajvīdī's musical works. Some of these were performed by Husayn Qavāmī,[13] Bahrām Siyar (1304–1387/1925–2008), and Amīnallāh Rashīdī (1304–1403/1925–2024), while others[14] were featured on the acclaimed radio program Gul'hā (Flowers), performed

[10]Munīr Tāhā was remarkably audacious during the early years of her literary career, to the extent that the broadcasting of her first song on the radio sparked considerable controversy and challenges.

[11]A distinctive style and method of teaching music, encompassing three components, radīf (melodic figures), composition, and performance, was developed by Abul'hasan Sabā (1301–1336/1922–1957).

[12]See Bahrām Girāmī, "Munīr Tāhā, shāʿir, nivīsandah va nakhustīn zan-i tarānah'sarā-yi Īrān" [Munīr Tāhā, poet, writer and the first Iranian woman songwriter], Ārmān 13 (Spring 1399/2020): 8.

[13]Husayn Qavāmī was one of the principal vocalists of the Gul'hā program and performed in numerous broadcasts, including "Gul'hā-yi jāvīdān" [Eternal flowers], "Gul'hā-yi rangārang" [Colorful flowers], "Barg-i sabz" [Green leaf], "Shākhah gul" [Flower], and "Gul'hā-yi tāzah" [Fresh flowers].

[14]Some of these songs are published in the final pages of the collection Mazdā, in a chapter titled "Songs sung on the Gul'hā-yi rangārangprogram on Radio Tehran."

by celebrated vocalists such as Ghulām Husayn Banān (1290–1364/1911–1985) —— a member of the Radio Music Council, a professor of singing at the Tehran Music School, and the founder of the Iran Music Association —— and Marziyah (Khadījah Ashraf al-Sādāt Murtizāyī) (1303–1389/1924–2010).[15]

Tāhā's collaboration with Master ʿAlī Tajvīdī continued until 1357/1978, the year before the Islamic Revolution. By that time, Tajvīdī had composed several new works and Tāhā had written lyrics for them. They were preparing to introduce a new vocalist to bring these songs to life, but with the outbreak of the revolution, the project was suspended, and these songs were never performed.

Following her emigration to Canada, Tāhā continued to compose songs in the same lyrical tradition. Notable examples include "Bahār Bahārūn" (Spring of springs) and "Mīgan kih jangah" (They say it's war), both arranged for orchestra by Farīd Farjād (b. 1316/1938) and performed by Shahlā Sarshār (b. 1334/1955). She also wrote "Nāz'gulak" (Delicate flower) for her daughter, which was arranged by Kāzim ʿĀlimī (b. 1333/1954) and performed by Sattār (ʿAbd al-Husayn Sattār'pūr) (b. 1328/1949). Another significant work from her later years is "Hamāsah-yi 'āshiqānah-yi sarzamīn-i man" [Romantic epic of my homeland], composed in 1369/1990. It was performed on two occasions during events organized by the Rūdakī Foundation in Vancouver: once by the Vivaldi Chamber Choir,[16] and again as a solo performance by the vocalist Tālīn Awhāniyān, accompanied on piano by Rāmīn Jamālpūr (1336/1957).[17]

Books of Poetry

Alongside her songs, which, when paired with music, gained an auditory identity and secured a lasting presence in Iranian musical memory, Munīr Tāhā authored numerous poems that appeared in poetry collections or reputable journals and magazines of her time.[18]

[15]Gul'hā was an Iranian music program broadcasted for twenty-three years, from 1335/1956 to 1357/1978, on Iranian National Radio. It comprises approximately 850 hours of introductions and poetry recitations accompanied by singing, with some instrumentals solos included. Gul'hā is widely regarded as one of the finest and most original programs in the history of Iranian radio due to its transformative impact on Iranian music and its profound influence on the public's attitude toward music.

[16]The Vivaldi Chamber Choir is a well-established, non-profit community choir of thirty-five voices that has been dedicated to presenting high-quality choral music for more than thirty years. The group was officially incorporated in 1991 as the "Greater Vancouver Vivaldi Chamber Choir Society" under the BC Society Act.

[17]See Bahrām Girāmī, "Munīr Tāhā, shāʿir, nivīsandah va nakhustīn zan-i tarānah'sarā-yi Īrān" [Munīr Tāhā, poet, writer and the first Iranian woman songwriter], Ārmān 13 (Spring 1399/2020): 12.

[18]Magazines such as Rawshanfikr [Intellectual], Khūshah [Cluster], Haftah'nāmah-yi Bānuvān [Women's Weekly], Ittilāʿāt-i Bānuvān[Women's information].

Tāhā's first poetry collection, Sar'guzasht (Life story), was published in Tehran in 1332/1953. In his introduction to that volume, Zabīhallāh Safā (1290–1378/1911–1999)—a scholar of epic literature, translator, editor, and university professor—remarked:

A few months ago, when I read the poem "Nay" (Reed) by Miss Munīr Tāhā, I was astonished, because her intellectual power, sensitivity of feeling, and elevated themes seemed disproportionate to her youth, life experience, and limited immersion in the Dīvāns (poetry collections) of the great masters. She moves effortlessly across various subjects and expresses pure emotion in her simple language.[19]

Tāhā's second poetry collection, Du'rāhī (Crossroads), was published in Tehran in 1336/1957. Several poems in this volume demonstrate remarkable eloquence and beauty.[20] In the same year, Tāhā's third work, Mazdā, was published in Tehran, with introductions by Ibrāhīm Pūrdāvūd, Lutf ʿAlī Sūratgar, and Zabīhallāh Safā. Pūrdāvūd wrote:

> The writer of this Dīvān, which has the felicitous title Mazdā [Ahūrā Mazdā is the god of goodness in Zoroastrian belief], is a young woman from Tabriz… I have read both Mazdā and Dū′rāhī to assess this Dīvānmore accurately […] I know Munīr Tāhā, the intelligent writer, personally, as she was my student for years in both undergraduate and doctoral literature programs. She consistently stood out among hundreds of male and female students.[21]

Sūratgar added:

> Munīr's poetry exudes a scent reminiscent of the delicate and elevating fragrance of petunia flowers, which is noble, tender, maternal and innocent.[22]

Upon the publication of Mazdā, Rawshanfikr magazine observed:

[19]Munīr Tāhā, Sar'guzasht [Life-story] (Tehran: Self-published, 1332/1953), 3.

[20]Munīr Tāhā, Du'rāhī [Crossroads] (Tehran: Ātash'kadah, 1335/1956).

[21]Munīr Tāhā, Mazdā (Tehran: Ātash'kadah, 1336/1957), 4.

[22]Munīr Tāhā, Mazdā (Tehran: Ātash'kadah, 1336/1957), 4.

> Although Munīr has relatively recently entered the realm of poetry and her work is not yet fully coherent, her sensitive soul and discerning taste have produced fresh and original tableaux that leave a deep impression on the reader. It should not be forgotten that she is still young and has ample time for growth and refinement.[23]

Tāhā's next collection, Dar kūchah'hā, bāzār'hā (In alleys, bazaars), was published in Tehran in 1358/1979.[24] She explained:

This book differs from my earlier works in form, structure, subject, and language. Until now I have composed in ghazal and chahār'pārah.[25] When form and theme change in this volume, there is no sense of obligation or imitation. These changes arise from emotions and events I have experienced. I cannot express these varied and paradoxical impulses in any other form or language.[26]

Tāhā's subsequent volume, Sīnah'rīz (Necklace), was published in Los Angeles in 1364/1985.[27] Later, in 1375/1996, she released Pāʾīz dar parchīn-i bāgh (Autumn on the garden hedge) in Vancouver.[28] These collections show a clear thematic and linguistic shift from her earlier work in Iran.

Tāhā's early published poems were largely influenced by the neo-traditionalist milieu of the 1330s/1950s. This alignment drew the attention of literary figures such as Ibrāhīm Pūrdāvūd, Zabīhallāh Safā, and Lutfʿ Alī Sūratgar, and raised expectations for her development as a leading poetic voice. Nevertheless, her later work gradually diverged from the promise of her early poetry. It not only failed to achieve the expected heights of artistic maturity but also revealed ambivalence between tradition and modernity.

[23]Rawshan′fikr 120 (Ābān 1336/November 1957): 16.

[24]Munīr Tāhā, Dar kūchah'hā, bāzār'hā [In alleys, bazaars] (Tehran: Chāpkhānah-yi Āsimān, 1358/1979).

[25]A poem consisting of several stanzas, each containing four hemistiches. Typically, in each stanza, the second and the fourth lines rhyme.

[26]See Bahrām Girāmī, "Munīr Tāhā, shāʿir, nivīsandah va nakhustīn zan-i tarānah'sarā-yi Īrān" [Munīr Tāhā, poet, writer and the first Iranian woman songwriter], Ārmān 13 (Spring 1399/2020): 10.

[27]Munīr Tāhā, Sīnah'rīz [Necklace] (Los Angeles: Self-published, 1364/1985).

[28]Munīr Tāhā, Pāʾīz dar parchīn-i bāgh [Autumn on the garden hedge] (Vancouver: Self-Published, 1375/1996).

[29]Munīr Tāhā, Du'rāhī [Crossroads] (Tehran: Ātash'kadah, 1335/1956). 65.

[30]Munīr Tāhā, Pāʿīz dar parchīn-i bāgh [Autumn on the garden hedge] (Vancouver: Self-Published, 1375/1996), 35.

The Waning of Audacity in the Poetry of the Most Audacious Woman Poet and Songwriter

Munīr Tāhā's poetry and song lyrics span more than four decades, from 1332/1953 to 1375/1996. It is natural in such a long creative career to observe noticeable shifts in thematic focus. Her early collections abound with romantic passion, physical desire, moral rebellion, and pride in defying traditional norms. In contrast, her later volumes reflect social, patriotic, and maternal themes, along with gentler romantic and nostalgic tones.

A historical survey of Tāhā's poetic themes reveals a clear correlation between changes in her poetic voice and the evolution of her temperament over time. The youthful intensity and passion of her early poems give way to more controlled and serene emotions in her later years. These transformations can be traced in the contrast between early and mature poems.

Early poem fragments express ecstatic abandon:

> After this, being drunk and coquettish and desired,
> Throwing down the hair and dancing in society,
> Showing off and flirting in every alley,
> Pressing my lips to the passionate mouth of the desired.[29]

Later poem fragments show intimacy imbued with restraint:

> I will embrace you with the long ode (qasīdah) of my arms,
> I will sit to watch you in the mirror of my lyric poems (sg. ghazal),
> I will let you drink the red wine of my quatrains (sg. rubāʿī),
> I will scatter the perfume of my couplets (sg. dūʹbaytī) on your bed,
> And I will say "I love you" in my songs.[30]

Despite the maturity of language and distinctive style in her mid-career poems, many of those themes parallel those found

in the works of other poets. What made Tāhā unique was the extraordinary boldness of her early voice, a rebellious, unrestrained soul that dared to articulate desire and defiance within the patriarchal literary climate of mid-century Iran. These early poems exerted deep influence on women poets who followed.

In their early works, including poems and songs widely embraced by the public, Tāhā presents herself as a confident, autonomous woman, keenly aware of her agency. At that time, the literary community had little precedent for such a model: women poets were usually expected to conform to social norms. Tāhā, however, deliberately shattered those norms through her writing. Her artistic upbringing, academic education, social standing, and celebrated beauty all contributed to her self-confidence. As a result, today we have a rich legacy of work by a courageous woman operating within a constricted social environment.

In almost every section of her early collections, Tāhā casts herself as a romantic narrator: independent, audacious, with complete freedom to choose her thoughts, words, and actions. She takes pride in her rebellion and freedom of expression. She writes candidly about intimate and taboo moments:

Why should I feel shame, or bow my head?
I want you and your arms around me.
I want you and the long, endless nights,
You, your embrace, and your honeyed lips.[31]

I returned his kiss and once again
I lost myself in the shelter of his arms.[32]

Two kisses, on two nights, by two souls were taken
And the trace of both still lingers on my lips…[33]

Whatever my heart longs for, I will do
I'm not afraid of tomorrow's disgrace.[34]

[31]Munīr Tāhā, Mazdā (Tehran, Ātash'kadah, 1336/1957), 12.

[32]Munīr Tāhā, Mazdā (Tehran, Ātash'kadah, 1336/1957), 24.

[33]Munīr Tāhā, Mazdā (Tehran, Ātash'kadah, 1336/1957), 89.

[34]Munīr Tāhā, Du'rāhī [Crossroads] (Tehran: Ātash'kadah, 1335/1956), 42.

Lustful thoughts now stir within my mind
Whose path shall I lace with a hidden snare?
In whose mouth shall I pour the wine of lies
To burn his lips with the venom of deceit and pretense?[35]

Yes, yes, it's me, the flirtatious drunk.[36]

We've been with countless dark-eyed ones.[37]

Tāhā's poems often emphasize her defiance of social conventions:

The gaze of one so easily stole my heart,
Another's smile led it astray.
One ruby lip now begs a kiss from mine
A kiss, near midnight, drunk, ruined, and desired.[38]

Tāhā emphasizes her rebellious and unconventional behavior to such an extent that her poetry even takes on a tone of self-reproach. It almost appears as if the narrator willingly invites criticism and blame from others. In response to the judgmental voices, she expresses complaints and reproaches, curses her faultfinders, and ultimately asserts her own pride and defiance against them:

My heart burns from the words of the artless
May the Lord cut the tongues of the slanderers.[39]

They sit on the ground, whispering to each other,
Spreading strange stories like old gossipy women.[40]

Though the artless mock me, I am not afraid
Because I am valued among the true artists.[41]

Munīr, if your heart is wounded by the insults of the vile,
You are pure, do not fear the hostility of the lowly enemy.[42]

[35]Munīr Tāhā, Du'rāhī [Crossroads] (Tehran: Ātash'kadah, 1335/1956), 63.

[36]Munīr Tāhā, Du'rāhī [Crossroads] (Tehran: Ātash'kadah, 1335/1956), 65.

[37]Munīr Tāhā, Du'rāhī [Crossroads] (Tehran: Ātash'kadah, 1335/1956), 71.

[38]Munīr Tāhā, Du'rāhī [Crossroads] (Tehran: Ātash'kadah, 1335/1956), 63.

[39]Munīr Tāhā, Du'rāhī [Crossroads] (Tehran: Ātash'kadah, 1335/1956), 23.

[40]Munīr Tāhā, Du'rāhī [Crossroads] (Tehran: Ātash'kadah, 1335/1956), 25.

[41]Munīr Tāhā, Du'rāhī [Crossroads] (Tehran: Ātash'kadah, 1335/1956), 24.

[42]Munīr Tāhā, Du'rāhī [Crossroads] (Tehran: Ātash'kadah, 1335/1956), 24.

Where are my accusers? I no longer fear them
For I am free and escaped from every cage
This is me, impure and unchaste
Yes, this is me, bound and enslaved by desire.[43]

Tāhā even writes a poem spoken by her reproaching mother, which gives her further opportunity to take pride in her unconventional behavior:

Stop staying up late and wandering at night
Feel shame before me, daughter, and before God
It's past midnight, where have you been? Where?
If you do not feel shame before me, feel shame before your father
I no longer want to see you engaged in writing poetry
I no longer want to see you awake until dawn
I no longer want to see you with others until midnight
I no longer want to see or hear about your misdeeds.[44]

Turning away from the unfaithful beloved, a characteristic feature of the vāsūkht subgenre, holds a prominent place in Tāhā's poetry.[45] In her romantic poems, she rejects the masochistic submission that has become a convention in the behavior of the lovers in Persian literature. Her poems encourage abandoning clichés and conventional literary conventions and to create something new. This innovation is justifiable in her work because it reflects the same rejection of the beloved found in men's vāsūkht poetry. It is striking to see this attitude in the poetry of a woman who is traditionally expected to wait to be accepted and to complain about being abandoned. Tāhā, however, speaks with determination about her negative choice of "not wanting and rejecting":

I'll sell his love, cheap and without price,
The love that once was dearer than all, dearer than life.[46]

A single strand remained upon my heart,

[43]Munīr Tāhā, Du'rāhī [Crossroads] (Tehran: Ātash'kadah, 1335/1956), 64.

[44]Munīr Tāhā, Du'rāhī [Crossroads] (Tehran: Ātash'kadah, 1335/1956), 79.

[45]Vāsūkht is a term in classical literature referring to a poetic subgenre centered on the lover's turning away from and avoidance of the beloved. In this genre, due to the lover's failure to attain the beloved, the poet shifts from niyāz (supplication) to nāz (affectation). Rather than praising the beloved, the poet begins to admonish them, responding to the beloved's disloyalty with reciprocal disloyalty.

[46]Munīr Tāhā, Du'rāhī [Crossroads] (Tehran: Ātash'kadah, 1335/1956), 11.

Left from the thread of your fading love.
Rest easy, I've now cut even that one strand.[47]

How can I trust your promise again?
Didn't you break it a thousand times before?
By God, don't wound my aching heart anymore.
Let me go and find another to deceive.
A thousand girls more worthy than me surround you.
Go and play with the hope of someone better than me.[48]

In her love poems, Tāhā demonstrates a powerful stance toward her emotional counterpart. In fact, in her emotional relationships reflected in her poems, she consistently holds the upper hand:

If you withered me with your unfaithfulness,
I have found fresh life in the faithfulness of others.[49]

By presenting a different approach toward the others, Tāhā completely overturns the tradition of weak supplication and fear of abandonment. Instead, she shows that love relationships, as a form of human relationships, involve reciprocal actions and reactions. The lover is no longer a submissive figure who tolerates all behavior. Whoever strikes a blow must also receive one. "Choosing others" thus becomes an option marked by greater confidence and boldness:

In the end, you saw that I too broke that vow,
And went to make new vows of love with others.[50]

In some instances, Tāhā openly threatens the beloved, asserting her power and right to choose by threatening to begin a romantic relationship with someone else. This reveals the self-confidence of a woman who sees herself as the chooser in love relationships rather than someone waiting to be chosen:

You, who have hidden your face from Munīr,

[47]Munīr Tāhā, Du'rāhī [Crossroads] (Tehran: Ātash'kadah, 1335/1956), 19.

[48]Munīr Tāhā, Du'rāhī [Crossroads] (Tehran: Ātash'kadah, 1335/1956), 30.

[49]Munīr Tāhā, Du'rāhī [Crossroads] (Tehran: Ātash'kadah, 1335/1956), 18.

[50]Munīr Tāhā, Du'rāhī [Crossroads] (Tehran: Ātash'kadah, 1335/1956), 19.

Did you think I wouldn't show mine to someone else?[51]

I'll choose someone else in your place.[52]

Tāhā consistently asserts her authority and control in romantic relationships, often to the point of openly criticizing and chastising her partner. In patriarchal Persian literature, such criticism typically appears in the form of hajv (satire) and historically has been regarded as the exclusive right of male poets. Female poets seldom engaged in such bold satirical expression. In Tāhā's poetry, however, the decline of love follows a familiar arc found in sensitive and emotionally vulnerable poets. When she confronts a lover whose behavior diverges from his initial promise, emotional reactions are expected: criticism, satire, even scathing ridicule:

You were robed in hypocrisy from head to heel
Only the turban (ʿammāmah), the sandals (naʿlayn), and the cloak (ʿabā) were missing.[53]
The pure of heart know well and will one day reveal
Who was truly chaste, and whose hem was soiled.
Whose lap did that lowly old woman grace?
Which dancers stole kisses from whose lips?
Who cast lustful eyes on that child's mother?
In whose gaze stirred waves of deceit and desire?
Go on, go. From head to toe, you're worth nothing.
I had no love, no gaze to waste on someone so low.[54]

Look at his pride, his arrogance, his nature and ways.
See the pomp, the vanity, the empty displays.
He turns wide-eyed students into devoted fans,
With his lessons, his arguments, his polished pretense.
He aims to sit where the masters once stood,
That fraud, godless and lost in deceit.
When someone like you holds the professor's chair,
I spit on that department, and the university it disgraces.[55]

[51]Munīr Tāhā, Du'rāhī [Crossroads] (Tehran: Ātash'kadah, 1335/1956), 8.

[52]Munīr Tāhā, Du'rāhī [Crossroads] (Tehran: Ātash'kadah, 1335/1956), 41.

[53]The three pieces of clothing, turban (ʿammāmah), sandals (naʿlayn), and cloak (ʿabā), are traditionally worn by Muslim clerics. The poet draws on a longstanding literary tradition of satirizing a person's duplicity by likening them to a religious cleric, using these symbolic garments as metaphors.

[54]Munīr Tāhā, Du'rāhī [Crossroads] (Tehran: Ātash'kadah, 1335/1956), 39.

[55]Munīr Tāhā, Du'rāhī [Crossroads] (Tehran: Ātash'kadah, 1335/1956), 39.

Ultimately, Tāhā elevates her own status over that of the person being criticized:

> I'm the "shining" (munīr) sun, and I rise toward the sky.
> It was your hand that reached to pull at my hem.[56]

These themes, open satire of a former lover, self-assured moral judgment, and defiance in the face of conventional norms, were rare in the published poetry of Iranian women, at least prior to Tāhā's emergence. Her poems and song lyrics departed significantly from the dominant themes of her contemporaries. Over time, however, this bold originality gave way to a tendency toward greater conformity. By her middle period, her poetry increasingly bore the marks of other prominent voices in modern Persian literature. In some poems, she seems clearly inspired by the visionary and corporeal poetics of Furūgh Farrukhzād, adopting her fragmented and exploratory expressions of the self:[57]

> I'll split my hands in two,
> Open them wide to the four directions,
> And spin around in all four directions…[58]

Elsewhere, Tāhā channels the elemental lyricism and quiet mysticism found in Suhrāb Sipihrī's work, echoing his characteristic attention to nature, transparency, and inner stillness:[59]

> As green as the grass across the plain,
> As watchful as blossoms on the apple tree
> A mirror-like fountain
> Flows just beyond the mountain,
> While the fire-scorched plain
> Drinks deeply of the water's taste. [60]

At times, Tāhā's style reflects the mythic, historical tone of Mahdī Akhavān-Sālis, especially in poems where epic narratives and allegorical figures emerge through dramatic, fractured imagery:[61]

[56]Munīr Tāhā, Du'rāhī [Crossroads] (Tehran: Ātash'kadah, 1335/1956), 40.

[57]The reference here is to the poetic style of Furūgh Farrukhzād rather than to any specific poem of hers; however, the lines mentioned evoke her famous verse: "I plant my hands in the flowerbed / I'll grow green / I know…" See Furūgh Farrukhzād, Tavalludī dīgar [Another birth] (Tehran: Murvārīd, 1342/1963).

[58]Munīr Tāhā, Pā'īz dar parchīn-i bāgh [Autumn on the garden hedge] (Vancouver: Self-Published, 1375/1996), 109.

[59]The reference to Suhrāb Sipihrī concerns his poetic style rather than a particular poem, although the lines cited recall passages from his well-known poem "Sidā-yi pā-yi āb" (The footsteps of water) in Suhrāb Sipihrī, Hasht bihisht [Eight heavens] (Tehran: Bihzād, 1389/2010).

[60]The reference to Suhrāb Sipihrī concerns his poetic style rather than a particular poem, although the lines cited recall passages from his well-known poem "Sidā-yi pā-yi āb" (The footsteps of water) in Suhrāb Sipihrī, Hasht bihisht [Eight heavens] (Tehran: Bihzād, 1389/2010).

[61]The reference here is to Mahdī Akhavān-Sālis's poetic style rather than a specific poem; however, the lines cited evoke parts of Akhavān's poem,

That is how, at last,
Farrukh'laqā took his place behind Amīr Arsalān.
The flying horse set forth toward distant lands,
A handful of jaws dropped in stunned silence
History thundered,
And Alburz split apart.[62]

In still other poems, Tāhā's voice resonates with the intimate intensity and lyrical architecture of Ahmad Shāmlū. These moments are rich in sensual metaphor and emotional depth, echoing the cadence and imagery of her love poetry mentioned earlier and repeated here:[63]

I will embrace you with the long ode (qasīdah) of my arms
I will sit to watch you in the mirror of my lyric poems (sg. ghazal)
I will let you drink the red wine of my quatrains (sg. rubāʿī).
I will scatter the perfume of my couplets (sg. dū'baytī) on your bed
And I will say "I love you" in my songs.[64]

On the other hand, the explicit romantic themes, audacious expressions of physical desires, defiance of social and moral norms, and the bold pride in rejecting convention that characterize Tāhā's early poetry gradually give way in her later collections to themes centered around social engagement and patriotic sentiment. The following lines serve as an example of her patriotic verse:

O my sacred soil, adrift and drenched in blood,
O my lifeless plains, swept by my bleeding lashes.[65]

Tāhā also turns toward maternal themes, adopting a more intimate and affectionate tone:

"Shahriyār-i shahr-i sangistān" (The prince of the stone city). See Mahdī Akhavān-Sālis, Az īn Avistā [From this Avesta] (Tehran: Zimistān, 1344/1965). 14-25.

[62]Munīr Tāhā, Pāʾīz dar parchīn-i bāgh [Autumn on the garden hedge] (Vancouver: Self-Published, 1375/1996), 7.

[63]The reference to Ahmad Shāmlū concerns his poetic style rather than a particular poem, although the lines mentioned recall verses such as "You're not without reason to me / Tell me honestly / You're the prize of what qasīdah, O ghazal?" See Ahmad Shāmlū, Ibhāhīm dar ātash[Abraham in the fire] (Tehran: Kitāb-i zamān, 1352/1973), 21.

[64]Munīr Tāhā, Pāʾīz dar parchīn-i bāgh [Autumn on the garden hedge] (Vancouver: Self-Published, 1375/1996), 35.

[65]Munīr Tāhā, Pāʾīz dar parchīn-i bāgh [Autumn on the garden hedge] (Vancouver: Self-Published, 1375/1996), 3.

My daughter,
My tender blossom,
My delicate, soft-hearted one
The pearls of your sorrow
Roll down your cheeks…[66]

In place of the fierce passion of her early work, we find more subdued, melancholic love poems:

I had extinguished hope in my grief-nurtured heart
Why do you stir it once more?
Why do you expect light from me, O radiant soul?
I am a dark night, and the star in my heart has gone out.[67]

Tāhā also explores nostalgic memories, as in this recollection of childhood and place:

Our house in the old days stood atop on the hills of Yūsuf'ābād [a historic and well-known neighborhood in Tehran]…[68]

Taken together, these examples suggest that in her youth, Tāhā was more daring, more determined to assert her individuality, and more willing to present a defiant voice in both form and content. As she matured, however, her poetry began to reflect a distancing from that rebellious individualism and a greater alignment with the dominant modes of expression shared by many of her contemporaries. This shift appears to result not from a capitulation to external pressures or societal expectations but rather from the natural passage of time and the tempering of youthful intensity.

Despite the significance of her poetry in both classical and modern forms, it is her songwriting that occupies a particularly important place in Tāhā's literary legacy. Though her songs are fewer in number compared to her poems, they remain a vital part of the musical memory of Iranian artistic culture. For this

[66]Munīr Tāhā, Pā'īz dar parchīn-i bāgh [Autumn on the garden hedge] (Vancouver: Self-Published, 1375/1996), 13–14.

[67]Munīr Tāhā, Pā'īz dar parchīn-i bāgh [Autumn on the garden hedge] (Vancouver: Self-Published, 1375/1996), 6.

[68]Munīr Tāhā, Pā'īz dar parchīn-i bāgh [Autumn on the garden hedge] (Vancouver: Self-Published, 1375/1996), 66.

reason, it is worthwhile to examine the trajectory of one of her most prominent songs as it passes through the filter of Iranian social norms.

Tāhā's Poetry in Conflict with Traditional Moral Society

In 1334/1955, a beautiful piece of music was composed by ʿAlī Tajvīdī in the Humāyūn mode (dastgāh-i Humāyūn, a classical Persian musical mode), accompanied by Tāhā's stirring and captivating lyrics. This piece, when performed by Marziyah, sparked a wide range of reactions and provoked extensive public debate. In this song, for the first time, radio audiences heard words and expressions that, from beginning to end, reflected a woman's personal voice, expressing her inner sentiments and openly describing her physical desires. The speaker, with striking audacity, spoke of her romantic relationships and exposed listeners to the intense and untamed emotional world of a young woman wholly consumed by the fire of longing and infatuation:

I am sweet, I am sweet, I am sugar-sweet
I am the delight of every gathering and every company
I am wine, and I bring intoxication
I am in the cup of every drinker

I am the sweet one who brings the wine
Lift me onto your shoulder
Take me, I am delightful
I melt in every embrace

I am like a goblet in your hand
I am sweet in your mouth
Come, tonight I am compliant
Lift me onto your shoulder
Take me, I am pleasant
I melt in every embrace…

In the society of that time, shaped by traditional culture and

overshadowed by strong moral and religious values, the open expression of romantic desire and flirtation by a woman was an unthinkable taboo. Breaking this norm could lead to disgrace and accusations of immorality. For this reason, the song "Shīrīn'bar va shīrīn'lab" (Sweet-armed and sweet-lipped) was met with harsh reactions from the guardians of public morality and the enforcers of social values. Tāhā recounts her memories of those days:

> After I wrote the lyrics for "Shīrīn'bar va Shīrīn'lab," Mr. Tajvīdī came to our house one day and said that there were problems with airing the song on the Gul'hā radio program. Some parts of the poem would need to be changed for it to be approved for broadcast. I was extremely surprised and asked, "What problems?" He replied that, considering the moral and religious norms, and the deep-rooted sensitivities and bigotries in the society, certain words and lines in the song were viewed as overly bold and inappropriate, and their public release might lead to controversy. I was furious and firmly stated, "I will never change my lyrics, and I will never write another poem for your melodies again." Tajvīdī explained that this was not his own opinion, but rather the opinion of a review committee responsible for evaluating and approving lyrics for radio. Still, I rejected the idea of changing the lyrics without the slightest hesitation. At the same time, Marziyah, who had been rehearsing the piece for a long time and had become highly skilled in performing it, was unwilling to lose the chance to present it. So, without informing anyone, she went to the Air Force Radio and recorded the song there. It took only a few days for the piece to become enormously popular. It was joyfully sung in every corner of the city, in private gatherings, on the streets, and in the bazaars. When Dāvūd Pīrniyā [the director of Gul'hā, 1279–1350/1900–1971] recognized the overwhelming public reception and witnessed the song's extraordinary popularity, he ordered that it be aired on Gul"hā without any alterations. However, Rawshanak [Sidīqah-Sādāt Rasūlī,

1307–1391/1928–2012], the melodious host of the Gul'hā program, introduced the song by claiming that the references to wine, intoxication, and boldness were in fact mystical allusions and metaphors.[69]

Nevertheless, the ongoing reproaches and criticisms from moralists eventually compelled the poet to respond to the controversy. She wrote another song to the same musical composition, titled "Sawdāgar-i Dunyā" (Trader of the World). Unlike the previous song, which was filled with passion and unrestrained emotion, this new piece was a bitter lament, a powerful complaint about the state of the world and the hypocrisies and pretensions of society. It can be read as the anguished reaction of a female poet confronting the suffocating restrictions of a patriarchal society:

What should I do with all these merchants of the world?
What should I do with this scandalous, worldly crowd?
What choice do I have but to avoid and distance myself?
From these hypocritical, pious pretenders?
They are determined to destroy me,
To spill my blood without cause.
They show no regard for my cries of pain.
Look at my lone body
See how, with countless tricks and charms,
They provoke and scheme against me.
If I could soar into flight,
I would never return to this cage.
I would keep company with angels.
If I could set foot
In the heavens above,
There would be clamor and excitement.
My star would raise a cup.
My luminous moon would ascend.
And my song and voice would echo everywhere.[70]

The song "Sawdāgar-i dunyā" in fact expressed a deeply per-

[69]Quoted from a memorable conversation between Munīr Tāhā and Mulūk Zihtāb on Sidā-yi Īrān (Voice of Iran Radio). See Murtazā Husaynī-Dihkurdī, "Du tarānah-yi jāvidānī-i Munīr Tāhā" [Two everlasting songs by Munīr Tāhā], Ārmān 13 (Spring 1399/2020): 24–25.

[70]The song is preserved in the radio archives in Iran; however, as pre-Revolution recordings could not be accessed, an exact citation could not be provided.

sonal complaint. It illuminated the darker, oppressive dimensions of Iranian society and gave voice to the frustrations and desires of Iranian women across generations.

This song, like "Shīrīn'bar va Shīrīn'lab," was recorded in Marziyah's voice and broadcast on a separate Gul'hā segment (Shākhah-yi gul). This song was also met with widespread acclaim. At the time, however, few seemed to realize why the same composer and poet had created two songs with such contrasting themes for a single piece of music: one a daring celebration of physical love and desire, the other a sorrowful protest against society's suffocating constraints.

Negative reactions of this sort targeted many of Munīr Tāhā's audacious early works. Her poem Mard-i sharābkhārah(The wine-drinking man),[71] for example, also stirred heated controversy. So much so, in fact, that the writer and humorist Īraj Pizishkzād (1305–1400/1926–2021), with his distinctive humor, turned it into a play in his collection Āsimūn va rīsmūn (From here and there)[72] and other poets, including Ibrāhīm Sahbā (1290–1377/1911–1998), wrote responses in defense of the piece.[73]

Conclusion

Speaking candidly about the most personal and intimate thoughts, behaviors, and emotions, as well as speaking openly about what is rejected by societal norms, has long been considered an unbreakable taboo for women in Iran. There have been very few women writers who, not merely in a single work or two, but extensively during a significant phase of their literary lives, have actively sought to dismantle the irrational walls of social and moral convention that surround the expansive garden of their poetry. Munīr Tāhā is among those rare women who, with remarkable courage and boldness, in a society that could not tolerate even the slightest deviation from accepted norms, fearlessly addressed love and romantic relationships, physical-

[71]"I want a wine-drinking man to come / Into my house at night / To soothe the ache of too much wine / Drunkenly, with his lips on mine." See Munīr Tāhā, "Ān Nām va Nāmdārī, īn Jāvidānagī," 'Asr-i naw, 1 Bahman 1400 / 21 January 2022, accessed November 20, 2025, https://asre-nou.net/php/view.php?objnr=55224.

[72]A book of humor by Īraj Pizishkzād, first published in 1342/1963, containing a selection of his weekly writings originally published in Firdawsī magazine between 1334–1339/1955–1960.

[73]See Munīr Tāhā, "Ān Nām va Nāmdārī, In Jāvidānagī," 'Asr-i naw, Bahman 1, 1400/January 21, 2022, accessed November 20, 2025, https://asre-nou.net/php/view.php?objnr=55224. This is a report on the "girāmī'dāsht-i nāmdārān" (honoring distinguished figures) ceremony, held by the Rūdakī Foundation in Vancouver on May 15, 1997.

ity, the desire to err, liberation from constraints, and the right to make autonomous choices in her relationships and behavior.

The approach that Munīr Tāhā adopted can be found in the works of other poets in the years both preceding and following her, though only sporadically and in more limited form. What sets her apart is the breadth and consistency with which this mode of expression appears across many of her songs and successive poetry collections. Her work has played a meaningful role in inspiring and encouraging other women writers to claim their right to write with frankness and audacity. It is evident that her poetry holds a distinct and influential place in the continuing struggle for literary self-expression and autonomy among women authors.