

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: MEN WRITING WOMEN: “THE WOMAN QUESTION” AND MALE DISCOURSE OF IRANIAN MODERNITY

Sahar Allamezade, Doctor of Philosophy, 2016

Dissertation directed by: Professor Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak

School of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures

In this dissertation I explore “The Woman Question” in the discourse of Iranian male authors. A pro-modernity group, they placed women’s issues at the heart of their discourse. This dissertation follows the trajectory of the representation of “The Woman Question” as it is reflected in the male discourse over the course of a century. It discusses the production of a literature that was anchored in the idea of reform and concerned itself with issues pertaining to women. These men challenged lifelong patriarchal notions such as veiling, polygamy, gender segregation, and arranged marriages, as well as traditional roles of women and gender relations. This study is defined under the rubrics of “The Woman Question” and “The New Woman,” which I have borrowed from the Victorian and Edwardian debates of similar issues as they provide clearer delineations. Drawing upon debates on sexuality, and gender, this dissertation illustrates the way these men championed women was both progressive and regressive. This study argues that the desire for women’s liberation was couched in male ideology of gender relations. It further illustrates that the advancement of “The Woman Question,” due to its continuous and yet gradual shifting concurrent with each author’s nuanced perception of women’s issues, went through discernible stages that I refer to as observation, causation, remedy, and confusion. The analytical framework for this project is anchored in the “why” and the “how” of the Iranian male authors’ writings on women in addition to “what” was written. This dissertation examines four narrative texts—two in prose and two in poetry—entitled: “Lankaran’s Vizier,” “The Black Shroud,” “Arefnameh,” and “Fetneh” written respectively by Akhundzadeh, ‘Eshqi, Iraj Mirza, and Dashti. Chapter one outlines the historical background, methodology, theoretical framework, and literature review. The following chapters examine, the advocacy for companionate marriage and romantic love, women and nationalistic cause, veiling and unveiling, and the emerging figure of the New Iranian Woman as morally deprived.

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by

Sahar Allamezade

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Chair & Advisor:

Prof. Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak

Advisory Committee:

Prof. Sheila Jelen

Prof. Zita Nunes

Prof. Fatemeh Keshavarz

Dean’s Representative:

Prof. William Cohen

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DEDICATION

For my mother
Who loved me, so she let me go

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Dinavary of the Library of Congress has been incredibly helpful from the beginning. His energy and professionalism is unparalleled. He helped me to procure many books in Persian, and provided me with assistance when I had to look at old journals and newspapers.

I would never have been here if it were not for my wonderful parents. They have always wanted me and my sister to learn as much as they could not. My mother's red leather bound diary filled with Foruq Farrokhzad's poetry, Shahyar Qanbari's forbidden *taraneh*, and my father's love letters to her opened the magical door to the world of words. My father's eclectic book case lined with Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Ethel Voynich's *The Gadfly*, Hedayat's *Do Qatreh Khun* (Two Drops of Blood), with an array of Shari'ati and Motahari's books along with many more shaped my young imagination. I owe my unquenchable thirst for reading to their young and hopeful minds.

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Chapter One*

The Iranian Woman Question: An Overview

I began my academic career intending to look into the notions of gender and sexuality represented in the works of female authors of the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries in Persian literature. The idea came to me as a result of my studies in Victorian studies. The classic feminist training had taught me that in order to understand women's situation I had to look into their literature. So, the present study initially began as a project that would chronicle issues of gender and sexuality in the writings of Iranian female authors in comparison to literary works by their English coevals of approximately the same era. Apart from the fact that this proposal proved ambitious for a dissertation project, further research brought up challenging issues. For example, one such issue was the question of genre. While novels dominated the literary scene of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries England, poetry was the prevailing literary articulation in Iran. As well as poetry in all its varied forms such as *ghazal* (lyrical poetry) and *qasideh* (laudatory, elegiac, or satiric poem), other forms of writings such as memoirs, novellas, and treatise were also popular amongst Iranian authors. Yet, novel remained an underdeveloped genre. Thus, a comparative study of dissimilar works and cultures seemed anachronistic. However, I had to remind myself that “the discipline of Comparative Literature was formed from just such a cosmopolitan desire to embrace

* I have used the *Iranian Studies* transliteration scheme throughout this dissertation. Proper names of figures of living persons or Iranian authors writing in English (e.g. Karimi-Hakkak) have been transliterated according to their recorded preferences. Persian words and names, which are commonly used in English (Reza Khan, Tehran, etc.) have been rendered to their common usage in English rather than strictly transliterated. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

diversity” (Figueira 29). Keeping in mind the challenges at hand, I had to rethink my approach. Thus, the activity of a traditional comparative analysis in its Eurocentric sense did not seem reasonable in my case. Furthermore, I soon realized that issues pertaining to women (such as gender and sexuality) in the field of Victorian studies are not only copious, but are far more advanced compared to research on the same issues in Iranian studies. Most of the works on gender and sexuality in Iranian studies, however, have been conducted mainly within the field of historiography of gender or women studies. Many pioneering scholars in the growing field of Iranian studies in North American Universities have been mainly preoccupied with primarily establishing the field and then bring Iranian female authors to light and introduce their work to the larger academic community. In-depth literary analysis of the actual works of Iranian authors in general and female authors in particular compared to contributions to other disciplines are limited and has ample room to grow.

Taking all of the above concerns into consideration, I was still determined to learn about Iranian women and their lives compared to Victorian women. Further readings in the field opened another door. I realized that many Iranian male authors who were reform-minded and were in favor of Iran’s modernization had written fiction that displayed this desire. Some of these texts are unexplored or little has been said about them with respect to their representation of the issues of women. So, a closer look at these texts solicited a different approach to investigate women’s issues in Persian literature; how have women been “written” by the opposite sex? While this approach might be considered dated in Victorian studies, it is not the same in Iranian studies. A close reading of these texts helps shed light on silences and gaps in the literary texts

regarding Iranian women, which can be very revealing. In short, this dissertation will follow the trajectory of the representation of the “Woman Question” as it is reflected in the male discourse over the course of a century. It discusses the production of a literature that was anchored in the idea of reform and placed at its core the issues pertaining to women, gender relations, and notions of sexuality. Through a thorough literary analysis I have selected four narrative texts, which identify different stages of the shaped the discourse on women as they respectively allude to reporting on women’s predicament, the consequences of long-held practices of gender-segregation and veiling, and finally to the anxiety that male authors harbored with respect to the emerging New Woman during the first half of the twentieth-century.

In order to better frame these thoughts and show the exigency for a debate on women in Iran at the time I decided execute this research under the rubrics of “The Woman Question” and “The New Woman” from the Victorian debate of similar issues as they provide clearer delineations. An extension of the franchise by the Reform Bills of 1832 and 1867 “The Woman Question” debate protested the confinement of women to the sphere of home and stimulated discussions of women's political rights, nature, and role within the Victorian society.¹ Later on and at the turn of the century a new debate emerged from “the Woman Question,” which came to be known as “The New Woman” debate. The term “New Woman” was coined by the progressive British writer and novelist Sarah Grand in an article called “The New Aspect of the Woman Question” (1894), where she explains how the “new woman...solved the problem and proclaimed for herself what was wrong with the Home-is-the-Woman’s-Sphere, and prescribed the

¹ See “The Woman Question Overview” on the Norton Anthology of English Literature at: http://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/nael/victorian/topic_2/welcome.htm

remedy” (Nelson ix). As the present work illustrates it is possible to trail similar trajectories in Persian literature. In other words, by employing these Victorian paradigms I was better able to delineate similar cultural movements reflected in the Persian literary texts that directly concerned themselves with the plight of women. It also helped isolate its most contentious concerns at different stages of the development of the debate on women in Iran.

In the spirited intellectual milieu of mid-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Iran, many disenchanted with the country’s backwardness in the face of the advanced European countries were discussing the concept of modernity in their discourse. One of the major sites of contention for modernism project was women’s issues. Having observed the presence and the ways of European women in their respective societies through travelling as well as other mediums such as works in translation, a large group of Iranian male intellectuals began to incorporate women’s issues in their advocacy for progress. It was essentially in that intellectual ambiance that “The Woman Question” originated and came to occupy the central space in the works of some of the most prominent male authors in Iran at the time. This preoccupation continued well into the twentieth-century and up to the advent of the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Through examining select literary texts this study demonstrates how the intellectuals *responded* to the issues pertaining to women according to their own dynamic and unique perception of modernity. Their works therefore, manifest a growing tension between the existential realities of women’s abject subjugation to men on the one hand, and the rising aspirations of the reformists who saw the advancement of the society upon the liberation (even if partial) of its women on the other hand. This growing tension or “paradigm,” which is

defined by Kamran Talattof in *Modernity, Sexuality, and Ideology* as “ideology in action,” was reflective of a society in transition.² In other words where these men stood on women’s issues served as a barometer of their commitment to progress. As I hope to show, the way they championed women was both progressive and regressive at the same time. So, this project in a way is a critique of the way women were represented. The core of Persian literature was experiencing significant mutations and with this change the perception of women’s place in the familial and eventually in the social space also went through transformations.³ I will show how as the debate on modernity grew more nuanced and complex the image of women in literature experienced constant refashioning. In order to illustrate the changing image of women I have chosen four narrative texts: “Vazir-e Khan-e Lankaran” (Lankaran’s Vizier), “Kafan-e Siyah” (The Black Shroud), “Arefnameh,” and “Fetneh” written respectively by Mirza Fath ‘Ali Akhundzadeh (1812-1878), Mohammad-Reza Mirzadeh-‘Eshqi (1894-1924), Iraj Mirza (1874-1926), and ‘Ali Dashti (1894-1982). Akhundzadeh is arguably the first author who has written plays based on the European model. He has also directly discussed women and their situation in his plays. Not only ‘Eshqi’s work is innovative generically it is also unique in its advocacy for women. ‘Eshqi in “The Black Shroud” uses verisimilar and mimetic imagery to discuss women’s veiling. The poem attracted the attention of women’s journals such as Shahnaz Azad’s *Nameh-ye Banovan*. The journal printed “The

² In *Modernity, Sexuality, and Ideology: The Life and Legacy of a Female Popular Artist*, Kamran Talattof is resolved that the intellectuals simply “responded” to the concept of modernity. He uses “paradigm” to define the Iranian intellectuals’ dynamic contact with the modern Europe.

³ For a comprehensive study of how Persian poetry evolved during this era see Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak’s *Recasting Persian Poetry*. Also see Iraj Parsinejad’s *A History of Literary Criticism* to read about the advent of the practice of criticism and the debates it generated during the course of a century (from the mid-nineteenth until the mid-twentieth century).

Black Shroud” in their first two issues in 1920 (Sanasarian 33). Iraj Mirza’s “Arefnameh” elevates and continues the issue of women’s veiling and openly argues for its removal. Iraj’s use of graphic language is unprecedented and intends to incite. Ali Dashti’s work can be considered the culmination of his predecessors’ views on women. However, the type of New Woman, who appears in Dashti’s work is not the ideal woman that the authors that I discuss here had hoped for. Dashti’s work is one of the first prototypes of a kind of fiction that presents new challenge regarding the figure of the New Woman. In Dashti’s fiction male anxiety over the placement of the figure of the New Woman marks a new phase in the development of the Woman Question in Iranian society.

The present study first and foremost illustrates the representation of female characters in each text in an attempt to shed light on the lives of women and their issues as imagined by each author. These images, mirrored in the four texts that I have mentioned above, I hope to show, present women in relation to the dynamic nature of each author’s response to modernist ideas. As a result, I argue that the advancement of the Woman Question, due to its continuous and yet gradual shifting concurrent with each author’s nuanced perception of women’s issues, went through discernible stages of observation, causation, remedy, and confusion. In other words, the trajectory of the debate on women in Persian literature of the mid nineteenth- to early twentieth-centuries vacillated owing to each author’s idiosyncratic experience in viewing women’s issues within their respective and immediate societies. While the more realistic approach in their representation of women give us some ideas as to women’s actual status it is also expounds their conceptualization of women and how they imagined them. The male

author's imagination of women was further developed according to how they envisioned modernity's application to private and public spaces, and to social, political, and religious (amongst other) institutions.

Each author represents a specific stage of the debate of women and it's constantly shifting ideologies. In this study, I have attempted to show that during the first stage of the formation of the debate on women some authors simply reported on what they observed with respect to women. Authors like Akhundzadeh advocated for certain freedoms such as freedom to choose one's spouse and criticized established customs such as polygamy. As we move closer towards the turn of the century the intellectuals of the reform movement began searching for reasons behind women's status quo. They tried to find the roots of women's predicaments in history and they finally blamed it on foreign aggression. In doing so they have ignored the dominant culture of patriarchy that played (and continue to play to this day) a significant role in women's abject subjugation. The aim here is also to explore women's subordination to male superordinate authority.

Later on during the first half of the twentieth-century, other intellectuals continued the debate of their predecessors, but added to it by proposing certain measures to improve women's status such as the right to education and the unveiling of women. By mid twentieth-century, through a state-backed project called "The Women's Awakening" project of 1936-41 (a state feminism project), Iranian women were granted certain opportunities such as employment and education (Amin 1). However, this emerging "new woman," if we can call it that, became a source of anxiety for the male authors. On the one hand these men still cherished some of the time-honored notions regarding women, and on the other were pursuing the idea of progress in one form or the other. In a society

that “resembled” modern or in a “modernoid” society, to use Kamran Talattof’s term, men’s perception of women’s hardships lacked a progressive conceptualization of what constitutes a modern woman.⁴ Therefore, each author that I discuss here found his articulation in keeping with his reformist ambitions and visions. In other words, they raised the Woman Question in ways that served their purpose best. The Woman Question, therefore, became an integral part of the larger debate on modernity. That is, the aspiration of the modernity movement predicated general societal advancement upon at least partial emancipation of women.

By examining texts produced within a century I draw the map of a literary context for the four authors who wrote during this time period looking for their specific contribution to the advancement of the women’s cause. By doing so, I further hope to illustrate that we can gauge the degree to which their advocacy penetrated beyond the literary circles. This illustrative approach clarifies that the Woman Question was essential to the advancement of the larger discourse of modernity and not simply its consequence or its side project.⁵ As my research reveals, owing to different visions that these authors entertained about women’s place and their role at home and in society, women’s representations in the texts that I analyze here are being simultaneously constructed, deployed, and contested. Lifelong patriarchal notions of gender-segregation, arranged-marriages, polygamy, compulsory veiling of women, women’s education, and the emerging modern women are some of the main themes that these authors challenged in

⁴ Talattof, *Modernity, Sexuality, and Ideology: The Life and Legacy of a Female Popular Artist*, 9.

⁵ This idea is also central to Afsaneh Najmabadi’s work in *Women with Mustaches and Men Without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*. California: university of California Press, 2005.

their works albeit expressed differently. As mentioned above, the central concern of this project is an attempt to illustrate how each author envisioned the women of his time and conceptualized gender-relations. This study will further bring to focus the tensions and the on-goings of everyday life of the female characters in the texts, which will underscore their varied attempts within their restricted social parameters in order to carve out an individual identity. In their attempt to mold their unique identities and assert their individuality these female characters are constantly challenging, resisting, and subverting forces that seek to subjugate and humiliate them, as well as designate predetermined roles to them. Taking advantage of exposing the dynamics of this everyday tension, as Banani Mukhia in *Women's Images Men's Imagination* has observed, will “nuance the categories of dominance and subjugation” (14). Finally, this dissertation is an attempt to bring to light some of the lesser-known literary works that played a significant role in the making of the debate on women, but have so far been overlooked.

Chapter Delineation and Theory

Although the Woman Question permeated in many different forms of authorship, the focus of this work will be on literature. Theories of gender, sexuality, and feminism form the general theoretical framework of this study. At times this work might appear to hover between several disciplines, especially literature, sociology, and history. The comparative nature of this study has allowed for such an interactive and discursive approach to develop. Literature is of course the primary source that has generated the raw material for this research. In keeping with the interdisciplinary nature of the field of comparative literature, I draw upon works by scholars in the fields of Iranian, women's, gender, sexuality, and Victorian studies in general. Of the Victorian studies scholars I particularly remain committed to the analytical value of Mary Poovey's central project in *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* regarding the ideology of gender at work as it pertains to my general discussion. Following the works of notable critics such as Michel Foucault and Frederick Jameson, Poovey asserts, "every text *works* as an ensemble of specific discursive practices and as the outgrowth of a determinate mode of production; every text participates in a complex social activity" (Poovey 17). This assumption has particularly helped me to investigate texts to reveal their internal contradictions knowing that a literary text is an active element in the larger ideological current of a society and that is not produced in vacuum. As I have argued earlier, the Iranian male writers' visions of women and their demands with respect to women's situation reflected in their works have gone through a transformation as Iranian society came to grips with modernity. Thus, the texts produced by male writers on the subject of women, I argue, should be considered "the production

of ideology;” ideologies that were culturally and historically constructed and were decidedly male. I am also indebted to Rita Felski’s main argument in her important work *The Gender of Modernity*, which talks about “the complexities of modernity’s relationship to femininity through an analysis of its varied and competing representations” in my explication of the female characters’ complex relations to processes of social change in my overall analysis (Felski 7).

I should also note that I examine notions of gender relations with respect to Iranian society’s experiment with modernity. I draw upon the oeuvres of several prominent scholars of Iranian studies, particularly in gender history, women studies, and literature. Over the years I have benefitted from the works by Afsaneh Najmabadi, Janet Afary, Cameron Amin, Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, Farzaneh Milani, Tavakoli-Targhi, and Kamran Talattof. Najmabadi’s discussion of “the heteronormalization” of eros, sex, and public space is extremely relevant to my discussions in the chapters two, three, and four. I borrow from Tavakoli-Targhi’s discussion on the binary construction of the European woman as libertine and a source of emulation in his important work *Refashioning Iran*. The thrust of Tavakoli-Targhi’s argument engages the concept of modernity and its presumed European genealogy.

This dissertation includes five chapters. After the introduction, in the chapters that follow I analyze a play, two narrative poems, and a short story written in Persian. The authors I have selected and examined here have to some extent been discussed in the field of Iranian studies with respect to their contributions to literary and language reform and literary criticism.⁶ However, the scope of their contribution to the discussion of the

⁶ See for example Iraj Parsinejad’s *A History of Literary Criticism in Iran (1866-1951)*. Maryland: Ibex Publishers, 2003.

Woman Question in Iran needs further research. Akhundzadeh is one such example. He is known more as a social reformer and a literary critic than a playwright. This is while his *Tamsilat* or *Comedies*⁷ is a rich and realistic source of information on the lives of women and ordinary Iranians, which has been largely left untouched by scholars.⁸ Chapter Two examines a play from *Comedies* called “Vazir-e Khan-e Lankaran” (*Lankaran’s Vizier*). Written between 1850 and 1855 in Azerbaijani Turkish, *Comedies* addresses specific problems in Transcaucasia and Iran, but most of the plays present women’s issues as their main concern. Mirza Ja’far Qarachehdaghi later translated the plays from Turkish into Persian to the full satisfaction of the author.⁹ In *Comedies*, Akhundzadeh paints a realistic picture of the situation of women in his society and criticizes the prevalence of superstitious beliefs instead of relying on science, arranged-marriages, and polygamy.¹⁰ These issues are presented as the main hindrances in the advancement of women. The

⁷ I am aware that the correct translation for the Persian word *tamsil* (singular) is allegory, thus *Comedies* should be translated as allegories. However, after carefully reading Akhundzadeh’s notes on his collection of plays it became clear that he meant for his plays to be received and read in the style of European comedies, such as Molière or Shakespeare’s comedies. So, I have intentionally used the term comedies to refer to this collection of plays in order to be consistent with the author’s intention as stated in his letters to his translator. See Akhundzadeh’s letter to Mirza Jafar Qarachehdaghi in *Comedies* and “Qeritika” in *Maqalat* ed. by Baqer Mo’meni.

⁸ Mehrdad Kia has written two articles that discuss *Comedies* entitled “Women, Islam and Modernity in Akhundzade’s Plays and Unpublished Writings” and “Mirza Fath Ali Akhundzade and the Call for Modernization of the Islamic World.” In my research I have not come across other works with in-depth literary analysis of the plays of this collection.

⁹ In the letter of March 25, 1871, that Akhundzadeh wrote to his translator from Tbilisi he praises Mirza Qarachehdaghi’s translation and writes: “bravo, bravo, and bravo on your excellent penmanship” (*afarin, afarin, va sad afarin be qalam-e moshkin raqam-e shoma*).

¹⁰ Scholars like Janet Afary and Mehrdad Kia have argued that Akhundzadeh was indeed the first Muslim intellectual to discuss women’s issues. It was not until the late nineteenth-century that the Egyptian Qasim Amin wrote his *The Liberation of Women and the New Woman* (1899) that Amin based on the works of Herbert Spencer and John Stuart Mill. Amin’s *The Liberation of Women* under the title *Tarbiyat-e Nesvan* (*Education of Women*) was translated by Mirzqaa Yusef Ashtiani (‘Etesam al-Molk) into Persian from Arabic. The modified translation was published in 1900.

playwright advocated instead for women's education, their active participation in society, and friendship within familial relations. He also castigated the unlimited and unsupervised power of government officials and local rulers as well in their contribution to the larger debate on modernity.

In this chapter I will demonstrate that Akhundzadeh's representation of female characters shows a slice of the dynamics of women's everyday life. Akhundzadeh's portrayal of women in "Lankaran's Vizier" was unprecedented at the time, as the story unpacks the subtleties of women's quotidian activities. As part of the reformist agenda people like Akhundzadeh were distancing themselves from elaborate and exaggerated descriptions of the classical tradition that used hyperbole and highly stylized language. Reformists of Akhundzadeh's generation believed in producing a literature that can relate to its social context.¹¹ Critics like Camron Amin, Janet Afary, and Mehrdad Kia, unanimously agree that Akhundzadeh was indeed one of the first Muslim intellectuals who raised the Woman Question.¹² Introduced as one of the "renewalists" as Amin calls them, Akhundzadeh did not look into the reason behind women's status quo nor did he offer any solution that would help rectify some of the obstacles in the path of women's progress that he observed.

"Lankaran's Vizier" is an example of a text that has interwoven the author's political and social concerns. The play portrays the corrupt Mirza Habib, the vizier of Lankaran's Khan, who has two wives: Ziba and Sholeh. Ziba is Mirza Habib's first wife

¹¹ For more information on the topic of literary debates during that time and its role in pushing the reformists' agenda see Karimi-Hakkak's *Recasting Persian Poetry*.

¹² They all reference Akhundzadeh's *Maktubat (Correspondences)*, which is not the focus of this project and was written after *Comedies*.

and Sholeh is his second, much younger and more beautiful wife. The two wives constantly bicker and try to undermine the other in the hopes of winning the attention of their husband. In an argument Sholeh reminds her husband: “your wife is used to rambling, prattling, and telling lies” (*in zan-e shoma mesl-e tuti vel goftan, ver zadan, dorugh goftan ra ‘adat darad*) (Lankaran’s Vizier 58).¹³ A love story between Sholeh’s younger sister Nessa (who also lives in vizier’s house) and a young man called Teymur adds to the complexity of the domestic situation. Nessa refuses a marriage proposal arranged by the vizier. The play reveals the complications of a polygamous relationship as well as the triumph of a romantic union over an arranged-marriage.

In my discussion of the play I have benefited tremendously from Gayle Rubin’s classic essay “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex.”¹⁴ I draw on her definition of “sex/gender system” that demarcates it to be “the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity” (Rubin 13). Rubin’s emphasis on the *social* nature of women’s oppression has guided me throughout this study. From Afary and Najmabadi I have adopted the term “companionate marriage” as a fresh concept that was propagated by intellectuals such as Akhundzadeh advocating for a marriage based on love and not for the purpose of procreation only. My discussions of arranged-marriage and companionate-marriage in chapter one are informed by Rubin’s use of Levi-Strauss’s theory of kinship that “sees the essence of kinship systems to lie in an exchange of women between men” (Rubin 19). The notion of women as *gift* (in marriage) proposed by Levi-Strauss becomes key to

¹³ Henceforth all references to the text of the play will appear in page numbers only.

¹⁴ The version of Rubin’s article that I have used here is from *The Feminist Philosophy Reader*. Eds. Alison Bailly and Chris Cuomo. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008. 13-41.

Rubin's argument and essential to my analysis of the play in chapter two.

On the surface it may seem that Akhundzadeh's representations of female characters' mundane and routine everyday activities are telling us little about the status of women. However, these seemingly placid aspects of the female characters' lives are indicative of how each character creates and enlarges an individual space for herself within the given structure of relationships. In a way Akhundzadeh is telling his readers what these women want. This chapter will further show that the dynamic of everyday chores or tensions nuances the categories of dominance and subjugation. These accounts of women are some of the first reasonably realistic representations of women in Persian literature.

The failure of political and cultural reform that many believed would follow the Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911) disappointed and frustrated many authors who were writing during that time. Their disenchantment with the political situation of Iranian society is reflected in their work. However, the character, and activism of some of these authors have attracted more attention and became the topic of much debate than their literary legacy. Mirzadeh 'Eshqi is one such example. A young talent, 'Eshqi was disheartened by the failure of the Constitutional Revolution and began looking for answers to women's inferior position. His assassination in 1924 turned him into a revered figure that overshadowed his literary accomplishments. Reading 'Eshqi's oeuvre reveal that he was searching for what he probably thought was the answer to Iran's social and political failures. This search led him into investigating the ancient Iranian history. In other words, he strived to present the causation for the inadequacies of his society in his work by looking at historical events. It must be noted that 'Eshqi was not the only one

who partook in the exercise of unearthing the ancient past. He was simply following and building on the works of his predecessors including Akhundzadeh. These intellectuals, including ‘Eshqi, isolated a specific event in the Iranian history declared it to be the root of Iran’s demise: The Arab Invasion of the seventh century. Anti-Arab sentiments served as a popular theme throughout the second half of the nineteenth-century and well into the twentieth-century. For example, in a work of epistolary fiction called *Maktubat* (*Correspondences*), Akhundzadeh propagated his sharp censure towards the religion of Islam and even the Prophet himself.¹⁵ The daring criticism in *Correspondences* is, however, presented within a fictional framework thus providing a degree of protection for its author from possible condemnations by religious authorities.

Having lived during the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911 and experienced its aftermath, ‘Eshqi developed an ardent sense of nationalism, which dovetailed with the idea of finding the roots of Iran’s demise. So, he took up this theme and weaved it into many of his most remembered works. In his works that discuss women’s poor situation in Iran, ‘Eshqi candidly assigned the blame to Arabs: the uncivilized and aggressive Other of Iranian civilization. ‘Eshqi not only presented the Arab Invasion of Persia to be the origin of Iran’s destruction, but methodically introduces the Arab *man* as the main culprit in Iranian women’s ruin and their violator. The passionate poet blames this historical event to be the cause behind women’s veiled (both literal and metaphorical) existence rendering women into national entities. Chapter three expands on ‘Eshqi’s use of Arab men and Islam as the main reasons behind Iranian women’s ruin.

¹⁵ Janet Afary has discussed examples in *Correspondences* which reference Qur’anic verses and the narratives of the Prophet’s conduct with respect to the issues of marriage and divorce. For a full account of this debate see *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*, 114-118.

In chapter three, I will examine a dramatic narrative pome by ‘Eshqi entitled “Kafan-e Siyah” (The Black Shroud) that chronicles the speaker’s travels from Iran to Turkey. Along the way he stumbles upon the ruins of Ctesiphon, the seat of the Sasanian kings, and is deeply moved when he sees the place in ruins. In this nightmarish travelogue, the traveler sees women wrapped in what appears to him to be black shrouds appear all around him. Chapter three argues that the black shrouds that cover women’s bodies in this poem become metaphors for women’s veil. The word used to describe the veil is *kafan*, which refers to a piece of cloth that in the Muslim-Iranian tradition is wrapped around the body of a dead person prior to burial. The color of this cloth is white. By assigning the color black, which is the color of the *chador* (veil) and also the color of bad omen, the poem leaves little hope for the Iranian women of ‘Eshqi’s time.

Although ‘Eshqi is well-known for his ardent nationalism and his passionate nationalistic writing, his representation of women and the issues that he raised with regards to them in his oeuvre is largely ignored. This is while his works do contain female characters and broach crucial issues regarding them such as women’s veil. This chapter then provides an opportunity to examine those instances in ‘Eshqi’s poetry that represents women and their quandaries. These instances are at best bleak and even come close to being morbid. I will further argue that ‘Eshqi’s portrayals of dead, violated, and abandoned women stand for his failed political hopes and aspirations with respect to the potentials for reform that he thought would follow the Constitutional Revolution.

Still, ‘Eshqi’s disheartened tone is far from offering any solutions. Iraj Mirza, a contemporary of ‘Eshqi and a fellow poet concurs with him that women’s *hejab* or the veil is indeed what has impeded women’s progress and has kept them ignorant. In

addressing the issue Iraj takes one step further and proposes a solution: the unveiling of women. Ignoring the complexities of this established institution, Iraj in his poetry equates veiled women to hypocrites and ignorant people. He then proposes the unveiling of women as the only solution that would lead to educated women and transform them into sophisticated and cultured beings. In some ways, chapter three can be perceived as an extension of the utilization of the trope of women's freedom as a nationalistic manifestation by modernists. Nonetheless, this chapter expands the ideas presented in chapter two and suggests that authors like Iraj, while agreeing to the oppressive nature of the veil that has stifled women in Iran, they offered solutions.

As mentioned above coeval to 'Eshqi, the satirist Iraj Mirza also championed nationalistic discussions and wrote extensively on the matter. In one of his most famous long poems called "'Arefnameh" Iraj, like his contemporary, takes up the issue of women's veiling. One of the most controversial topics that Iraj impugns in this poem is the proposition for women's unveiling and the promotion of women's education. In a section within "'Arefnameh," the speaker tells a personal story about *ta'sir-e hejab* (the effect of the veil), which will be the main focus of chapter four. The story is about a veiled woman who objects vehemently to removing her veil in the presence of a strange man (the speaker himself). Upon seeing that the woman was perturbed, the speaker stops mentioning the veil but gradually begins to make advances towards the woman. At the end he has sex with the woman while she holds on to her veil tightly. At the end of the section the speaker warns that: "an ignorant woman's veil is so, and so is a veiled and chaste woman" (*hejab-e zan keh nadan shod chenin ast / zan-e mastureh-ye mahjubeh in*

ast) (*Divan* 83).¹⁶ The story aims to prove the hypocritical nature of the veil and argues that a woman's virtue is not necessarily contingent upon her veil. If a woman is lascivious the veil is not going to prevent her from indulging in promiscuity. The speaker then blames the veil to be the cause of women's ignorance and simple-mindedness.

In "Arefnameh," Iraj uses colloquial idioms, slang, and obscene language in his commentary on social, political, and cultural affairs. Writing *hazliyat* or obscene poetry was a common practice, but what is striking about Iraj's poem is the attention that he draws to the veil and the direct relationship that he creates between the veil and women's ignorance. Behind the apparent levity in Iraj's language, however, lies much fierce criticism. This chapter is first and foremost an opportunity to examine the "veiling" and the "unveiling" topoi and their relationship, as constructed by the poet, to other issues such as women's education and nationalism. This chapter also illustrates Iraj Mirza's explicit representation of the female body and female anatomy (including female genitalia) that not only proved effective in attracting readership, but can be surmised as some sort of a "literary unveiling" unprecedented for its time. In my analysis of Iraj Mirza's sexual poetics, I have benefited from Roland Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text*.¹⁷ I follow Barthes's description of a reading model that "is not the pleasure of the corporeal striptease or of narrative suspense," which would lead directly to full revelation. Rather, "it is the very rhythm of what is read and what is not read that creates the pleasure of the great narratives." Therefore, in Iraj's poetry it is not the totality but the "intermittence" of skin that is seductive and constitutes pleasure in reading.

¹⁶ References to the text of "Arefnameh" henceforth will only be mentioned by page numbers.

¹⁷ I have used the 1975 Hill and Wang edition of Barthes's text.

The idea of women's unveiling proved popular to the extent that it led to a momentous event in the modern history of Iran called *kashf-e hejab*: the unveiling act of 1936. During the reign of Reza Shah (r. 1925-1941) a series of reforms including sartorial reforms took place that impacted both women and men.¹⁸ In 1936 all Iranian women were ordered and in some cases forced to appear in public without their veil.

The works by authors like Iraj Mirza have attracted criticism due to their explicit language and references to sexual acts and have become targets of much criticism and rebuke. This is not to say that his poetry has not been praised, for they have. For instance, Paul Sprachman has included Iraj's "Arefnameh" in a volume of poetry that is devoted solely to obscene literature and is entitled *Forbidden Literature*. This study also aims to set aside discretion and offers a new reading of Iraj Mirza's "Arefnameh" and its explicit language in relation to its contribution to the discussion on the Woman Question in Iran.

By the mid-twentieth century Iranian women's presence in public is increased. They are authors, journalists, academics, etc. The country was moving rapidly towards modernization. It was in this climate that 'Ali Dashti, a prolific author, wrote about his views regarding these changes in Iranian society and their impact on women. In some of his fictional work Dashti's female characters become symbols of society's morality. In his stories,¹⁹ Dashti particularly presents the urbanization with burgeoning Western style establishments such as cinemas, cafes, and theaters more as vice than virtue. In the fifth chapter I have chosen to examine a short story called "Fetneh," which was published in

¹⁸ For a full account of Reza Khan's sartorial reforms see Houchang Chehabi's "Staging the Emperor's New Clothes: Dress Code and Nation Building Under Reza Shah." *Iranian Studies*. no. 3: 4 (Summer—Autumn 1993): 209-229.

¹⁹ Dashti wrote his fiction during the period of ten years (1940s-1950s) in three short story collections *Fetnehi*, *Jadu*, and *Hendu*, eponymously titled after each heroine.

1944 by Dashti. The story is taken from a collection of short stories also called *Fetneh*, eponymously named after the lead heroine. The collection is an attempt by the author to depict flaws of Iran's social life mostly amongst the upper classes and the intelligentsia. It also aims at highlighting the moral depravity of the said group of people in the early decades of the twentieth-century Iran. Product of an intellectual landscape that was constantly being reconfigured due to political upheavals, Dashti wrote some of his fiction within the confines of social scenes such as lavish parties of the upper classes. In "Fetneh" the female characters often claim or have the pretense of intellectual sophistication, but are portrayed as untrustworthy, deceitful, and unfaithful women. The story has multiple narrators, which in turn removes the author multiple layers from the narrative. The first narrator is a woman who has given a party at her upscale house in northern Tehran. At the party, she asks another guest, Faramarz, to tell the scandalous story of a woman named Fetneh and her adulterous relationship. The story tells a scandalous love affair between Fetneh, a married woman called, and a self-proclaimed Casanova called Hormoz who in turn becomes one of the narrators. Hormoz has just returned from a tour of Europe as an Iranian diplomat, confesses that he had always looked down on love and called it a "disease." However, he becomes smitten with Fetneh and finds her virtue attractive when she refuses to succumb to his desire at first. Expatriating on the theme of virtue, the story presents the seemingly (western) "educated" women as shallow and immoral lacking authenticity. Dashti, as I will argue, is doubtful about the extent of women's exposure to the outside world, their education, and social freedoms. Estranged from his hometown due to his job in Europe, "Fetneh"'s narrator (Hormoz) assumes that women in Tehran, endowed with rights and freedom, should be

more cultured. Yet when he sees the pervasive provincialism in their midst he is disappointed. The women in *Fetneh* have loose moral. They are just the type of woman that the woman in Iraj's story proclaimed she is not: "I am not like those *tehrani* [urban] women." So, between Iraj and Dashti we see a shift in the perception of urban women. "Fetneh"'s narrator believes that due to this newly achieved liberty, the Iranian woman has also gained superior moral attributes. But, once *Fetneh*, a Western educated woman and his object of affection, embarks on an extra marital relationship with him and when he finds out that she has other affairs this ideal image of the Iranian woman is shattered in his eyes. Women are cast as either adulteresses or kind wives, which in turn places women into two main categories. The disheartened lover talks about loving women as a kind of disease (*Fetneh* 23).²⁰

In chapter five, I argue how Dashti presented the dissolute aspect of modernity in the figure of his female characters: mainly in fallen women in urban settings. Chapter five will further illustrate that authors like Dashti entertained a deep sense of anxiety towards a new generation of women who by then had become educated, unveiled, and more demanding. This new figure, the unveiled New Iranian Woman, posed a threat to the deeply traditional order of gender relations, which many men still cherished at the time. In other words, gender-relations and views of women by men and by the society remained fairly unaffected or developed unevenly. Women had indeed gained certain rights by that time, but as critics like Camron Amin in *The Making of Modern Iranian Woman* have argued the modern Iranian woman "did not "exist," and there was no consensus on what she would look like—veiled or unveiled" (13). The modern Iranian

²⁰ Refences to the text of "Fetneh" will hereafter be only mentioned by page numbers.

woman may not have existed in its European sense as Amin seems to have defined the term. However, in this chapter I further explain why I find myself closer to Kamran Talattof's analysis of the evolution of the discourse on modernity and its impact on women in general and sexuality in particular. Talattof suggests that the Iranian intellectuals simply *responded* to modernity. He writes, "this *response* to modernity comprised of stories upholding the dominant ideologies, offering only a quasi, spurious, and at best uneven ideal of modernization without any fundamental, irreversible, and systematic transformation" (Talattof 7). A quasi ideal of modernization might not have resulted in fostering modern women, but the intellectuals' response and women's own awareness and efforts did bring to the fore a *new* Iranian woman. The female characters in Dashti's work that I examine here differ considerably from their more docile version in previous works. The female characters in Dashti's story live a less confined life, are educated, and act on their desire in a less socially acceptable (even condemnable) manner. Another observation that chapter four makes is that what further distinguishes Dashti's female characters is that in a work like "Fetneh," readers are also presented with an exposé of the female characters' internal conflicts. "Fetneh" is the only text in this study that reveals the psyche of its female characters. This adds to the depth and complexity of the characters. Finally this chapter shows that the representation of immoral women in Dashti's "Fetneh" is an occasion that interrogates society's morality.

Authors who contributed to the debate on modernity seem to agree that a modern nation state should possess qualities such as productivity, development, and dynamic activity. Such qualities; however, appear to be reserved for men. Women and especially the *new woman*, which is represented in one of the texts that I discuss here is introduced

as the “repressed feminine of aesthetic and libidinal forces” who possesses the pretense of intelligence, has settled for inauthentic pleasures, and has acquiesced to the status quo.²¹ The confusion regarding women’s place and role in the Iranian society of early twentieth-century as this study will show is exhibited by such female characters possessing a confounding conflation of several contradictory characteristics. Dashti’s work exposes the ambivalence inherent in the propagation of women’s freedom and rights and the inchoate understanding of their rights. The ultimate goal of this project is to place the narrative texts of a culture at the intersection of different kinds of contested ideologies and tensions. In sum, the discussion I have offered on chapter delineation and theory leads me to conclude that it is possible to appropriate findings from the Victorian and Edwardian literary traditions to Persian literature—a seemingly different literary tradition to English—as investigative tools in the study of women and gender relations.

²¹ Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, 4-5.

Methodology

My analysis in this work relies heavily on close reading. The texts that I have chosen for examination here are those that I consider most suitable for the task at hand. After I have analyzed each text I will move on to propose a generalization, which is capable of demonstrating my points. The close reading of the texts will allow me to move from the level of textual structures and arrive at the social structures that relate to each text's milieu. It is only after I have completed the first steps that I move to the next level. Moving outwards from the center of the literary texts, I attempt at identifying each author's contribution to the Woman Question. I try to highlight the processes that most likely brought these authors to some sort of a mutual interlocution. Thus, much of my effort will be directed toward uncovering the processes by which each stage (observation, causation, remedy, and confusion) is constructed.

The analysis enables me to see these men are not biased based on their own gender. In this study I have tried to move away from the widely-held assumption that any representation of women by male authors is biased and I challenge it in my work. Therefore, in an attempt to avoid the linear counter-positioning of men and women, one as the oppressor and the other as the oppressed—which is reminiscent of classic feminist writing—this study will focus on the gender-relations of female characters not only in relation to men, but to women as well as others outside of the periphery of the home as the primary locus of women's existence. The effort here is to contextualize women within the family structure as well as outside of the familial bonds and expose the representation of multifaceted interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, this work attempts not to essentialize women into categories such as wives, daughters, widows, and fallen women,

rather it recognizes each character in her unique subjectivity. These distinctive and yet varied subjectivities, I hope to show, are a result of the male authors' contesting ideological convictions in the face of social and political changes of the respective times that they lived in. This said, I do not suggest that by any stretch of the imagination the authors that I examine here were *fully* supportive of women's emancipation and freedom. Neither had they wholly comprehended the nature of what entails in the move towards becoming a modern nation.²² In addition, the awareness that these authors did acquire with respect to modernity and its relation to women developed unevenly.²³

Last but not least through close textual analysis I will show how these authors both contributed to the development of The Woman Question and problematized it at the same time. The primary texts that I examine here are varied in genre. I am aware of the generic differences of the texts that I have chosen. The texts consist of a play, two narrative poems, and a short story. The differences in genre result in varied audiences and performance. They assume a middle-class authorship and arguably a largely male readership. What each of these texts has in common is imagination and storytelling. They all feature characters, present conflict, and in some cases resolution. This dissertation does not claim to arrive at a neat theoretical paradigm, but it exposes the paradoxes and

²² This sentence basically sums up Talattof's argument in his book *Modernity, Sexuality, and Ideology in Iran: The Life and Legacy of a Popular Female Artist* (published in 2011). He believes that due to different social, religious, political, and cultural reasons Iranians had an inchoate understanding of sexuality and gender-relations in relation to modernity.

²³ I draw on Mary Poovey's discussion of the concept of the "uneven developments" of the ideologies of gender with respect to women in Victorian society to formulate my own argument regarding various ideologies with respect to women and gender roles in Iran at the time and their "uneven development" in the Iranian context.

inconsistencies of the Iranian male author's vision of women within a larger socio-political debate.

Male Authors and the Question of Gender

As Victorians of both genders championed women and made contributions to “The Woman Question,” the same scenario is true for both Iranian female and male authors who strived to advocate on behalf of women. In this section I would like to explain why I have elected to work on male authors only in addition to what I have outlined above. In her groundbreaking work, the *Second Sex*, Simon de Beauvoir wrote, “Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relates to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being” (16). It was based on this view that at the beginning of my research on the Woman Question debate in Persian literature of the mid nineteenth- to early twentieth- centuries I was interested in looking solely at women authors and their works of the period that I have outlined above. However, my readings led me in a completely different direction, while keeping de Beauvoir’s remark in mind. Although the almost hegemonic feminist discourse concurs with de Beauvoir’s hypothesis one might run the risk of ignoring a “major episode in the drama enacted perpetually in the relationship between the two sexes” (Mukhai 92). Given the scarcity of works by female authors comparable to the Victorian tradition further proved my original idea challenging. This is not to say that Iranian women did not write at the time or they were unaware of the mistreatments and the injustices that they were exposed to. Some of the more well-known texts written by the most notable female authors at the time such as Tahereh Qurratol’Ayn (1814 or 1817-1852), Bibi Khanum Astarabadi (d. 1921), Taj Al-Saltaneh (1884-1936), and later on Sadiqeh Dowlatabadi (1882-1961) have already been discussed in various scholarly works. So, instead I decided to look at works written by male authors who put women’s issues at the center of their works. To my

delight I realized that many Iranian male intellectuals who wrote on modernity and the need for reform put women's issues at the heart of their debate. So, I decided to shift gears and examine the literature written by male authors only. My findings showed that not only these men helped with the advancement of The Woman Question considerably, but they redefined the tenor of the debate according to their own agenda. Although one might argue that the representation of women in works by male authors betrays the authors' biased it is under this tight male gaze, as this study shows, that female characters struggle to establish separate identities and assert their individuality.

One can also argue that men had direct access to the outside world and their experiences with modernity were not mediated as women's would have been. Therefore, concentrating on male authors is an attempt to demonstrate first and foremost the extent of the ideological systems of the male discourse permeating the texts. Also, this decidedly male oriented approach establishes the degree that these ideological systems determine and control specifically the conceptualization of sexual difference and progress of the debate on women.²⁴

Taking up this approach in my analysis has allowed me to depart from the biased assumption that the works of male authors and their representation of women are still deeply rooted in patriarchy; a highly problematic notion in itself. In problematizing the concept of patriarchy I tend to concur with Nira Yuval-Davis' assumption in her book *Gender and Nation* that acknowledges 'patriarchy' to be "the rule of the 'pater,' the father...traditionally applied to younger men, not only to women" (Yuval-Davis 7). This aspect of the notion of patriarchy that the rule of the 'pater' involved young men

²⁴ The same study can be done on the female gender, which is not the focus of this work.

traditionally, as Yuval-Davis maintains, did not play a significant theoretical role in the generalized usage of the term by feminists. Knowing that, I still adopted the general definition of patriarchy as the “autonomous system of women’s subordination in society,” in my analysis (Yuval-Davis 5).

Despite the general view that believes works by female authors are closer to what women thought and how they envisioned their lives and their futures to be, works by male authors about women can serve an equal purpose. This is while as I reiterate we cannot ignore the degree and the influence of the male author’s subjectivity in the creation of his female characters. However, one question still remains. Should this subjectivity dissuade researchers from looking into works on women written by male authors simply because their prejudice might permeate into the female characters that they create? The feminist tradition is certainly skeptical. Agreeing with that notion, in *Almost a Girl: Male Writers and Female Identification* Alan Williamson explains the limits and expectations that the feminist tradition has set on research pertaining to women’s issues reflected in works by male authors. Williamson accuses feminism of being suspicious, for the most part, of the male authors’ subjectivity when they write about women. Denouncing the feminist critics, he states:

Feminist criticism has felt the need to emphasize how hard it is for men really to imagine what women experience. It has been quick to smell preemption, rather than legitimate empathy, whenever male writers attempt to represent a female point of view. They fear that they will perpetuate stereotypes, offer up straw men, or rather straw women, so that the patriarchal side can have the last word, or, at best, steal insights women writers deserve the chance to express for themselves. (*Almost a Girl* 2)

Based on what Williamson outlines in the opening arguments of his book, feminist critics are said to be almost always suspicious of all the femininity that male writers put forth in

their works. A quick look at feminist texts and feminist criticism will corroborate Williamson's argument. Scholars like Judith Kegan Gardiner argue that because men and women lead different lives due to their sex, this dissimilarity is almost always reflected in their writings.²⁵ Others believe that this bias is originated from the authority that male writers invoke in their writings, which have both inhibited—and still inhibits—female writers thus curtailing their authorial activities. Quoting the great English poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1899) whose remarks to his friend in 1886 described the creative power as a gift bestowed upon males only, Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert made a stronger case for male authorship and called the pen a man's metaphorical penis.²⁶ In other words, male sexuality, as they write in their seminal work *Madwoman in the Attic*, "is not analogically but actually the essence of literary power" (Gubar and Gilbert 4). The "pen-penis" model of writing, or as Jacques Derrida famously called it "phallogentrism," on the virgin page (i.e. the woman), identifies the male as the creator and the female the creation; secondary objects lacking autonomy. Statements that affirm the "creative gift" to be a quality that only males possess or that a woman's power is "not for rule...invention or creation" automatically transform writers like Hopkins or John Ruskin, the famous Victorian essayist and art critic, into creators.²⁷ By establishing various ontological links between the words authority and author, for example Edward

²⁵ Judith Kegan Gardiner, "On Female Identity and Writing by Women," in *Writing and Sexual Difference*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982, 178-189.

²⁶ See chapter one of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *Madwoman in the Attic* for discussions on female creativity and literary paternity.

²⁷ See Ruskin's "Of Queen's Garden" in *Sesame and Lilies*, which is evidence that men like Ruskin could not bring themselves to see women in any other position than the position of a homemaker. In another place in OQG he writes: "The Woman, we say, is not to guide, nor even to think for herself. The man is always to be wiser; he is to be the thinker, the ruler, the superior in knowledge and discretion, as in power" (75).

Said in *Beginnings: Intention and Method* has found out a “constellation of linked meanings,” which he concludes can describe the authority of any literary text (83). The notion of male authors “fathering a text” has been all-pervasive in the Western and the Persian literary traditions. Although one cannot ignore the pen-penis analogy, I would like to problematize the claim that the female characters created by male authors are simply secondary objects lacking agency. As stated earlier, the feminist criticism views this authority to be reserved for the male author and is therefore deeply skeptical of the ubiquitous patriarchal notion of authorship when it comes to discussing women. In an attempt to go beyond the skepticism of the feminist theory in examining the texts that I discuss here, I have tried to overcome this “dogmatic separatism,” to use Allen’s phrase, in describing feminism (Allen 1). In doing so, I interrogate the essentialist error of equating maleness to patriarchy, which, as established earlier, is a “gender-complicated term—not conflated with the concept “male” alone” (Laura P Claridge and Elizabeth Langland 3). This is not to say that any male writer’s “resistance to and defiance of the phallic mode and a patriarchal ideology” can be considered feminist as Laura P Claridge and Elizabeth Langland explain in *Out of Bounds: Male Writers and Gender(ed) Criticism* (3). In short, an anti-patriarchal activity would not necessarily encompass feminism and the conclusion that male writer’s criticism of anti-patriarchy is the *sine quo non* of female liberation is not only reductive, but is simply incorrect. The male author, then, is on the one hand, exonerated from being charged with creating stereotypical female characters and on the other, he is said to be incapable of really identifying with women and understanding their plight, as stated earlier. If we adopt Judith Butler’s theory that “gender is performative” and given that a written work is usually produced with a

specific audience in mind, we can further complicate the notion of authorship. Therefore, we may even suggest that the act of writing is in fact a performance. Simon de Beauvoir once famously wrote, “one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman.” This important line has led critics such as Judith Butler to further suggest that “gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceeds; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*.”²⁸ If we concur with the idea of a gendered-self, and consider writing as performance, then what does the act of writing—the production of the author’s voice—involve specifically when the writer writes from a gender(ed) category that he does not fall under? In other words, do male writers experiencing a sort of “mental transvestism,” meaning that—by virtue of writing from a woman’s point of view—do they simply act as women?²⁹ This dissertation does not claim to answer these questions fully, but the discussions presented here will at the least complicate the simplistic notion that male authors’ portrayal of female characters must be in essence a biased representation.

²⁸ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” *Theater Journal*. Vol. 40. No 4 (1988): 519-531, 519.

²⁹ L. Timmel Duchamp’s discussion of the authorial voice and writing as performance in the article “Creating “the Second Self”: Performance, Gender, and Authorship helped shape my argument.

Chapter Two

Acting Like a Woman: Representation of Female Characters in *Lankaran's Vizier*¹

Fath 'Ali Akhundzadeh (1812-1878) is considered one of the most influential contributors to the modernist project. Many authors of Akhundzadeh's generation saw literature as a mirror that reflects the ills of the society and used it as a medium through which they voiced their discontent and offered solutions occasionally. Akhundzadeh spent a good part of his adult and professional life in Tbilisi and Transcaucasia, which provided him with a unique position to learn about Europe and read major works of Europe by way of Tbilisi. He began to compare his findings with his knowledge of Iranian (at times even the Trans-Caucasian) culture. Inspired by European literatures especially the social realism in the contemporary Russian literature Akhundzadeh cultivated the desire to promote ideas of reform within Iranian society in his works.²

The focus of this chapter is on Akhundzadeh's attempt at raising the Woman Question for the first time in Iranian society. At least in two of his most important works this playwright and essayist spoke about some of the pressing issues regarding women. The focus of his criticism was chiefly on "arranged marriage, temporary marriage, and polygyny," and his advocacy included "monogamy and the triumph of marriage based on love" (Najmabadi 156).³ Scholars like Camron Amin have argued that Akhundzadeh was

¹ For the sake of brevity and ease I simply refer to the play as *Lankaran's Vizier*. The play is also known as *The Story of the Vizier of the Khan of Sarab*, which was changed in the Persian translation to *The Vizier of the Khan of Lankaran*.

² Iraj Parsinejad, *A History of Literary Criticism in Iran*. Bethesda: IBEX publishers, 2003, 56-57.

³ For a full discussion on the debate on romantic marriage and its importance in the modernist project see Afsaneh Najmabadi's "The Tragedy of Romantic Marriage" in *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beard*. California: University of California Press, 2005.

one of the first thinkers of his age to have expressed his concern regarding the situation of women. Amin maintains, “In 1865 Akhundzadeh was one Iranian man articulating what a few Iranian men felt about the role of women in Iranian society” (Amin 7). What Amin and others have mainly observed are based their examination of Akhundzadeh’s *Maktubat (Correspondences)*. A work of fiction, and Akhundzadeh’s second major literary venture written in 1865, is a series of letters that two imaginary princes write to one another. In this work, Islam and even Prophet Mohammad himself are subject to harsh criticism. In *Correspondences* Akhundzadeh raised the question of women’s lack of access to education, their proclivity towards superstition, and their segregated and isolated lives, amongst other issues. However, an earlier work of this dramatist called *Tamsilat or Comedies*⁴ reflects the same issues in a more tempered manner. *Comedies* presents somewhat realistic representations of women in Akhundzadeh’s society, which sets precedence for later works of literature as an attempt to move away from the classical tradition, filled with hyperbole and exaggeration and used a highly stylized language; a practice which was popular amongst the intellectuals at the time.⁵

Most of the plays in the collection depict women as active and dynamic individuals who struggle to improve their situation albeit they do so within their circumscribed existence. *Comedies* consists of six plays and a short story and was written between 1850 and 1856. In this chapter I will only discuss one of the plays from *Comedies* entitled “Lankaran’s Vizier.” It is in this play, written in 1851, that female

⁴ *Comedies* has been translated as “allegories” as well as “comedies.” I have chosen the term “comedies” not because it is the best definition for the Persian word. However, I find the term closer to Akhundzadeh’s views on his plays. In a letter to his translator he explains in detail why telling funny and comical stories are more effective than preaching and advice giving.

⁵ Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak in *Recasting Persian Poetry* has chronicled the evolution of modern ideas in both form and content of the poetry produced during the nineteenth- and early-twentieth centuries.

characters, as Mehrdad Kia has observed, “appeared for the first time as independent-minded individuals who refused to obey the authority of corrupt and tyrannical men” (7). In addition to representation of ordinary lives of female characters I would like to go beyond this observation and further explore gender relations in this play. In other words, in this chapter I hope to show how female characters in “Lankaran’s Vizier” negotiate their place within the given structure of gender relations as subordinates to male authority and in their interaction with other women. I will also show how these women within their circumscribed existence manage to challenge authority and demonstrate ingenuity.

The story of “Lankaran’s Vizier” is set in the Azerbaijani khanate in the city of Lankaran by the Caspian Sea and on the eve of the Russian rule. The story, told in four acts, revolves around the corrupt vizier to the Khan of Lankaran, Mirza Habib, who at the end is outsmarted by his womenfolk. As mentioned before, this play has entwined Akhundzadeh’s social and political observations, but given that three of the four acts involve women directly one can assume that women’s issues take precedence and are the main focus of this play. Although women in this play have been cast in subordinate and traditional roles such as wives, mothers, sisters, and maids, they are in no way passive tools in the hands of scheming men. As the narrative unfolds one can see that each act underscores and comments on one specific issue that was at the heart of the debate on women at the time. The first two acts focus on trials and tribulations of polygamous relationships/households, arranged-marriage, and romantic love, the third act is a mockery of incompetent rulers, and the fourth and final act illustrates women’s resourcefulness within their carefully restricted sphere of existence. In order to better illustrate my points I will provide a brief summary of each act as I discuss them. The

order with which these issues, arranged-marriage, polygamy, and romantic love, are presented does not provide any substantiated evidence to the precedence of one issue over the other I am simply following the play's chronology of the events. The final act includes a scene in which women are instrumental in bringing the story to a happy ending, which is testimony to their potential for progress and growth. This chapter concludes with the notion that the changing perception of women's place in the familial, and by extension, social space, is representative of Akhundzadeh's society: a society in transition.⁶

Struggle for Personal Space and Authority

The first act of "Lankaran's Vizier" paints a chaotic picture of a polygamous household and the vicissitudes of this institution that made both men and women vulnerable in trying to carve out a personal space. It also elaborates on the power dynamics between the vizier and his wives, constant undermining of each other's power, and the struggle to maintain a sense of order and authority.

Here is a brief summary of the first act: Mirza Habib, the vizier to Lankaran's Khan, is in his room talking to a local merchant by the name of Hadji Saleh. The vizier is planning to place an order of a golden-brocade vest through the merchant to present to his second and favorite wife, Sholeh, on the occasion of Nowrouz—the Persian new year. Fearful that his first wife, Ziba Khanum, might find out, the overly cautious Mirza Habib asks the merchant if he could place the order in a different city to avoid any news of it

⁶ I have adopted the idea that relates the representation of women's place in both the home and society in fiction to a society that is changing from Banani Mukhia's *Women's Images Men's Imagination*, 15.

getting out and reaching his first wife. Little did he know that Ziba had been eavesdropping behind the doors hearing every detail of the transaction. The vizier was wrapping up his conversation with the merchant when an angry and screaming Ziba storms into the room confronting her husband. Finding the moment an opportune time to strike a blow against her rival and her husband, she accuses Sholeh of having an affair with Teymur: the son of the deposed Khan of Lankaran and the nephew to the current one. The act ends with the vizier feeling despondent and suspicious of his second wife.

The opening dialogue between the vizier and the merchant presents two men plotting. Their dialogue involves lies, deception, and secrecy all of which destabilize the foundation of any relationship. As mentioned in the plot summary, the vizier is intent on purchasing an expensive gift for his second wife, Sholeh, and insists that this matter be kept secret lest his first wife finds out (Lankaran's Vizier 35-38). So, he orders Hadji Saleh, a friend and a merchant, to place the order in the city of Rasht. He even refuses to give Sholeh's measurements to the merchant as further precaution lest getting that information create unwanted curiosity. The frustrated merchant questions the reasons behind the extreme secrecy and suggests that the vizier could avoid this complicated situation if he simply ordered two vests for both women. In response Mirza Habib says: "I want to give something unique to Sholeh for 'Eid (Persian New Year). If I have it made here Ziba Khanum would want the same thing. It will cost me extra and it does not suit her" (37).⁷ Highlighting Ziba's unflattering looks Mirza Habib is an expression of Mirza Habib's waning desire for her and his unwillingness to invest in his relationship with her. The total liberty in taking a younger and more desirable wife once his first one

⁷ The translations of the Persian texts throughout this chapter and the dissertation are mine unless stated otherwise. They are literal translation as they mean to serve analytical purposes rather than aesthetic ones.

is less desirable and young is illustrative of a system, aside from being class related, that endorsed such behavior enjoyed by men with means such as the vizier, which in essence rendered women disposable commodities. Mirza Habib's less than complimentary remarks on Ziba's looks is confirmation of Ziba's suspicion; hence her eavesdropping. Adding insult to injury she also learns that Mirza Habib was concocting another plan to lie to her once the gift arrived. Feelings of rejection, deception, and perhaps jealousy compel Ziba to confront her husband's dishonesty. She barges into the room as the merchant is being dismissed screaming and livid. Ignoring Mirza Habib's desperate lies to try and deny everything that he had said, Ziba cries out: "you were ordering a brocade vest with golden buttons for your *sogoli* (favorite wife). Bravo on your *mardanegi* (honor) (38)." The Persian word *mardanegi* has multiple meanings that include 'manliness,' 'masculinity,' 'virility,' and 'manhood,' but here I feel like she is both referring to his honor as well as his virility. Ziba's remarks bring up two issues. First she refers to Sholeh as *sogoli*, to mean a favorite wife or lover—customary in a culture that practiced polygamy and had institutions such as the *harem* or women quarters. By assigning the adjective *sogoli* to Sholeh, his first wife, Ziba, acknowledges the discrimination between herself and the younger woman. Her admission to Sholeh's superiority in beauty and youth could further be taken as a sign of Ziba's reticent acceptance of her fate as the marginalized and the less privileged wife. However, her acceptance should not be taken as a passive act. Her acknowledgment of the vizier's discriminatory behavior is firstly a sign of awareness. Finding out vizier's plans ultimately propelled her to act on her frustration and turn her knowledge into action. Thus, her vociferous confrontation with Mirza Habib puts an end to her otherwise

unchallenged acceptance of her situation and provided her with an outlet to express repressed emotions, which were probably brewing in her head for some time. Ziba's acknowledgment further serves as a reminder to Mirza Habib of her ostracized status within the conjugal dynamic that her husband has intentionally assigned to her.

Second, as mentioned above, Ziba questions her husband's *mardanegi*. In Persian, the word *mardanegi* is generally synonymous to bravery (*shoja'at*), courage (*deliri*), and gallantry (*delavari*). But, it can also mean virility, potency, manhood, and masculinity. In her mockery of Mirza Habib's *mardanegi* Ziba could be criticizing Mirza Habib on different levels. Ziba's insinuation that her husband lacks the fundamental trait of a man she undermines Mirza Habib's honor and challenges his virility simultaneously. Outraged by his wife's accusations, vizier denies the entire transaction with the merchant and is startled by her intrusion: "Za'ifeh (the weak one) You scared me. What are you on about? What souvenir? What vest? Have you gone mad? (39)" Mirza Habib uses the word *za'ifeh* to call his wife. *Za'ifeh*, which is derived from Arabic is the feminine form of *za'if* and means weak. *Za'ifeh* like *kamineh* (the lesser one) was one of the common forms of addressing women. Calling women weak undermined their worth systematically. In response to his denial Ziba exclaims:

Don't deny it, don't change your words! I have heard every single detail that you and Haji Saleh talked about. I knew from the moment you asked for Haji Saleh, I knew it in my heart. I came and quietly hid behind the other door. I listened. I learned it was as I had expected. May God bless the vest with golden-buttoned collar for your *sogoli* [favorite]⁸ wife. Teymur Agha must be very pleased that a new vest has been ordered for his *sogoli*. She should wear it and dance for him! (39)

⁸ Sometimes for the sake of clarity I had to add an explanation to quotations, which are marked by brackets. Anything marked by brackets in quotations throughout this dissertation are my insertions and explanations and not part of the original text.

Ziba refuses to believe Mirza Habib's spurious explanation as to where the gift for Sholeh would have come from. Ziba's protestation is remarkable here. It seems that she has been waiting for this confrontation for some time since she reveals to her husband that she had known from the moment that the vizier had asked for the merchant what was going on. Catching her husband red handed so to speak vindicates Ziba and lends logic to her otherwise melodramatic actions. From Ziba's familiarity with the merchant one can also assume that this was not the first time that Mirza Habib had summoned him to arrange for a special gift. So, Ziba's decision to face her husband's mendaciousness is brave and shows that she could not tolerate the insult to her intelligence any longer.

Ziba's attack on her husband's *mardanegi* is twofold. On the one hand she directly targets her husband's manliness by criticizing his discriminatory behavior towards her. On the other by nonchalantly mentioning Teymur as Sholeh's lover she strikes a more serious blow that not only questions her rival's virtue as a married woman, but challenges her husband's honor. Although expressed in what seems like a blasé manner, Ziba's accusation of Teymur's intimate knowledge of Sholeh is a calculated attack on Mirza Habib. The alleged indiscretion can point to Mirza Habib's inability to exert control over his wife and his failure in pleasing his wife: both of which are humiliating the vizier. The possessive phrases of "*zan-e sogoliat*" (your favorite wife) and "*sogoliash*" (his favorite) have Sholeh in common as the possession (*sogoli*) of two different men. (she is using the same word for her husband's favorite wife and the lover. Ziba does not have another word to use for *sogoli* and in using it she *is making a mistake and legitimizing her husband's relationship to Sholeh*. In "*zan-e sogoliat*" the pronoun ending "*t*" is a reference to second person singular: in this case Mirza Habib who is in

possession of *zan* or wife. The pronoun ending “*ash*” in “*sogoliash*” is a reference to third person singular: Teymur, the alleged lover. By using the word *sogoli* in both cases Ziba is further stressing Sholeh’s desirability as well as her exclusivity. Ziba’s prediction that Sholeh would entertain her lover in her new golden vest is meant to further disconcert Mirza Habib and injure his honor.

Ziba’s intimations of Sholeh’s unfaithfulness turn into full-fledged accusation of adultery as the couple’s discord continues. She says to her husband that Sholeh is with Teymur all the time and informs the vizier that her maid has seen the couple *dast beh garden* (embracing) many times.⁹ Upon hearing Ziba’s revelations Mirza Habib is outraged and refuses to believe what Ziba had just told him. He tells her that she ought to be ashamed of herself and asks whether she is trying to dishonor him by spreading such rumors?¹⁰ He exclaims: “Aren’t you ashamed? Can’t you show any modesty? Accusing my wife in front of me? Are you going to cost me my honor?” (39). It is interesting to see how an accusation of an immodest behavior whether it is leveled against a woman or by woman always comes full circle to challenge a man’s honor. Vizier’s reaction to Ziba’s accusations of sexual transgression conducted by his other wife supports this hypothesis. His first response is to question Ziba’s *haya* or decency (*haya nemikoni*) indicating that women should be diffident enough not to entertain ideas like sexual transgression, even though another person committed the act. In other words, Mirza Habib’s immediate concern is to show his alarm regarding his wife’s audacity to discuss grave matters such as allegations of adultery. He comes to her second wife’s defense, which imparts a sense

⁹ All references to the text of the play are from the Kharzami edition (1977) unless otherwise noted.

¹⁰ Akhundzadeh, *Comedies*, 39.

of responsibility over his wife's actions, which in turn takes away the woman's agency and independence of action.

In the same statement Mirza Habib asks rhetorically: "Are you going to cost me my honor?" The Persian word *namus*, which is used for honor, embraces the idea of a woman's purity and is constituted as subject to male possession and protection.¹¹ The use of another possessive phrase *namus-e mara* (my honor) further emphasizes Mirza Habib's sense of entitlement over his women. It also renders women and their degree of discretion as a kind of barometer for his ability to protect and control them. Therefore, his first concern is about the threats of disgrace to *his* honor should Ziba's story be revealed. Mirza Habib's scolding does not deter Ziba from pressing her point further, so she fires back: "If I wanted to disgrace you as well as your first wife, I would have taken one of these handsome and attractive young men and would have made love to him" (39-40). This statement is remarkable in a sense that it reveals Ziba's desire and frustration regarding her own relationship with her husband. Although Ziba talks about a hypothetical situation one can assume that she is indirectly revealing her dissatisfaction regarding her own sexual and emotional desires. It is evident that Mirza Habib favors his second wife over his first. By stating that she could have also found a young and attractive lover Ziba is indirectly suggesting that Mirza Habib is neither young nor attractive. Her statement transforms the seemingly passive, marginalized, and unwanted figure of Mirza Habib's first wife into a dynamic, involved, and lively individual demanding the attention which has been denied her. Finally, Ziba's patronizing remark regarding her hypothetical choice of a handsome young man as her lover could suggest

¹¹ See Najmabadi's *Women with Mustaches Men without Beard* and her discussion of the concept of *namus* as it was used in the nationalist discourse to mean the integrity of a nation in need of protection, 1-2.

Mirza Habib's lack of sex appeal in her eyes and possibly a payback for his unkind comments on her looks. Furthermore, the comparison between a young handsome man and the aging vizier could be interpreted as another jab at Mirza Habib's lack of virility.

From this point onwards the narrative digresses and shifts its focus from the news of Sholeh's alleged sexual transgression and onto young Teymur's attractive manliness. The vizier, in a state of confusion, informs Ziba that it would be impossible for Sholeh and Teymur to be having an affair since Sholeh has not even laid eyes on Teymur. But, Ziba rightly reminds her husband that on the eve of 'Eid Al-Fitr (Muslim celebration to end the fasting month of Ramadan), he had taken Sholeh, along with her sister Nessa Khanum, and their maids to watch a wrestling match held by the Khan outside of the palace. She reminds Mirza Habib:

Teymur Aqa, the handsome and powerful youth of twenty five, defeated all of his opponents and Sholeh fell in love with him head over heels. God only knows what trickery (*hileh*) she has employed [to get him]. She is not at peace if she doesn't see him one day. Didn't I tell you that in your age marrying a young girl is not appropriate? You did not listen to my words. Now, this is your punishment and it serves you right! (49)

It is not clear how Ziba has come to know about what went on during an event that she was not attending. One can assume that the women kept a close eye on one another's activities. By praising Teymur's youth, beauty, vigor, and physical strength Ziba is indirectly drawing the vizier's attention to his own lack of such desirable qualities. Sholeh's alleged yearning for the younger man is another subtle insinuation that Mirza Habib, who had apparently been duly warned by Ziba regarding the consequences of marrying a younger woman, is not capable of satisfying his wife on account of his old age. Issues of virility aside, the reminder of the "inappropriate" (*shayesteh nist*) nature of

Mirza Habib's marriage to a much younger woman, references the social ramifications of his actions as well as the domestic discord it created. Should the news of Sholeh's affair with Teymur gets published it would mean that she had fooled her husband, a public figure and the second most important man in Lankaran. Being cuckolded, which Ziba says is his punishment (*seza*) for disregarding her counsel, considering the vizier's standing would be a poor reflection on his performance as a man of distinction, as the head of the household, and finally as a man. Thinking that her prophecy regarding her rival's transgression is true lends credibility to Ziba's initial objections to the marriage and her discontent. It further provides her with a sense of personal worth and self-assertion.

Enraged by the allegations Mirza Habib dismisses Ziba, however, once he finds himself alone with his thoughts he begins to ponder over his wife's revelations. After his wife leaves the scene and he is left alone with his thoughts, Mirza Habib's logic rejects the idea that Sholeh is in fact capable of cheating on him: "My logic does not permit me to accept that Sholeh has committed this deed" (41). While he rejects the thought of Sholeh's infidelity he does see the possibility that Teymur's physical strength could have seemed attractive to Sholeh. So, in order to ease his conscience the vizier begins to imagine a scenario in which Sholeh had simply praised Teymur's beauty and strength in front of Ziba, which then caused her to interpret Sholeh's compliments as affection out of jealousy:

That woman [Ziba] has regarded her [Sholeh] talks to be out of love, but she is in fact digging a well for her. All in all Sholeh must be convinced otherwise and it should be made known to her that Teymur is not that strong. Those whom he has defeated are just small kids. Maybe with this idea she gets Teymur Aqa's image out of her head and does not mention him ever. I should get up and pay Khan a visit, and then I have to return and go to her room and see what can be done. (42)

Mirza Habib's resolute conviction regarding the impossibility of Sholeh's sexual transgression indicates that he does not recognize his wife's sexual desire and brushes it off as a simple fancy. In doing so, Mirza Habib also ignores Ziba's feelings completely and relates her antagonistic behavior to female jealousy; one of the many adjectives that constitutes stereotypical traits of women. Given that one of the pre-dominant concerns in a traditional male-dominated society is the chastity of a wife and her sexual fidelity any sign that contradicts these notions would mean failure on behalf of the man as the protector/provider. Furthermore, the dismissal of a realistic hypothesis about female sexuality could be a reflection on the idea of male redundancy.¹² Male redundancy is a described as a fear that men harbor that women could be indifferent to them.¹³ Mirza Habib is troubled by the idea of becoming indifferent in the eyes of his wives, which might result in him losing his authority over them altogether. Vizier's adamant belief regarding the unlikelihood of his wife acting on her sexual desires brings his troubling thoughts to a reassuring conclusion that keeps him in control, but strips Sholeh of desire and denies her agency. His plans to undermine Teymur's physical prowess is further proof that he is fearful of becoming redundant and ultimately losing his authority.

¹²I have adopted the term 'male redundancy' by Afsaneh Najmabadi from her discussion in "Reading 'Wiles of Women' Stories" in *Imagined Masculinities*. London: Saqi Books, 2000.

¹³ Najmabadi, "Reading 'Wiles of Women' Stories as Fictions of Masculinity," 147.

Romantic Love, the Catalyst of Modernity

Akhundzadeh believed that the roots of domestic discord amongst Iranian couples lie in the lack of contact and familiarization prior to marriage between men and women in Iran.¹⁴ He wrote in his *Correspondences*:¹⁵

Secondly, the problem with marriage is related to the shortcomings of women's veiling and their staying at home. Since husband and wife must spend their entire life together and live together, of course they should know each other's disposition and temperament very well and should approve of each other's character, habits, attractiveness, and achievements. Otherwise, how can they live a content and happy life together for the duration? Iranian men have bought women without having seen them and have approved of them without having known them. There are not many husbands and wives [in Iran] who are happy with each other and are not inherently antagonistic and hostile towards one another. [There is not one couple] who is not continuously in conflict, or behaves indecently, and reproaches and criticizes each other deeply. Instead of the sounds of harp and musical instruments, one can hear wailing, beating, fighting coming from the house. And instead of cooperation and assistance in life, they spend their time in contention, altercation, willfulness, and animosity. (77)

As stated before, prior to making pointed statements like the above in which the author romanticizes Europe, Akhundzadeh had revealed some of his ideas with regards to women and marriage in *Comedies*. In the second act, the conflict part of the play, romantic love and arranged-marriage are the focus of the narrative as well as the complications involved in managing both of them. This act further highlights the ulterior motives such as strengthening familial ties, power, financial security, etc. as impetus behind arranged-marriages and how in this type of a union the opinion of both parties

¹⁴ Maryam 'Ameli-Rezaei, *Safar-e Daneh beh Gol: Seyr-e Tahavvol-e Jaygah-e Zan dar Nasr-e Qajar, 1210-1340* (Safar-e Daneh beh Gol: The Development of Women's Position in Prose during the Qajar Era, 1796-1925). Tehran: Nashr-e Tarikh-e Iran, 2010, 77.

¹⁵ Qtd in 'Ameli-Rezaei, 77.

(least of all women) mattered very little.

This act puts the struggle of the story's lovers (Nessa and Teymur) at its heart. The couple along with other Sholeh and Pari Khanum, their mother, struggle to undo vizier's self-serving ploy to marry Nessa off to the Khan. As well as exposing the detailed mechanism of an arranged-marriage, the incidents in this act further reveal the complexities of polygamous interpersonal relationships that are carefully monitored by the laws of patriarchy.

A highly complex custom in its own right practicing arranged-marriage has roots in ancient Iran, which is beyond the scope of this study.¹⁶ However, the textual evidence in this act coupled with the previous one—although indirectly—point to the social, economic, and political stimuli that are embedded in the processes of organizing an arranged-marriage. The underlying impetuses in observing a union as such; therefore, problematize the quality of conjugal love, which lies at the crux of the narrative. Before delving into the text, here is the summary of what goes on in the second act: Teymur is rendezvousing with Nessa Khanum in Sholeh's room, Nessa's sister. Teymur has become aware of vizier's plans to marry Nessa off to the Khan. As the lovers are discussing their options Teymur expresses his wish to talk to Sholeh as well about the matter. Sholeh had been in her mother's room at the time and the couple leaves to go and visit her there. Not too long after they were gone, Ziba, vizier's first wife, enters Sholeh's room to argue with her over the mistreatment of one of her maids. When she finds the room empty, she prepares to leave the room but stops upon hearing a strange man's voice. Fearful of being

¹⁶ For further information on marriage customs in Iran including Imperial Iran and Iran after the advent of Islam see "Marriage in Iran: A Family Affair" in Willem Floor's *A Social History of Sexual Relations in Iran*. Washington, D.C.: Mage Publishers, 2008.

seen by him without being properly covered, Ziba takes refuge behind the curtains. It is at this moment that Sholeh accompanied by Teymur enters the room. Nessa stays back in the corridor to keep watch in case Mirza Habib appeared. Little into their conversation, Nessa informs her sister and Teymur that vizier was coming towards the room. Teymur had no other choice but to hide. Unbeknownst to her that Ziba is also hiding behind the curtains, Sholeh asks Teymur to hide behind the curtains. After a little while a limping vizier comes into Sholeh's room, orders a coffee, and begins talking nonchalantly about Teymur. Thinking that he will be ruining Teymur's masculine image in the eyes of Sholeh, the vindictive vizier tells his wife a made up story about a wrestling match between Teymur and himself. In that match, Mirza Habib claims to have defeated Teymur and caused him serious injury. Teymur who is hiding behind the curtain and can hear the fake story cannot contain himself and bursts into a loud fit of laughter. Upon hearing voices from behind the curtain Mirza Habib pulls the curtain back only to discover his first wife, Ziba, and Teymur hiding behind it. Enraged he demands an explanation from Teymur who is standing there quietly. Mirza Habib presses for an answer, but Teymur ignores him and gets ready to leave the room. The vizier trying to prevent his escape gets hold of the young man's sleeve when Teymur literally picks him up, throws him to the floor, and leaves the room quickly. The vizier and his wives begin a lengthy argument in which both women claim to be innocent, calling each other names, and accuse the other of being the transgressor. Mirza Habib who is now completely distraught orders his horse to be saddled and ready. He then rides to the Khan's palace to relay the events to him.

Teymur and Nessa are in love and intend to marry. Their willingness for a romantic union undermines the covenants of the otherwise socially favored practice of arranged-marriage: the kind that the vizier propagates. In placing a romantic union at the heart and center of the play, the author proposes an alternative to the arranged-marriage customs and advocates the idea of a “companionate marriage.” A union based on mutual agreement and romance individuality plays a significant part in a companionate marriage. As it is opined by scholars of the historiography of gender, such as Afsaneh Najmabadi and Janet Afary, this new concept became one of the salient components of the debate on modernity in the second half of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. It has also been argued that Akhundzadeh is one of those pioneering intellectuals in the second half of the nineteenth-century Iran and even in the Islamic world that “campaigns for companionate monogamous marriage.”¹⁷ The term encompassed romantic love as the main ingredient, which stood in strict opposition to arranged-marriage. A “companionate marriage” also meant that ideally the man and the woman would enter a union of their choosing, which was based on “affective bonds” even love and not for the purpose of procreation only.¹⁸ A self-explanatory term, an arranged-marriage had (and when practiced still has) manifold reasons but in most cases it aimed to strengthen tribal/familial ties. Therefore, many families often without securing the consent of their daughters and sons would make promises of alliance well in advance—sometimes even in infancy—that usually benefited both parties socially, economically, and politically.

¹⁷ Janet Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 114.

¹⁸ Najmabadi in *Women with Mustaches Men without Beard* has discussed the theme of the “companionate marriage” in its relation to the heteronormalization of love and Eros in the modernist discourse.

The opening scene of the second act of “Lankaran’s Vizier” is an example of the predicaments of this custom at play. Mirza Habib’s ulterior motives to enhance his influence at the court of the Khan in marrying off his sister-in-law to the Khan are revealed. In a secret tryst that takes place in Sholeh’s room a distressed Teymur is fretting over losing his beloved to the Khan and asks Nessa in a confused manner about Mirza Habib’s true intentions in arranging the match. The question that he poses in Persian is this: “*manzurash az gherabat-e khan cheh chiz ast?*” (48), which literally means, “what does he [the vizier] mean by getting close to the Khan?” The word *gherabat*, as defined by *Loghatnameh* has a plethora of definitions like “kinship,” “familial,” “alliance,” or “relation through marriage or blood.” In her famous essay titled “The Traffic in Women,” Gayle Rubin praises Lévi-Strauss’s seminal work on the origin and nature of human society *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. In his book, Lévi-Strauss conceives kinship as “an imposition of cultural organization upon the facts of biological procreation” (Rubin 19). Rubin identifies two key notions of the “gift” and “incest taboo” that Lévi-Strauss discusses in his work as relevant to women and writes: “Lévi-Strauss adds to the theory of primitive reciprocity the idea that marriages are a most basic form of gift exchange, in which it is women who are the most precious of gifts” (20). The idea of the “gift of women” compared to other forms of gift transactions, Rubin proposes, transforms the relationship thus established between the giver of the gift and its recipient one of kinship and not one of reciprocity.¹⁹ She explains:

¹⁹ Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women,” in *The Feminist Philosophy Reader*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008, 21.

If it is women who are being transacted, then it is the men who give and take them who are linked, the woman being a conduit of a relationship rather than a partner to it. The exchange of women does not necessarily imply that women are objectified, in the modern sense, since objects in the primitive world are imbued with highly personal qualities. But it does imply a distinction between gift and giver. If women are the gifts, then it is men who are the exchange partners. And it is the partners, not the presents, upon whom reciprocal exchange confers its quasi-mystical power of social linkage. The relations of such a system are such that women are in no position to realize the benefits of their own circulation. As long as the relations specify that men exchange women, it is men who are the beneficiaries of the product of such exchanges—social organization. (The Traffic in Women 21)

It is through this type of an exchange that the objects (in this case the women) are in a way molded by subjective forces of men for specific purposes.²⁰

The content of Teymur and Nessa's conversation in Sholeh's room exemplifies this form an exchange. By marrying off Nessa to the Khan, she is transformed into a gift, which will be exchanged between the Khan and Mirza Habib. Both men are then the "beneficiaries" and expect to see the desired outcome of this transaction: Mirza Habib will secure more power and authority through this exchange and the Khan will enjoy a young and beautiful wife. Thus, a purely bureaucratic relationship will be transformed into one that is personal making it more precarious to breach. Nessa's comments later in the scene further clarify the reasons behind Mirza Habib's decision in facilitating her marriage to the Khan. She emphasizes Mirza Habib's motivation behind securing this union since he is hoping for his authority (*ekhtiyar*) and reverence (*'ezz*at) to become permanent: "through kinship he [Mirza Habib] wants his authority and reverence to become permanent" (49).

²⁰ Ibid., 21.

In addition to *gherabat* (kinship) *ekhtiyar* is another critical word that Nessa brings up in her explanations. The Persian word *ekhtiyar*, which means choice, right, authority, and power can have a binary application: it can be exerted in both domestic and public affairs. Vizier's efforts in gaining more *ekhtiyar* are then contingent upon *gherabat*. In other words, *gherabat* (kinship) becomes the occasion through which *ekhtiyar* can be attained. As it is outlined above, Rubin explains how kinship systems are not essentially for the exchange of women and involve achievement of rights mainly exercised by men.²¹ Rubin asserts:

They [kinship systems] exchange sexual access genealogical statuses, lineage names, and ancestors, rights and *people*—men, women, and children—in concrete systems of social relationships. These relationships always include certain rights for men, others for women. “Exchange of women” is a shorthand for expressing that men have certain rights in their female kin, and that women do not have the same rights either to themselves or to their male kin. In this sense, the exchange of women is a profound perception of a system in which women do not have full rights to themselves. (The Traffic in Women 22)

As we have seen the “rights” that Rubin explains men enjoy and women are deprived of in kinship systems have social and domestic reverberations. Rubin's illumination of the quiddities of the concept of the “exchange of women” within social systems can to a great deal rationalize Mirza Habib's unconditional sense of entitlement over the fate of his sister-in-law on the one hand. On the other, Nessa as the gift to be exchanged between vizier and Khan is the conduit through which Mirza Habib guarantees his rise in the government hierarchy. Furthermore, Vizier's unreserved claim over Nessa, a woman who is not an immediate relative or a kin, is a right that he enjoys since he is acting as Nessa's

²¹ Ibid., 22.

guardian in the absence of a male kin (i.e. father, brother, uncle). Since there is no textual evidence to believe otherwise Mirza Habib plays the assumed role of a guardian to Sholeh, Nessa, and their mother Pari Khanum. It is mentioned in the previous act that the three women reside in Mirza Habib's house and even have separate rooms allocated to them. The details of how that arrangement had come to be are also unspecified, but the absence of a father and a husband figure verifies that these women have no male guardian other than the vizier and it is he who acts as their sole provider and protector. Although many details regarding the three women's past, their condition, economic status, etc. are undetermined, but one can speculate that these women came from the lower classes and were of little means. So, Sholeh's marriage to the vizier must have relieved them from what could have been a dire situation.

In most patriarchal societies women through the bond of marriage that establishes their relation to men are permitted to occupy a space in a household and are designated the role of either a wife or a mother. In the event that the head of that household is no longer part of the familial equation the same space (the home) can be denied women since that initial relation (to the man) that validated the bond no longer exists. This is due to the fact that women in male dominated societies are simply transported from one space to the other under the strict supervision of male authority. A girl is cared for in her father's house and is being prepared to occupy a space especially designated to her according to the social norms at her husband's house. Sholeh and Nessa's mother, one can assume, must have been a widow. Social codes concerning widows have varied in Iran throughout history. There were times when marrying widows was forbidden and other times that it was considered a preference to marry a widow since a widow due to

her previous experiences would be more skillful and therefore would not need supervision and instruction as a young bride would. Assuming that Sholeh and Nessa's mother was indeed a widow she would subsequently lose her space previously allocated to her as a wife. One can also imagine that in the absence of a provider she had found herself in economically and socially challenged situations. It is not entirely unfeasible to conclude that in order to remedy those situations Sholeh had to consent to becoming a second wife to a much older but affluent man of distinction, since keeping a polygamous household was rather a privilege reserved for the aristocrats and the wealthy. Marrying a man in vizier's position proved conducive in restoring Sholeh and her family's social status bringing them economic security as well. So, the social position of the woman and the financial position of the husband played important roles in the prevalence of polygamous relationships and it still does to this day.

The notion of the "exchange of women" does not end with women or within the confines of the domestic sphere, but it is commensurate with other types of societal transactions regulated by men. In other words, this type of an exchange can be employed to facilitate the extension of one's authority and power within other social systems. In this case, Mirza Habib's aspirations for permanent (*paydar*) authority and his plans to hurt Teymur are the desired "productions" of a kinship system that he is seeking to cultivate and achieve through his relationship with the Khan. Once Teymur is out of the way, Mirza Habib's plans can more easily be played out.

As the narrative develops, we learn that Khan and his vizier share a sense of hatred towards Teymur but for different reasons. In a book entitled *Maqalat* (Essays) Baqer Mo'meni has compiled a series of Akhundzadeh's essays, which exposes the

playwright's varied inspirations from Western and Russian literary traditions. Akhundzadeh has written on figures such as John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), the British economist and philosopher, Hume (1711-1776), Shakespeare, Molière, and Pushkin amongst others. So, it should not be a surprise to detect similarities in the plot of "Lankaran's Vizier" to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. As in *Hamlet* the present play includes themes of power struggle, conspiracy, murder, and revenge as well as love. Similar to the ominous fate of the prince of Denmark's father in the hands of an evil brother, Teymur's father, a just ruler, was overthrown and murdered by his brother. After the successful ousting of his brother, the Khan assumes the khanate and now is fearful his nephew's plans to avenge his father's murder.²² Going back to the beginning of the second act where the two lovers were conversing, Nessa confides in Teymur about Khan's plans to kill him out of fear of retaliation. She says that the ruler has for a long time been looking for an excuse to kill him (49). Nessa reports:

He [the Khan] sees you as disrupting his affairs. He would be careful once you claim your father's land. I have heard many times that he keeps a straight face in public and shows you respect. He won't leave you alive for one they should he find the opportunity. (50)

Later on she warns Teymur that Mirza Habib, who is apparently oblivious to their love-affair, is already offended by some of Teymur's actions:

Since you have appointed Salim Khan, the previous vizier's son, as your clerk, the vizier is of the thinking that Mirza Salim without a doubt would come forward to take his father's place. And now he [the vizier] is thinking of asking the Khan to expel him from this province. (50)

²² It must be noted that this information does not come up until the end of the third act, but I found it necessary to mention it where I did.

The second part of Nessa's statement reinforces the role of women as conduit to kinship systems, the idea that men are the ultimate beneficiaries of such relations, and that women have little if any control over their fate. Mirza Habib, as the text suggests, is concerned about facing a fate similar to the ousted vizier. Should Teymur be successful in claiming his father's throne, Mirza Salim, the son of the deposed vizier, might find the motivation to do the same and claim his father's old post. So, Teymur's elimination is essential in preventing all that from taking place, but would still be contingent upon Nessa's marriage to the Khan. Although Mirza Habib is oblivious to the romance between Nessa and Teymur, should they marry his plans to gain more authority and increase his power will not materialize.

Throughout the rest of the second act the comical humiliation of vizier presents him as the incompetent "official" who is about to learn a lesson. It should also be noted that the representation of vizier's incompetence is not directly in relation to his performance as an official. Rather, his competency as the text suggests is tied to his masculinity and in connection to his relationship to his wives. This said, his avaricious intention to increase his power and authority finds its articulation in his domestic affairs and in his interpersonal relationships especially with his wives. The next section will expand on this connection. Here is what happens after the vizier discovers Ziba and Teymur behind the curtains in Sholeh's room: Anxious to talk to Sholeh in an attempt to humiliate Teymur in her eyes, a limping vizier enters the room. In response to Sholeh's inquiry about his leg and his surprise visit—since that day was Ziba's day to be with Mirza Habib—the vizier tells a made-up story about how he had defeated Teymur in a wrestling match:

Today I was sitting with a few of the noblemen in Khan's presence when Teymur Aqa's strength came up. Everyone said there is nobody in Lankaran who can match Teymur in strength. Khan also confirmed. I denied it and said that Teymur is weak. Although during the fasting month he has knocked out a few people, but they were all kids. Teymur Aqa was also there. Khan did not accept what I told him. He asked: what reason do you have to prove this? I responded: "this is beneath me, otherwise being in my fifties I would wrestle with Teymur Aqa and would defeat him then you could see." Khan who always shows a great deal of interest in these matters ordered that I should wrestle with Teymur. I saw that I had no choice. We got up and held hands. I saw my honor under attack and in a flash of a moment, I pulled Teymur Aqa's leg forward and I can't recall how I knocked him out. Poor kid was lying on the floor unconscious. After half an hour he gradually came back to his senses. Because of the pressure, my back was struck and hurts a great deal. That is why I cannot walk properly. (54-55)

The Persian word *gheyrat* is key in Mirza Habib's invented story. A combination of many characteristic traits, thus difficult to find an exact equivalent for it in English, *gheyrat* has mostly been defined as "jealousy," "zeal," "honor" or "courage" depending on the context. However, I believe "honor" best captures the nuances that the Persian word *gheyrat* evokes in the context of the play. The notion of "honor" in the domain of gender is subject to male possession and protection as previously stated.²³ Mirza Habib's compulsion to defend his honor is evident when he exclaims: "I could not bear the attack on my honor" (*gehyrat beh man zur avardeh*).²⁴ Here, the word *gheyrat*, I propose, has a binary application. Sholeh is not aware of the allegations of sexual impropriety on her behalf and the conversation that transpired between Mirza Habib and his first wife Ziba.

²³ In *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beard* Afsaneh Najmabadi has discussed the notion of "honor" in relation to another Persian word *namus*. Generally, in Iranian society men are expected to show *gheyrat* in defending their *namus*, which is a substitute for female kin and in extreme cases men can extend it to any female who in their view has been harassed sexually.

²⁴ This is not a literal translation of the Persian sentence due to the complexity of the word *gheyrat*. I have tried to translate the sentence as faithfully as possible and convey the meaning that the Persian sentence invokes.

But, Mirza Habib who is suspicious of his wife's sexual fidelity is using *gheyrat* to prove his masculinity and physical prowess and his right over his property (i.e. his wife). In Iranian society a man's honor is vitiating upon any indiscretion—especially sexual indiscretion—committed by his female kin (mother, sister, wife), which ultimately challenges a man's authority and control. Thus, the fake story is designed to uphold vizier's honor, re-assert himself as the man of the household, demand obedience from his wife, and finally prove his virility. Also, as discussed earlier, Mirza Habib's concocted story about defeating Teymur reinforces the desperate necessity exhibited by the vizier in asserting his masculinity is to avoid "male redundancy." If we take masculinity to denote "expression of fearlessness and assertiveness" and assume that it is "attained by constant vigilance and willingness to defend honor, face, kin and community from external aggression and to uphold and protect cultural definitions of gender-specific propriety," we see that vizier's made-up story corresponds perfectly with such definitions of masculinity.²⁵ Furthermore, the act of "challenging" a rival "confers honor upon a man, because it is a cultural assumption that the 'challenge, as such, requires a riposte and therefore is addressed to a man deemed capable of playing the game of honor.' "The challenge provides an opportunity for males to prove their belonging to the world of men."²⁶

Following the challenge to fight, Teymur's fictitious harsh defeat is meant to solidify Mirza Habib's claim over his wives and present him as the stronger male. One can argue that the physical fight between two males over a female is the most primitive

²⁵ Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards*, 107.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 107-108.

manifestation (even animal) of one male's physical superiority over the other that results in claiming the female by the victorious male.

Oblivious to the secret audience comprised of Teymur and his first wife behind the curtains, Mirza Habib continues on telling his exaggerated tale. His entire audience (including the hidden ones) is of course aware of the mendacity of his tale of victory. Mirza Habib's fabrications sound so outrageous and amusing to Teymur that he is unable to contain himself and bursts out laughing. Upon hearing voices, Mirza Habib lifts up the curtain only to discover Teymur and his first wife Ziba behind it. A petrified and confused Mirza Habib begins to scream demanding to know what Teymur has been doing there.²⁷ Teymur does not offer any explanation to Mirza Habib's angry inquiries and with downcast eyes comes out from behind the curtain and prepares to leave the room when the vizier gets hold of the young man's arm and says: "I won't let you go unless you tell me what you have been doing here, go on tell me!" (56). A defiant Teymur tries to free himself from vizier's tight grip, but Mirza Habib is determined not to let him go unless his curiosity is satisfied. It is at this point that Teymur, who is by now flustered (*beh tang amadeh*) grabs hold of Mirza Habib's neck with one hand and with the other grabs him by the leg of his trousers, lifts him off the ground, tosses him in the middle of the room, and flees the scene.²⁸

The unfolding of the above events is in a way the enactment of Mirza Habib's story in reverse, which invalidates his entire statement and humiliates him. But, vizier's dishonesty is almost left unchallenged by his wives, except in passing when Sholeh asks

²⁷ Akhundzade, *Comedies*, 55-56.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

sarcastically: “What was Teymur Aqa doing here? Didn’t you defeat Teymur Aqa and send him back to his mother?” (58). Mirza Habib who is clearly unable to bear further humiliation and has no answer to give to his wife’s question interrupts her and curtly retorts: “Enough, you are nosy, answer my question...” (*deh, hey fozul, harf-e mara javab bedeh...*) (59). By calling his wife *fozul* (nosy) Mirza Habib is bringing Sholeh to the level of a naughty child probing into the grown-ups’ affair and warns her against it. In other words, in one word Mirza Habib is telling his wife that she is not in the position to question his credibility. Rather, it is he who asks the questions, which is another sign of the vizier’s frantic attempt to uphold his authority. The rest of the scene revolves around the wives bickering and accusing each other of breach of modesty and cheating with Teymur, while Mirza Habib desperately tries to discern the true version of the events from each rival’s story. In order to get to the bottom of things Mirza Habib asks his wives to each tell her version. So, each woman begins to explain how she found herself in that awkward situation. The stories are worth mentioning here as they reveal some marginal information that once elicited will expose the author’s parody of a polygamous household. It also presents women’s elusive yet essential role in its administration as well as the constant struggle in enlarging their individual space.

Here is Ziba’s version of the events:

Your wife Sholeh Khanum had cursed at my maid. I had come to ask why she doesn’t mind her own business. My maid does not receive any wages from you, why do you use curse words? So when I arrived she wasn’t there. I wanted to leave when I saw Sholeh Khanum was coming towards the room talking to a man. I got nervous and couldn’t leave the room. I hid behind the curtain to see what these two were up to so that I could later tell you [Mirza Habib]. Especially, because I was unveiled I could not appear with a bare head in front of a *namahram* (a man who is not a relation/kin). Perchance you arrived as well. [because] When you got closer, he did not

have any choice and wanted to hide from you so he also hid behind the curtain until the time you left. (57-58)

Here is Sholeh's account of the same event:

Ziba Khanum knew that I have gone to the bath house today. She had thought that my room would be empty and wanted to bring her lover here and have some fun. Because today was her turn for your visit, she could not take him to her room. By chance the bath house did not have any water so we forgot about it and decided to come back home. Since we got here unannounced they could not leave the room and they went behind the curtain, so that they could have their fun and also hide from us. They wanted to wait until I left the room so that they could find an opportunity and escape. This is the truth, think about it and don't be fooled by this slut. Don't be suspicious of me unjustly. (59)

Both stories reveal little about the women's living situation and are focused on the events leading to the alleged transgression. What they do reveal however, although marginal, is the existence of meticulous systems of management regulated and supervised by Mirza Habib's wives that are idiosyncratic of a *harem* (a secluded quarter of a house reserved for women in aristocratic and royal families). All textual evidence points to the fact that Mirza Habib does have a *harem* (or *haramsara*) in his house. The only instance that the word *haramsara* is directly mentioned though comes later in the play (in the Third Act) where the Khan questions Teymur: "...so, what were you doing at vizier's *haramkhaneh*?" (*khob dar haramkhaneh-ye vazir cheh kar dashti?*) (69). References to women's separate rooms, maids, eunuchs, and entourage chaperoning women to public places such as bath houses further imply the existence of the institution of *harem*. In *harems* (especially in royal *harems*) women took charge of its precise administration according to their rank. "Each woman had white and black servants and eunuchs, whose number varied according to her status. Some wives had a house apart with personnel and

stables of their own, whose expenses were supported by the crown.”²⁹ This description of the amenities afforded to women in *harems* corresponds to the on-goings of Mirza Habib’s household. In addition to highlighting the overseeing of a dynamic system of household that Sholeh and Ziba manage, their accounts of the events preceding the discovery of Teymur and Ziba behind the curtains, reinforce how these women constantly strive to extend and negotiate their power base within the household. In doing so and in spite of their subservient status to the vizier, and in addition to their attempts to constantly negotiating their place within the household, they do so in relation to each other as well as in relation to their husband.

One of the examples of the constant struggle in carving out their individual space is reflected in Ziba’s account. The alleged mistreatment of one of Ziba’s maids by Sholeh and Ziba’s exclamation of protest became an opportunity in which Ziba could voice her complaint, and more importantly assert her authority as the first wife.

Let’s go back to the point in the narrative where Ziba intent to settle a dispute with Sholeh enters her room. As she is moving towards the room and under her breath she begins addressing her invisible rival vociferously and exclaims: “You don’t pay my servant’s wages. Why are you insulting her? (57) Ziba’s querulous remark is imbued with important information that although minimal lends insight into both wives’ lives. Ziba addresses her maid using two different words: *kaniz* and *nan-khor*. *Kaniz* is a word that is commonly used for female servants and it also means a slave girl. There is no textual evidence to suggest whether Ziba’s *kaniz* is indeed a slave girl or a simply a maidservant.

²⁹ Anna Vaznan, “Harem,” *Iranica*. Also for more information on the dynamics of a *harem* see Abbas Amanat’s *Pivot of the Universe: Nasir al-Din Shah and the Iranian Monarchy, 1831-1896*. California: University of California Press, 1997 and *Khaterat-e Taj al-Saltaneh* (Memoirs of Taj al-Saltaneh) edited by Mansureh Ettehadiyyeh and Sirus Sa’dvandian. Tehran: Nashr-e Taikh-e Iran, 1982.

However, given the time that this play was written (1851) it is entirely possible that *kaniz* in this play does reference a slave girl. Historical evidence also supports the custom of owning slaves in the royal courts and the home of the wealthy. Iran's slave trade history can be traced back to the third century.³⁰ However, scholars like Anthony Lee and Thomas Ricks have shown in their works that nineteenth-century Iran experienced a boom in the slave trade, especially by the way of Persian Gulf.³¹ Many African women were brought to Iran to work as domestic servants in the royal courts, homes of the aristocrats and the wealthy. In Ziba's remarks the word *kaniz* is immediately followed by *nan-khor*, which in colloquial Persian is a reference to somebody whose livelihood is dependent upon another's income or job.³² Here, the word *nan-khor*, which is comprised of *nan* (bread) and *khoreh* (the passive part of a compound noun meaning one who eats), is used as an adjective (although it can also be used as a noun). Generally used in a condescending way, *nan-khor* then designates the place of a person who is called as such on the lower end of the social strata. The total dependency of a *nan-khor* on others divests the person from exerting any sort of authority or any control over their affairs. Their unmitigated reliance on the other hand presents the provider of *nan* (bread) with all the authority and control. This is the very point that Ziba is trying to make. By employing the word *nan-khor* to describe her *kaniz*, Ziba is intent to ossify her position as a figure of authority vis-à-vis her rival. Furthermore, if we take *kaniz* to actually mean a slave girl we can then assume that Ziba is her owner and the maid her property. So, in questioning

³⁰ Thomas Ricks, "Slaves and Slave Trade Trading in Shi'i Iran, AD 1500-1900." *Journal of Asian and African Studies*. vol. 36 (2001): 407-418, 407.

³¹ Thomas Ricks talks about different routes for the slave trade including the Persian Gulf region, northwestern Afghanistan, and the Caucasus.

³² The phrase can also be a reference to one's wife and/or children.

Sholeh's right to discipline *her* maid Ziba's complaint highlights the limits of authority that is assigned to each wife as well. In other words, the incident provided Ziba with the opportunity to fight for her property and negotiate boundaries of authority. In addition to managing the complexities of interpersonal relationships in a polygamous household, Ziba and Sholeh are also charged with various responsibilities concerning their quarters. As the women's stories reveal, the women's quarters in Mirza Habib's house has an intricate and methodical administration system that is managed solely by his wives. This includes the overseeing of maids, servants, eunuchs, and even handling finances. One can argue that domestic servants were "major sites of the management" practiced by the mistresses of the household.³³ Such acts, although they may seem peripheral, do illustrate feminine power aimed at enlarging the personal space as well as engendering authority. In her study of female characters in Bengali fiction Banani Mukhai questions the feminine power "not in absolute terms" and "not in its masculine incarnation." She proposes:

Even peripheral influences lend vigor to women's sense of identity, of their personal worth. This sense of identity of personal worth, their self-assertion, sometimes muted, at others overtly articulated, took a definite form, a form of protest, denial, resistance. (*Women's Images Men's Imagination* 17)

Similar to Ziba's story, Sholeh's version of the events, which is by no means muted but rather "overtly articulated," is accusatory. Ziba's entry into Sholeh's room, her sphere of influence and her territory, without her knowledge is an act of transgression in Sholeh's

³³ In *Burying the Beloved* Amy Motlagh talks about the domestic servants and their role in empowering and at the same time threatening the emerging figure of the "companionate wife" in modern Iran (during the early decades of the twentieth-century).

eyes. Discovering Ziba behind the curtains with an unrelated man is humiliating and Sholeh employs the occasion to level accusations of disloyalty. This embarrassing incident is the perfect opportunity for Sholeh to tip the scales in her favor and even entertain hopes of Ziba's dismissal considering the gravity of the situation that Ziba was discovered in. Should she succeed in convincing her husband, Sholeh would in turn gain more power and solidify her position within the household: things that were probably denied her due to her status as a second wife, therefore lacking seniority, and finally due to her younger age.

Sholeh's story further highlights the constant competition between the two wives by exposing a system that is specific to polygamous relationships. Sholeh mentions in her retelling of the events that on that day it was Ziba's *turn* to have her husband in her rooms: "because today was her turn for you to go to her room" (*chunkeh emruz nobeh-ye otaq-e u bud keh shoma tashrif bebarid*).³⁴ The word *nobeh* (colloquial for *nobat*) generally means "turn" or "time." Based on what Sholeh has divulged in her narrative it seems that Mirza Habib divides his time between his two wives. So, it is safe to imagine that both wives live in constant trepidation and fear of losing their appeal in the eyes of their husband: thus, they must compete for his attention at all times. In other words, the battle over gaining the vizier's trust is an unwavering factor of this system (a polygamous marriage). The competition must include constant plotting to undermine and eliminate the rival in the hopes of strengthening one's own place. This fact is obvious when Sholeh cautions her husband against Ziba's *makr* (guile) and pleads with her husband: "Do not be suspicious of me unjustifiably" (59). In further demeaning the rival both women use

³⁴ Akhundzadeh, *Comedies*, 59.

specific words to sully the other's virtue. Here is the tail end of the argument between the wives:

Sholeh: Your wife is used to jabber, ramble, and lying like a parrot. (58)

Ziba (screaming at Sholeh): You are wicked what is all this talk that you are fabricating about me? I am not like you. Ah, ah, I swear to God I will kill myself. (59)

Sholeh: You are the wicked one, and you are a whore. If you want to kill yourself go ahead, or don't. Everyone in Lankaran now knows your trickery. You cannot present yourself as honest. Your husband has eyes and can see whether it is your doing or mine. (60)

Ziba: Oh, help! God, I will kill myself! Man, why don't you smack this shameless [woman] who is accusing me of such things? You are just standing there and watching? (60)

Sholeh: You whore, why should he smack me? If he is a man he should tear you into pieces because you have been with a strange man. (60)

Their hostile back and forth include name calling such as *bi haya* (shameless) and *lakateh* (whore). The words *bihaya* and *lakateh* unambiguously signify a woman who is disgraceful, immoral, and a prostitute. A woman that fits those descriptions has no place in a respectable home and will suffer grave consequences on account of her lasciviousness. References to acts of violence such as "smacking" and "tearing one into pieces" that the other should endure imply that the women must be fully aware of the unforgiving consequences of sexual transgression that could transpire. In other words, if she is found guilty of such indiscretion she could very well suffer physical punishment as well as be dismissed. Although the Persian phrase "*beh dahan zadan*" suggests the actual violent action of smacking a person over the mouth, however, the phrase used in this context can also be interpreted as shutting somebody up. When applied either literally or

figuratively each woman is at least looking to silence the other in the hopes of raising her own voice.

In addition to disgrace the rival by attacking her virtue, both Ziba and Sholeh in turn accuse each other of resorting to *dorugh* (lying) *harf sakhtan* (fabrication), *bohtan* (accusation), and *hileh* (trickery). The connection between femininity and guile is an old established assumption shared by many authors (mainly male) that readily equates femininity with trickery and presents it as a natural tendency specific to women or at least the “socialized woman” as suggested by Milani.³⁵ The presence of guileful and wily women does reinforce the idea that being “cunning” is idiosyncratically female; however it also begs the question that would these women act the same way if their conditions were varied?

³⁵ Farzaneh Milani, “The Mediatory Guile of the Nanny in Persian Romance.” *Iranian Studies*. (1999):181-201, 181.

Superstition & Women, A Modern Paradigm?

Most Persian dervishes, although they have great pretensions to sanctity by which they impose upon the people, high and low, are without religion. They are however credited with working miracles, and with being able to give efficacious charms. They are consequently always welcome in house or tent. There is invariably a woman who wants a child, or a girl a husband, or an old man a philter, or a youth protection from wounds by sword or gun, or a whole family with sore eyes—they all come to the dervish, who is ready to prescribe a charm as a remedy for every ill, or to give an amulet which is warranted to preserve the wearer against every accident. Although these dervishes are rank imposters, and generally arrant scoundrels, they maintain their influence over the ignorant or superstitious Persians of all classes, who greatly fear, and do not dare to offend them. (*Early Adventures in Persia* 231-232)

These are the words of Sir Austen Henry Layard (1817-1894) who traveled through Persia between 1840 and 1842. Layard's critical observation is an example of what many European spectators who visited Iran at the time wrote about. Such "less than objective observations," as Tavakoli-Targhi puts it, were common during the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries.³⁶ It was during this time-period that Persians found themselves being seen by the European Other as primitive and uncivilized at best.³⁷ An example of the many remarks by European travelers, who described Iran to be a backward country infested with superstition and ignorance, did not go unnoticed by the reformists including Akhundzadeh. Both *Comedies* and his other works (fiction and non-fiction included) in part reflect the author's pointed concern regarding rampant superstition and the use of magic, talisman, and charms amongst Iranians. The philosophical core of *Comedies* revolves around "the conflict between reason and traditional superstitions, customs, and

³⁶ For more information see Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi's "Persianate Europology" in *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and Historiography*. New York: Palgrave, 2011. In that chapter Targhi explains that both Orientalist and Occidental accounts of Persians and Europeans were "based on self-experience and eye-witness accounts of alterity:" hence they were less than objective and biased at best.

³⁷ Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and Historiography*, 36.

practices.”³⁸ In an essay entitled “Mirza Fath ‘Ali Akhundzadeh and the Call for Modernization of the Islamic World” Mehrdad Kia elaborates on this conflict in Akhundzadeh’ s oeuvre and enumerates the author’s critique of corrupt government officials and “ignorant and opportunistic charlatans and mystics” (428). Kia maintains:

Akhundzadeh’ s protagonists, who came for the most part from the popular classes, appeared as powerless individuals struggling against corruption, traditional values and customs, and archaic beliefs and practices as represented by the patriarchal family structure. They were the victims of a backward society which refused to break away from its traditional norms and adopt modern ideas and institutions which would allow the individual to live, explore and discover his destiny in peace, justice and freedom. (Mirza Fath ‘Ali Akhundzadeh and the Call for Modernization of the Islamic World 429)

Although Kia’s observations regarding a society that was grappling with traditional beliefs in the wake of a movement that aimed at eradicating them is pertinent, however his analysis of the characters of *Comedies* in its entirety seems to be reducing them into one category only: “victims.” It is safe to assume that most stories include heroes and villains, victors and victims, and therefore, the same rule applies to Akhundzadeh’ s plays. The plays do include people who have either fallen victims due to their own ignorance or they have been wronged by social and cultural injustice. In fact many of the protagonists in *Comedies* are far from being “powerless individuals.” They exhibit a great deal of power and strength albeit within circumscribed situations.

The issue of superstition and its power to victimize individuals and abuse their trust is indeed a topic that Akhundzadeh tackles in some of the plays in the collection. However, the author’s portrayal of women’s proclivity towards resorting to magic and

³⁸ Mehrdad Kia, “Mirza Fath ‘Ali Akhundzadeh and the Call for Modernization of the Islamic World.” *Middle Eastern Studies*. no. 31 (1999): 422-448, 428.

other superstitious practices has to be understood and analyzed in light of women's status quo and their access to resources or the lack thereof. While the traditionalist camp attempted to define women's susceptibility to practice superstition as natural and specific to women, reformists, including Akhundzadeh, saw this problem as the extension of societal and cultural flaws and presented it as malady.³⁹ Critics like Kia, Afary, Targhi, 'Ameli-Rezaei, amongst many, have aptly observed Akhundzadeh's disparagement of superstitious beliefs and magic. However, what is missing from their observation is the discussion of ingenuity in women's application of such practices to problem solve and the causation behind their appeal to such customs.

The play's fourth and final act is demonstrative of a society that engages in superstitious practices that is specific to women. What is remarkable is that this act includes an incident that reveals more than what may be perceived ostensibly that represents superstitious women. In this particular scene women are able to utilize superstition in an ingenious way that while it does not upset the hierarchical structure of authority and patriarchy on the surface it does outsmart men. What happens is as follows:

The two sisters (Sholeh and Nessa) anxious and distraught regarding Teymur's fate are in deep conversation when suddenly the fugitive appears in front of them with a smile on his face. In response to their concern about having come back to vizier's place where he might get caught, Teymur expresses his undying love for Nessa and says that not even the fear of death could prevent him from seeing his beloved.⁴⁰ Teymur then divulges his plans to elope with his fiancé that same night. At this point of the narrative,

³⁹ Dariush Rahmanian & Zahra Hatami, "Sehr va Jadu, Telesm va Ta'viz va Donya-ye Zanan dar 'Asr-e Qajar (Sorcery and Magic, Talisman and Ta'viz and the World of Women in Qajar Iran). *Jastarha-ye Tarikhi*. No. 2. (2012): 22-44, 33.

⁴⁰ Akhundzadeh, *Comedies*, 75.

Aqa Mas‘ud, the eunuch, barges in to inform everyone that Mirza Habib is on his way towards Sholeh’s room. Once again the women plead with Teymur to hide behind the curtain. Teymur accepts reluctantly. When Mirza Habib enters the room he is pleased to see both Sholeh and Nessa there, since he finds it an excellent opportunity to break the news of Nessa’s imminent engagement to the Khan. Before doing so he warns his wife to think about her *niknami* (honor) and not to entertain a *namahram* (a male who is outside of the circle of kinship) lest she sully Khan’s reputation.⁴¹ He continues reprovingly:

I say these things to you because I want you to behave in a way that ill-intentioned words should not be spoken about you in Khan’s presence. He might become disinterested in Nessa khanum. Since, right now he is so excited about Nessa khanum. He has also ordered me to plan and prepare for the wedding for next week. Here is a ring that has sent as a gift. Nessa khanum here put it on. (77)

Vizier’s statement is another example of Rubin’s notion of “kinship system” and its internal workings at play. Stressing the controversial nature of the internal mechanisms of kinship systems Rubin writes: “Kinship systems vary wildly from one culture to the next. They contain all sorts of bewildering rules which govern whom one may or may not marry. Their internal complexity is dazzling” (19). These “bewildering rules” don’t seem bewildering to a character like vizier. He simply executes these rules as they come natural to him as the figure of authority. There is no ambiguity in his role when he arranges the marriage between his sister-in-law and the Khan. In fact his ignoring Nessa’s presence in the room and instead addressing his wife of his plans for Nessa is further proof of his sense of inherent entitlement over the women in his custody. Even the motivation behind discussing the matter with his wife, Sholeh, and not the future bride is

⁴¹ Ibid., 77.

not to seek her counsel, but to make sure that no further transgression is committed that could potentially ruin the chances of forming an alliance with the Khan. Moreover, vizier's conclusion further adds to the complexity of the kinship system when one woman's impropriety can cost another woman the prospects of a marriage: in this case an entirely patriarchal accord.

Immediately after the vizier hands over the ring to Nessa, she refuses it without hesitation and exclaims: "A girl whose sister is being subject to suspicion is not worthy of khan. Take this ring and find a girl who is worthy of him and give it to her" (77). Apart from coming to her sister's defense—a sign of female solidarity—Nessa's sarcasm is directed at the inherent hypocrisy and insincerity of such unions. She puts the ring down in front of her brother-in-law and leaves the room. The vizier is indignant by Nessa's insolence. At this moment in the narrative, Pari Khanum enters the room accompanied by the outspoken Nessa. Before Mirza Habib gets a chance to direct his complaint about Nessa's defiance to his mother-in-law, Pari Khanum says she has something important to tell him. She continues:

I went to see Qorban the fortuneteller to buy a charm. God willing, and by His grace my daughter Sholeh Khanum will bear you a son. The fortuneteller wrote the incantation and said that I need to give wheat measuring to three times the size of vizier's head for *Samanu* (Persian sweet wheat pudding) to the poor. Now, I need to take your head's measurement as the *Samanu* making season is coming to an end. (79)

Mirza Habib expresses his astonishment when he hears about the task at hand and retorts: "How can you measure my head and its equivalent as long as it is attached to my body?" (79). Pari Khanum's nonchalantly responds:

My dear, I can, and it is very simple. The fortuneteller taught me how to do it. A deep bowl needs to be put on your head. The capacity of whatever bowl that fits your head will then equal your head's measurement. Nessa Khanum, bring a bowl over here. (79)

The vizier reluctantly accepts to participate in the ritual for Sholeh's sake. What goes on afterwards is a comical scene that exemplifies women's ingenuity at play. Based on the textual information we can assume that before entering the room Nessa had brought her mother up to speed and had told her about Teymur's hiding place behind the curtains in Sholeh's room. Notwithstanding his reluctance to participate in the practice prescribed by the fortuneteller, the vizier succumbs to the order despite the strange nature of what has been ordered (*taklif namonaseb ast*) (80). He says: "...I cannot refuse. I must do what has been told" (*nemitavanam mozayegheh konam. Har nahvi keh gofteh-and bayad 'amal kard*) (80). Vizier's statement indicates that although he may not be a strong believer in superstitious practices, but his participation and the precision with which he wishes for the task to be executed undermine the idea that believing in magic and superstition has been exclusive to women. What is worth noticing here is that there is no textual evidence to confirm that what Pari Khanum had asked her son-in-law to undergo was in fact the exact orders of the fortuneteller. It is plausible that after becoming aware of Teymur and her daughters' conundrum Pari Khanum improvised the story.

In order to perform the fortuneteller's orders, Pari Khanum gently removes her son-in-law's hat. Then orders Nessa to place the bowls over vizier's head. At this point and in order to make the bowl which is clearly too small to cover vizier's head completely, Nessa pushes hard but the bowl only comes down to vizier's eyebrows. The pressure makes him scream out of pain, complains that his nose is broken, and asks her to

be more gentle (80). Nessa removes the bowl and brings a bigger one. Vizier is still anxious to discuss the urgent business of Nessa and Khan's marriage with her mother-in-law, but Pari khanum insists that the task must be done now and crying she says: "Is it fair that at my old age I should die before seeing Sholeh carrying a child?" (81). Here again Pari Khanum is able to use her emotion as a worried mother to convince the vizier to see the task through, which he does. The next bowl fits and covers vizier's head all the way down to his neck. At this moment, Pari Khanum motions to Sholeh to get Teymur out from behind the curtain and the room. Once Teymur is gone Nessa removes the bowl. The rest of the narrative revolves around the altercation between Teymur who is finally discovered by vizier and Khan's people. Still loyal to the deposed Khan (Teymur's father), the soldiers pledge allegiance to Teymur: his son. Meanwhile, messengers bring news of Khan's death who drowned due to inclement weather during his sea voyage. People rejoice, Teymur is elected Lankaran's khan, and vizier is stripped off his position. And, finally Teymur orders preparations for his wedding to Nessa to begin.

Many scholars have discussed that in Islamic literature in general and Persian literature in particular, written and oral, women's trick (*makr-e zan*) is considered a topos.⁴² In an article entitled "Whose Best Tricks? *Makr-i zan* as a Topos in Persian Oral Literature," Margaret Mills in conversation with Milani, Najmabadi, and Merguerian (based on their study of *Yusuf va Zulaykha* in its Qur'anic version) tells us that her suggestions in concurrence with others find the construction of female desire (usually sexual desire, sometimes greed) and guile to be linked (262). The classical tradition of Persian literature, the story of Yusuf being one example, Mills concludes is "on its

⁴² Scholars like Najmabadi, Milani, Merguerian, and Mills have discussed the concept of *makr-e zan* or *keyd un-nisa*, which they generally translate as "women's guile" in their works.

surface, generally misogynist, reinforcing a stereotype of the active woman as lacking a moral compass, morally inferior to man by nature” (263). In other words their collective postulations point to a bias in the range of portrayals of female motives and actions by male authors. This theory holds true for many works of literature, primarily in the classical cannon, such as Jami’s (1414-1492) *Yusuf va Zulaykha* (Yusuf and Zoleykha) that forms the basis for Najmabadi and Merguerian’s study.

As previously discussed, one of the tasks of the new intellectuals such as Akhundzadeh was to consciously distance themselves from the classical tradition. They did so not only in terms of form, and genre but also in terms of themes that they incorporated in their works as well. While Akhundzadeh’s portrayal of guileful women is still male-centered and is within the traditional capacity and role that women occupied at the time, it is not misogynistic either as some like Mills have argued. The incident simply sheds light on a small portion of women’s imagined lives at the time and inadequacies of resources available to them presenting them as the main reasons behind women’s guile and dishonest behavior. In order to better elucidate my point let me try to review Pari Khanum’s motives for visiting a fortuneteller and using trickery to deceive her son-in-law. According to the text Pari Khanum had gone to the fortuneteller to buy a charm for Sholeh to conceive a son. There is no textual evidence to suggest that Mirza Habib has any children from his first wife and Pari Khanum’s little rendezvous with the fortuneteller attests to the fact that Sholeh is having trouble conceiving a child. So, should Sholeh produce a child and preferably male she can secure her future in vizier’s household as childlessness for many women in that society was grounds for divorce or taking another wife. Lady Sheil, the wife of the British minister Austin Sheil, wrote

extensively on Persian women during her stay there (1849-53). With respect to women's security and its relation to having male children she wrote: "The grand ambition of every married woman is to have several sons, as through them she is secured consideration and a provision in advanced years" (148-149). Since Sholeh is the younger wife we can assume that Mirza Habib married her because Ziba was unable to give him children. And as mentioned before, knowing that Mirza Habib provides for Sholeh, her mother, and her sister it is only natural that these women have recourse to everything at their disposal to safeguard their situation. We will never know whether the women in this story are firm believers of the power of charms and incantations. But, fear of dismissal and the uncertainty of future are enough motivation behind their appeal to superstitious practices.

In another section of her travelogue Lady Sheil makes a similar observation:

When a woman finds herself neglected and cast aside, and that she has ceased to please, she sometimes has recourse to incantations and endeavors to bewitch her husband. She decks herself, and, if possible, him, with charms and talismans; she presents nazr—as an offering to God or to any of the prophets or saints is called—of a sheep, or anything else (like the Jews of old), which is afterwards given to the poor. (*Glimpses of Life and Manners in Persia* 147-148)

What is remarkable in this story is that rather than attempt to break free of their defined gender roles that they were brought up in these women, in the time of crisis, are able to use superstitious practices in order to influence figures of authority and change the course of events conducive to their situation. On the one hand the issue of women and their association with superstitious practices addresses "the oppressive power of women in

traditional society” (Karim 264).⁴³ On the other the inclusion of vizier in the practice and his complicity addresses Akhundzadeh’ s concerns regarding the pervasiveness of such practices amongst both genders. While in the story it is the man who blindly follows the orders of a fortuneteller and believes that the task must be performed (*bayad ‘amal kard*), women use the same occasion to solve a problem.

⁴³ In her review of Moniru Ravanipur’s *Sangha-ye Sheytan* (Satan’s Stones) Persis Karim talks briefly about the use of superstition in villages and the “oppressive” power it gives women. *Iranian Studies*. vol. 36. no. 2 (June 2003): 263-266, 264.

Satire, A Didactic Tool

The incorporation of comical occurrences throughout the play is deliberate and demonstrate Akhundzadeh's firm belief in the power of comedy as the perfect medium through which criticism is best communicated and practiced.⁴⁴ As Maryam Sanjabi observes, Akhundzadeh—an admirer of Molière's and Voltaire's comedies—was “well aware of the effectiveness of the theatrical medium, particularly comedies, in conveying to a wider public the message of social change.”⁴⁵ Echoing Sanjabi's observation, Iraj Parsinejad also suggests that Akhundzadeh used categories such as “lampooning, satire, and criticism interchangeably,” and indiscriminately in the hopes of promoting the art of practicing constructive criticism and his wish to eradicate ignorance from his society.⁴⁶ In one of his famous essays entitled “fan-e kritika” (The Art of Criticism) Akhundzadeh writes: “Today in every European country satirical newspapers, that is, journals of criticism and burlesque, are printed and distributed each week dealing with the disgraceful behavior of their countrymen.”⁴⁷ Elsewhere he conveys similar sentiments:

⁴⁴ The third act best represents Akhundzadeh's use of satire to underscore the incompetence and ignorance of the ruler. In this act the Khan of Lankaran, surrounded by the nobles and courtiers, is at his court settling disputes. In this act the Khan rules on two different complaints brought to his attention by the people of Lankaran. In both cases the ruling has no basis in justice and is ludicrous. Here is an example of one of the cases that the Khan ruled on: a petitioner is presented to the Khan to plea his case against the town *hakim* (physician). The petitioner explains that he brought in the physician to visit his sick brother. He had paid the doctor three *Tomans* hoping that his emaciated brother could regain some weight. As soon as the physician saw the patient he performed a phlebotomy on him, which resulted in the death of the patient. Outraged by the outcome the petitioner had asked for his money back, but the physician refused. When the Khan asked the physician about the reasons behind his treatment the physician responded that the patient was suffering from *estesgha* (edema) and had he not bled the patient he would have died in less than six months. This way, the physician continued, he had saved the brother six months expense. After hearing the physician's explanations the Khan orders the mourning petitioner to pay an extra sum of money to the doctor as a sign of gratitude for having saved him all that money.

⁴⁵ Maryam Sanjabi, “Rereading the Enlightenment: Akhundzada and His Voltaire.” *Iranian Studies*. (1995): 39-60, 42.

⁴⁶ Parsinejad, *A History of Literary Criticism in Iran*, 47.

⁴⁷ Qtd. in Parsinejad, 47.

“European states have spent millions to erect theaters, wherein men and women listen to critical and ridiculous stories pertaining to their fellow citizens, and watch comical plays from which they take lessons.”⁴⁸

In addition to learning lessons through using satire, in “Vizier of Lankaran,” the vizier is the target of all the comical events that moves him from gradual humiliation and ends with his ruin. Vizier’s slow tumble into disgrace is linked to his desperate and constant struggle to balance and negotiate his relationship with his wives. Vizier’s challenge in negotiating his authority at home reverberates in his profession as well. Two comical incidents at the end of act one and two depict Mirza Habib’s fight for authority and power.

As we have learned by the end of act one, Mirza Habib has heard from his first wife about accusations of indecency and infidelity committed by his second wife. After his first wife Ziba leaves the scene, deeply engrossed in his thoughts, the vizier prepares to leave the room and go to the Khan’s court and report Teymur’s offence. Meanwhile, his foot gets caught in a colander that he had not seen lying about the room. Mirza Habib stumbles upon the object and the colander hits him in his knee. In pain and furious, the vizier begins questioning members of his household to find the person who had left the colander in the room. Finally, the stable boy, while trembling, confesses to the act and explains that he had forgotten to take his colander with him when he came to see if the vizier was going to ride on that day. To everyone’s surprise the vizier orders his men to bastinado Agha Bashir, his overseer, instead of the stable boy. Vizier’s men hold down the overseer and begin whipping the soles of his feet. Screaming, Agha Bashir asks why

⁴⁸ Ibid.

he is being punished instead of the wrongdoer. At this point, Mirza Habib stops the beating and explains:

Aqa Bashir, your mistake is the fact that you have not made the servants understand their duty. You have the authority over everyone who works in this house. You, yourself, must assign them their place and their duties and make them understand them. The stable boy should never be anywhere else except for the stable. (46)

The disparity between the misconduct and its punishment shows the extent of Mirza Habib's fear of losing his authority and seeing disorderly conduct. The alleged transgression of his wife has challenged and undermined Mirza Habib's authority and sense of control. Thus, the punishment of bastinado for the mismanagement of his overseer is in fact symbolic of Mirza Habib's failure in managing his own affairs and lack of control in preventing intruders from disturbing the order of his household and impinging on his property (his women). Also, by emphasizing that the "place" of each person within the house must be recognized, he is reaffirming his own place as the head in the chain of command. In a way the desperate vizier is trying to restore his self-confidence by exerting dominance where he could.

In the second act, the guilty party is Khajeh Mas'ud: the eunuch.⁴⁹ During the argument with his wives over why Teymur and Ziba were behind the curtains in Sholeh's room, Mirza Habib orders Khajeh Mas'ud to bring him some coffee. As the argument was heating up and going nowhere, the unfortunate Khajeh Mas'ud appears with a hot

⁴⁹ The word *khajeh* or *khawjah* (in some cases) mean eunuch. Eunuchs were customary in the homes of the wealthy and in royal harems. They were basically the interlocutors between the outside world and the women's world. For more information see Willem Floor's chapter called "Homosexual Relations: A Common Affair" in *A Social History of Sexual Relations in Iran* and Anna Vaznan's entry on Iranica: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/eunuchs#pt5>

cup of coffee from behind where the vizier was seated. Khajeh Mas‘ud approaching the vizier from behind offers the coffee to his master. Frustrated and apparently in no mood for coffee, Mirza Habib suddenly turns and knocks the cup of hot coffee out of Khajeh Mas‘ud’s hand, which inadvertently burns Khajeh Mas‘ud and retorts angrily:

Get lost you idiot, at this moment of frustration drinking coffee has no place. I am going to see the Khan at this instant and everything will become clear. (61)

As the narrative progresses vizier’s authority is undermined further and further. What is worth noticing is how the vizier negotiates and manages his authority in the domestic and professional/public spheres. The rumors of his second wife’s infidelity and the discovery of his first wife behind the curtains with another man are as confusing as they are disconcerting to Mirza Habib. A trespasser has violated codes of honor and his most private space has been intruded upon. In act one and two, Mirza Habib’s outraged and disproportionate reaction to the small offences of a forgotten object in his room and the knocking over of hot coffee are symbolic of his inability to restore order and punish the *real* culprit. In other words, disciplining the stable boy and the eunuch of his *haramsara* and even resorting to corporal punishment is an effort to restore *his* image as the ultimate voice of authority and is meant to set an example for others.

However, although the stable boy and the eunuch are Mirza Habib’s subordinates, the nature of their subordination to his authority is different than the subservient nature of his wives. It seems to be more complex. Although both wives have been caught conducting mischief Mirza Habib’s condemnation of their actions stops at verbal admonishment and bickering. The vizier reserves the full expression of his rage for his

servants instead. It is as if there is a limit to his dominance over his wives and to how much he wishes to displease the two women. Based on the text we know that Mirza Habib favors his younger wife and wishes to remain on her good side. Vizier's discriminatory behavior towards his first wife and his aversion towards her becomes further apparent at the end of the second act. After he hears both sides of the story and listens to his wives accusing each other of dishonesty and cheating, he turns to Ziba and exclaims:

Of course, I should tear you up into pieces. Now, give me some time so that I get to the Khan. First, I will take care of your *friend* [my emphasis], then I will think of something else to do with you. You have spent all of your life telling lies. I know you. (60)

Mirza Habib's tone is confident here. There is no sense of apprehensiveness in his wishful expression of reserving a violent punishment for Ziba. Blaming her for "having lied all of her life" is another sign that there is deep resentment between the two or at least harbored by the husband.

At the end of act two Mirza Habib orders Khajeh Mas'ud to prepare his horse and decides to leave for the Khan's palace to report Teymur's offence. Resorting to a higher authority (i.e. the Khan) in order to eliminate the trespasser (Teymur), who is the common denominator in disturbing the order of his household, is another attempt by the vizier to regain control of his domestic affairs as well as fortifying his official position.

Conclusion

Perhaps a visionary, Akhundzadeh strived to produce a literature that addressed the social needs of its time, which were common amongst the intellectuals. In *Comedies*' plays, Akhundzadeh portrays an array of female characters who encounter hardships. These characters are both victorious and defeated. The plays show women' abject subjugation to men's authority as well as their resourcefulness in undermining men. Borrowing tools of critical skepticism from his Russian contemporaries and European literature allowed Akhundzadeh to discuss issues of social criticism in the European fashion. As Parsinejad notes: "Akhundzadeh was making a vitally important intellectual break with the past and blazing a new trail, yet at the same time reaffirming the time-honored criteria for the evaluation of literature: novelty, freshness, and "excellence" of content and of diction" (*A History of Literary Criticism in Iran* 56).

As we have seen above "Vizier of Lankaran" attests to Akhundzadeh' s commitment in planting the seeds of the need for social and literary reforms. His adaptation of play as his mode of expression was innovative at the time. The play's plain and simple prose, which includes colloquialism, is a far cry from the highly stylized prose of the classical texts. Akhundzadeh' s portrayal of seemingly realistic female characters, his advocacy for marriage based on love, and his criticisms of arranged-marriage are signs of his progressive thinking. With respect to "The Woman Question" in Iran, what Akhundzadeh provides in this play and in *Comedies* in general is the opportunity to investigate women's oppression and the possibilities for resistance and positive change that they strived towards. Although, women in this play are assigned traditional roles, their actions constantly challenge tradition. They show a great deal of agency, they are

resilient and most importantly they are not silent. Their achievement does not translate to total emancipation or materialization of social and civil rights. However, the fact that most of the narrative, at least in the case of “Lankaran’s Vizier,” takes place within female private space underscores the women’s limitations in every aspect of their lives as well as their resourcefulness and efforts to constantly be negotiating these limits.

Akhundzadeh names his heroine Nessa, which means “women” in Arabic. One may argue that Nessa is the representation of all Iranian women who reject higher authority. So, in a way the Khan’s marriage proposal is symbolic of the women who defy figures of authority. This is an indication that Akhundzadeh did not perceive women, behind the walls of the *andarun* (women’s quarters) as voiceless and without agency. He criticizes a society that is incapable of hearing their voices. It is through reading the plays like “Lankaran’s Vizier” in *Comedies* that we see examples of the likes of Nessa, which perhaps speak of an author who moved faster than his society did.

The play has a happy ending. Justice is on the side of the earned-authority and not ascribed power. Although Teymur can be considered as the hero of the story who fought against injustice and for love, women are instrumental in his victory. “Men in conceptualizing women as heroes, are much more likely to imagine them behaving as if they were men, since men’s heroic agency is the ideal cultural form and more positively conceivable to them (as men) than female powers exercised within female sphere” (Mills 254). While the story is loyal to this definition of heroism it also challenges it as the entire narrative revolves around women’s active role throughout.

The advocacy for a companionate marriage in Akhundzadeh’s work placed women at the center of a completely new debate. Romantic love does have a strong place

within the classical tradition of Iranian literature. Stories such as Jami's (1414-1492) *Yusof o Zoleykha* (Yusof and Zoleykha) or Gorgani's *Vis o Ramin* (Vis and Ramin) written in the eleventh-century are a couple of examples of stories about romantic love. However, concepts of *ma'shuq* (beloved), *'asheq* (lover) and *'eshq* (love) dominate the semantic field of mysticism. Coupled with the gender unspecified pronouns in Persian language the idea of romantic love in such literature is sometimes allegorical. Authors and intellectuals who followed Akhundzadeh assigned women the role of the beloved. As Iran went through tumultuous political and social cycles and as foreign encroachment threatened Iranian sovereignty the figure of the beloved as woman went through a major transformation. Woman as beloved came to signify concepts such as homeland in need of protection. While the goal of Akhundzadeh and his contemporaries was to propagate ideas of social reform, the Constitutional Revolution gave rise to a generation of playwrights, authors, and poets who followed the course of their predecessors. Their work, as an extension of the likes of Akhundzadeh reflected social criticism, but nationalism took center stage. Women became the tool with which such authors exalted nationalistic ideologies. As it is opined by many scholars women's entrance into national arena and nationalistic debate is a fairly recent and partial endeavor (Yuval-Davis 3).

In the next chapter I will discuss how a young and passionate poet by the name of Mohammad-Reza Mirzadeh 'Eshqi employed the figure of woman to nationalistic ends. His frustration with the course of the Constitutional Revolution and his opposition to the republican movement initiated by Iran's prime minister found their articulation in the images of violated and abandoned women. Continuing a popular nationalist discourse, 'Eshqi assigned Arab men and the Arab Conquest of Persia the blame for the aggression

against Iranian women in particular and Iran's backwardness in general. 'Eshqi criticized the veil as one of the symbols of destruction and decay that in his view had plagued Iran.

Chapter Three

Patriotic Poetry and Women: Trope of Woman as Nationalistic Symbol in “The Black Shroud”¹

During the early hours of July 3 in 1923, in the city of Tehran, a young poet and journalist was gunned down in his yard by two men in plain clothes. The assassination of Mohammad-Reza Mirzadeh ‘Eshqi took place by the orders of Prime Minister Reza Khan, who would be Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925–41).² ‘Eshqi, an ardent nationalist and supporter of the Constitution, despised Prime Minister’s republican movement (*jomhuri*).³ His untimely death instantaneously elevated him to the ranks of a great poet and a martyr. Frustrated with the course of the Constitutional Revolution (1906-1911), and the political situation in Iran, ‘Eshqi began writing his caustic criticisms against state corruption in a series of inflammatory articles published in radical newspapers such as ‘Ali Dashti’s *Shafaq-e Sorkh* (Red Dusk) and his own publication *Qarn-e Bistom* (Twentieth Century).⁴

Prominent literary historians including Yahya Arianpur have reached a general conclusion that the content of ‘Eshqi’s last issue of *Qarn-e Bistom*, which was banned immediately after its publication, sealed his unfortunate fate and brought about his

¹ An early draft of this chapter was first presented at the ninth biennial ISIS conference. A modified and partial version of this chapter has been published in Kamran Talattof’s *New Leaves, Fresh Looks: Persian Language, Literature and Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 2015.

² For details of ‘Eshqi’s assassination and death see Moshir Salimi’s *Kolliyat-e Mosavvar-e ‘Eshqi* (The Complete Works of ‘Eshqi). Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1943, reprinted 1965, 1978.

³ For more information on ‘Eshqi’s life and death see the introduction to ‘Eshqi’s *Divan* by Moshir Salimi and Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak’s entry on ‘Eshqi on Iranica: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/esqi-mohammad-reza-mirzada>

⁴ Ehsan Yarshater and ‘Ali-Asghar Seyed-Gohrab, *A History of Persian Literature XI: Literature of the Early Twentieth Century, From the Constitutional Period to Reza Shah*. London: I. B. Tauris, 2015, 392.

murder.⁵ In the last issue of *Qarn-e Bistom* republicanism (*jomhuri*) was depicted as an armed and wrathful man holding a rifle in his right hand and a bag of money in his left hand. ‘Eshqi’s articles such as “Jomhuri-ye Qollabi” (fake republic) and “Eid-e Khun” (feast of blood) are two of his most provocative essays published respectively in *Qarn-e Bistom* and *Shafaq-e Sorkh*. While the former ridiculed the concept of a republic as it was misunderstood in Iran and by ordinary Iranians, the latter expressed a sardonic desire for annual bloodbaths to expurgate the country of all traitors. Based on what ‘Eshqi’s contemporaries, such as Bahar—the poet laureate at the time—and later critics have written about him and his work, it is safe to suggest that the political climate at the time necessitated that ‘Eshqi’s assassination be glorified and be used as an occasion for public protest against the rising power of the Prime Minister.⁶ For this reason, in-depth literary analysis of his poetry and other works was pushed sideways and largely ignored. A closer look at ‘Eshqi’s overall oeuvre, however, suggests that although nationalism forms the underpinning of the majority of his works, ‘Eshqi does elaborate on social issues concerning his society including the Woman Question. In other words, ‘Eshqi’s corpus of poetry points to his other concerns, many of them social and humanitarian, which renders him more nuanced rather than presenting him as a one dimensional author.

Much like his predecessors, such as Akhundzadeh, whose work is discussed in the previous chapter, ‘Eshqi is also committed to the idea of social change and his works attest to this aspiration. For example, in his political essays, such as “Jumhuri-ye Qollabi” (fake republic) written in two parts, ‘Eshqi’s main concern is the Iranian people’s

⁵ Yahya Arianpur, *Az Saba Ta Nima* (From Saba to Nima). 2 vols. Tehran: Zavvar Publications, 1993, 363.

⁶ For more information on ‘Eshqi’s opposition to the republican movement refer to his article *Jomhuriyyat* (republicanism) in *Kolliyyat*.

ignorance and their lack of comprehension of new political concepts such as “republicanism.” He thought it ridiculous that the people of the lower classes, such as shepherds of a remote region of Iran, would be in favor of the republic without truly knowing what to do with it or what it meant.⁷ In the second part of the same essay entitled “First Transform People’s Minds and Then Their Hats” (*‘Avval Kaleh-ye Mardom ra ‘Avaz Konid Ba ‘d Kolah-e Anha ra*),⁸ ‘Eshqi directly attacks the decision of Reza Khan’s cabinet to institute *Kolah Pahlavi*, or the Pahlavi Hat, as the official hat for Iranian men as part of Reza Khan’s ambitious sartorial reform.⁹ There, ‘Eshqi, a self-confessed *fokoli*, a term that was pejoratively used to refer to men with a *faux col* (false collar), identifying them as Westernized, enumerates a plethora of concerns ranging from social to economic, including the country’s infrastructure. He writes:

Besides republic we have so many incurable afflictions for which we should look for remedies. We need universities, we need railroads, we need mining, we need to have a thousand different material and spiritual reforms.¹⁰

As these examples suggest, ‘Eshqi had a lot to say regarding social change in Iran during his short life. Nonetheless, what has remained from his writings is enough for further investigation and examination, which will hopefully provide a more thorough understanding of his vision.

⁷ All references to ‘Eshqi’s works and to “Kafan-e Siyah” are from *Kolliat-e Mossavar-e Mirzadeh ‘Eshqi*, Ali Akbar Moshir Salimi’s edition.

⁸ This article was published in *Siasat* newspaper, second year, no. 29, on May 11, 1924, 142–46.

⁹ For a full history of the event and what ensued, see Houchang E. Chehabi, “Staging the Emperor’s New Clothes: Dress Codes and Nation Building under Reza Shah.” *Iranian Studies*. no. 3:4 (1993): 209-229.

¹⁰ ‘Eshqi, *Divan*, 114.

As briefly mentioned earlier, an intellectual committed to social change ‘Eshqi’s work includes his views on women as well as political commentary. In fact, a large portion of ‘Eshqi’s work addresses the cause of women directly. Since mid-nineteenth century, the Woman Question became the unalienable and essential element of the discourse on modernity and ‘Eshqi should be credited for making a considerable contribution to this debate. In these works, ‘Eshqi takes up women’s cause, but frames it within the nationalistic rhetoric through which he expresses his political vision. The trend of espousing women’s movement within a larger political ideology, as Talattof observes in *Modernity, Sexuality, and Ideology in Iran*, continued well into the twentieth-century, gained momentum amongst the religious camp (i.e. leftist clerics and thinkers), and reached its peak after the Islamic Revolution of the 1979 (209). The religious camp with their Marxist obsession, Talattof maintains, “perceived all issues relating to women, however, in the context of their quest for political change and political power.”¹¹ Eshqi’s representation of women in his works in general is a product of such milieu. As it should be expected his approach to discussing women and gender relations are projected from a male point of view and within the masculine context of the revolutionary cause. In these works ‘Eshqi does make an effort to extend visibility and legitimacy to women’s plight, but his representation falls short. This chapter provides an occasion to bring to light this aspect of the poet’s work in a poem that he wrote in 1919 called *Kafan-e Siyah* (Black Shroud), which is one of his most anthologized poems regarding women and veiling. This chapter will discuss in depth and will elaborate on how ‘Eshqi built on the discourse on women that his predecessors such as Akhundzadeh had initiated.

¹¹ Talattof, *Modernity, Sexuality, and Ideology in Iran*, 209.

In terms of form, ‘Eshqi seems to have adopted the format of dramatic plays from the likes of Akhundzadeh. He developed a taste for operas and wrote at least three of his major works within that format including “The Black Shroud.” A fantastic tale for the most part, this narrative long poem is an outcry against the practice of veiling and an elegy to a civilization lost. Despite this vehement criticism of veiling (*hejab*), one cannot help but notice ‘Eshqi’s fatalistic tone. He provides morbid and dark images of an ancient palace in ruins to stand for an Iran that no longer exists as well as images of “violated,” “abandoned,” and “dead” bodies of women wrapped in black shrouds to stand for the veiled women that inhabit that land. The imagery of doom and destruction serves as metaphors for the death of the poet’s political visions. Furthermore, frequent portrayals of dead women compounded by decay and destruction, one can argue, can be interpreted as a *fait accompli*—the elimination of women and their issues altogether as a hopeless cause.

“The Black Shroud” comes in a form called *mokhammas*—a poem which consists of segments divisible by five. It consists of a preamble and eight sections entitled respectively “Sinema-i az Tarikh-e Gozashteh” (A Cinema of Past History), “Dar Gurestan” (At the Cemetery), “Andishehha-ye Ehsasati” (Sentimental Thoughts), “Andishehha-ye ‘Erfani” (Mystical Thoughts) “Dar Qal‘eh-ye Kharabeh” (At the Ruined Citadel), “Boq‘eh-ye Asraramiz” (At the Mysterious Mausoleum), “Bargasht az Boq‘eh beh Deh” (Return from the Citadel to the Village), and “Dar Payan-e Dastan” (The End of the Tale).

The poem is like a travelogue as it chronicles the poet’s travels from Iran to Turkey during World War I. On his way, the caravan makes a stop at a historical village

called Mahabad. The story begins when the speaker and the caravan that he is traveling with decides to rest near Ctesiphon, the ancient city and the seat of the Sasanian Empire (r. 224 CE-650 CE) on the Tigris River, in modern day Iraq, at sunset. The village is described as bleak with old and crooked huts. When the caravan enters the village everyone looked for accommodation, but the curious speaker begins exploring his surroundings. Suddenly a row of palm trees next to what seemed to him like a pool catches his attention in the distant. There, he finds a house that belonged to an old widowed woman (*biveh zan*). The house is also described as bleak and in shambles. The speaker enters the hut. The old woman leaves her guest in the care of an old man. Looking through the windows of the hut the speaker sees majestic and desolate castle faraway. The old man informs the traveler that the ruined building used to be the seat of royalty. The speaker then asks hesitantly whether the dilapidated building that he was seeing in the distance was indeed Ctesiphon. The old man confirms his earlier statement that this forlorn village (*kureh-deh*) was once the undeniably prosperous Mahabad. After these pronouncements the old man also leaves the hut. At this time, the traveler imagines an episode in Iran's ancient history; the Arab War (*jang-e 'arab*) and as he begins to picture the bloody event (*vaq'eh-ye khunin*), another scene begins to take shape in his imagination. The next episode of the poem entitled: A Cinema of the Past History (*cinema-i az tarikh-e gozashteh*) is what follows. At this point it is necessary to provide a brief summary of the story and then launch into its analysis.

In “A Cinema of the Past History,” the speaker visualizes a row of Iranian kings on a curtain or *pardeh*.¹² On this imaginary curtain the speaker sees the orderly sequence of past kings adorned with gold, crowned, and seated on the throne. In the background the traveler sees signs of prosperity (*sa’adat*) and traces of science and art (*‘elm o honar*) everywhere. The glamorous order of the array of majestic kings is interrupted suddenly when he reaches the image of Yazdgerd III—the last king of Sasanians—who looks rather downhearted. Lingered on the image, the speaker exclaims that he saw that the king and the country were in danger. Amongst the images of Iran’s royalty he also detects the peeking image of ‘Omar, the second Muslim caliph, who led the battle of Qadesiyah in 637 that brought about the downfall of the Sasanian Empire. Upon casting his eyes on ‘Omar, the speaker goes mad, leaves the house, and begins walking towards the graveyard, which marks the beginning of the next episode of the poem entitled: At the Cemetery (*Dar Gurestan*).

The description of the scenery and even the air of the cemetery where the traveler’s next venture takes him are morbid. The imagery of death, ruin, and the stench of the dead are what mostly constitutes the scene of the cemetery. The traveler walks through the headstones that are likened to cut-off trees popping out from the ground stepping on the skulls of an ancient people (*khalq-e kohan*). Witnessing the prevailing gloom, the speaker is speechless out of utter discontent. The wind begins to blow hard and subsequently moves the palm trees. The swinging shadows of the trees appear to the traveler to be the spirits of the dead wanting to tell him something. The flow of the

¹² This invokes an old form of street theater in Iran called *pardehkhani*. This form of theater entailed a large curtain usually with multiple pictures of famous epic battle scenes from the Shahnameh (The Book of Kings) or Shi’ite religious stories specifically the Battle of Karbala that resulted in the beheading of Imam Hossein, the third Shi’ite Imam.

narrative is interrupted by the speaker's philosophical reflections. In his hallucinatory walk, he finally leaves the desolated castle and reaches a mysterious mausoleum (*boq'eh asraramiz*). Upon entering the place, the speaker sees a black mass (*tudeh siah*) and a candle in the corner of the tomb (*maqbareh*). The black mass appears to him to be either a sack, a shepherd's bag, or at one point he thinks it to be a black beast (*siah heyvan*). As he was trying to figure out what the black mass was, he discovers that it moves and speaks. In the next section of the poem entitled "The Appearance of the Queen of the Shrouded Ones" (Tazahor-e Malakeh-ye Kafanpushan), the black mass stands up and stares into the terrified eyes of the speaker addressing him. At this point the traveler realizes that the black mass is indeed a woman's body raised from the dead. She is not an ordinary woman; she is called a *malakeh* or queen in Persian. The use of the word *malakeh* in the title contradicts the readers' expectations, since in place of a princess a dead woman rises from the grave that lacks the splendor deserving of royalty. She introduces herself as *dokht-e Khosrow* or the daughter of Khosrow and explains:

mar mara hich gonah nist beh joz ankeh zanam
zin gonah ast keh ta zendeh am andar kafanam.

I am devoid of all sin, except for being a woman
It is because of this sin that I am condemned to live my life wrapped in a shroud.

Condemned to living as dead due to her veil the woman warns that her misfortune in actuality is the fate (*bakht*) of the lot of men. The traveler finally gathers his strength to ask her about her origin and her lineage. Distraught, she reveals that she is the daughter of Khosrow (*dokhtar-e khosrow*), the great king of the Sasanian empire, and further

explains that her ruin is due to the destruction of Iran. Overwhelmed by her tale of woe the traveler leaves the mausoleum.

In “Return From the Mausoleum to The Village” (Bargasht az Boq‘eh Beh Deh) that follows, readers learn that as the anguished traveler was running out of the mausoleum and due to the intensity of his anxiety he hits his head to a pillar, falls down, and loses consciousness. When he comes to his senses in the next morning, he finds himself at the gates of the village. He gets up and in a state of bewilderment he sees three women approaching the water. He recognizes these women as they were identical to the woman he had seen in the mausoleum the night before; the three daughters of Khosrow (*seh tan dokhtar-e kasra*). Utterly disturbed by what he had witnessed, he is once again filled with terror when he sees the three women and runs towards the village in total disarray. In the village, to his alarm, he sees the same image appearing from every corner; a woman clad in a black shroud. After his return to Iran in three years’ time the speaker now addressing his readers directly says that he still feels frightened by the story. So, he says that he has retold the story in verse (*in qesseh beh nazm avardam*), but leaves the understanding of its message to the readers (*fahm-e an bar to havalat kardam*). In the last section of the poem, The End of the Story (*dar payan-e dastan*), the speaker confirms his identity as the poet ‘Eshqi, and openly criticizes the veiling of women as the cause that has rendered women as the living dead. He candidly blames religion (*mazhab*) to be the cause behind women’s veiling and their subsequent lifeless existence. He then calls on others to join him in his musings promising that should they unite they could gradually bring about the unveiling of the women folk in society. He ends the poem by warning

that should women continue to be wrapped in the shroud (*kafan*) half of Iran is as good as dead.

“The Black Shroud”: An Elegy for Iranian Women

The message of radical nationalism, which is anchored at the heart of the poem, corresponded with the mainstream themes of the plays written during the Constitutional era that focused on the themes of *e'eteraz* (protestation) and *efshagari* (revelation), as Hasan Mirabedini suggests that rendered the theater at the time into an ideological institution.¹³ The full title of the poem in Persian reads: *Namayeshnameh-ye Kafan-e Siyah* (The Black Shroud, A Play), which proves Mirabedini's hypothesis regarding the period's regard for plays. 'Eshqi is mostly known as a poet, but the word *namayeshnameh* (play) in the title of the poem, attests to 'Eshqi's aspiration to engage in composing new forms of poetry. Following Akhundzadeh's model, as the pioneering playwright in the Western fashion, 'Eshqi and his cohorts realized the merit of play writing and its edification purposes.¹⁴ They viewed dramatic plays as media to introduce ideas of reform and social change. What distinguishes 'Eshqi from his predecessors, however, is his frank and candid criticism of the Iranian society, its customs, and the political movement in Iran through his personal experiences. He plants himself as the

¹³ Hasan Mirabedini, *Seyr-e Tahavvol-e Adabiyat-e Dastani va Namayeshi az Aghaz ta 1320 Shamsi* (Survey of Development of Persian Fiction and Plays From the Beginning until 1941). Tehran: The Academy of Persian Language and Literature, 2008, 90–91.

¹⁴ I am aware of other notable playwrights such as Mirza Aqa-Tabrizi who also wrote plays following Akhundzadeh's example. Mirza Habib Esfahani also played a big role in introducing drama to Iran's literati by publishing some of the first articles about playwriting. He also translated many Western plays into Persian and published them in *Tasvir Al-Afkar* in Istanbul. For more information on how translation changed the course of writing dramatic plays in Iran see Shirin Bozorgmehr's *Ta'sir-e Tarjomeh-ye Motun-e Namayeshi bar Ta'atr-e Iran* (The Effect of Translated Texts on Iranian Theater). Tehran: Afraz, 2000.

speaker of most of his critical plays. Although like his fellow authors, ‘Eshqi’s critique of the Iranian society and politics reflected in “The Black Shroud” is couched within the framework of fiction, but placing himself as the speaker gives the story a certain sense of credibility and downplays its fictional appeal. Furthermore, the use of the word *namayeshnameh* or play in the title instead of *she’r* or poetry given its theatrical nature renders the story more believable. In this realistic poetic expression readers witness the speaker’s journey “from the mundane to bizarre and fantastic.”¹⁵ Although “The Black Shroud” is identified as a play, there is no evidence to suggest that it was written for the stage or performed anywhere.¹⁶ This is while ‘Eshqi’s other play *Rastakhiz-e Shahriyaran-e Iran* (The Resurrection of The Iranian Kings), written in 1916, which is also very similar to “The Black Shroud” thematically, was performed and sometimes the poet himself would oversee and even perform in them.¹⁷

“The Black Shroud,” much like *The Resurrection of the Iranian Kings* is set as a versified travelogue that ‘Eshqi wrote when he reached Istanbul from Iran. During the occupation of Western Persia by Russians during World War I ‘Eshqi traveled from Iran to Turkey with other intellectuals of leftist political orientation.¹⁸ “Once in Istanbul he

¹⁵ Seyed-Gohrab, *A History of Persian Literature*, 393.

¹⁶ ‘Ali Miransari. *Namayeshnamehha-ye Mirzadeh ‘Eshqi: Tahlil-e Asar-e Namayeshi, Barrasi-ye Tavanmandi-ye ‘Eshqi dar Afarinesh-e Namayeshnamehha va Asari Montashernashodeh az u* (Mirzadeh ‘Eshqi’s Plays: Analysis of his Plays, A Study of his Mastery in Creating Plays & an Unpublished Work). Tehran: Entesharat-e Tahuri (Tahuri Publications), 2007, 40. I am indebted to Abbas Jamshidi who brought this book to my attention.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁸ See Karimi-Hakkak’s article on “‘Eshqi,” *Encyclopedia Iranica* on <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/esqi-mohammad-reza-mirzada>

wrote an operatic verse drama with the palace of Mada‘en at its locus. *The Resurrection of the Iranian Kings* features in addition to ‘Eshqi himself as the traveler, Zoroaster, Cyrus, Darius, and a few other mytho-historical characters from pre-Islamic Iran. “This was the first of several dramatic compositions designed to incite patriotic feelings in contemporary Persians.”¹⁹ “The Black Shroud” is the other product of ‘Eshqi’s trip and his two-year stay in Istanbul, which also features the poet as the traveler. A fiercely nationalistic ideology found its expression in the works that ‘Eshqi wrote from this point onwards, which ultimately brought about his death.

As I have outlined earlier, the discourse on women in Iran developed vis-à-vis other sociopolitical movements and ‘Eshqi’s representation of women in this poem, I propose, became an occasion through which he expressed his political vision. In doing so, his general approach in his discussion of women is within the masculine context of the revolutionary cause.

I would like to begin my discussion of the poem by talking about the color black (*siyah*) in the title—*Kafan-e Siyah*. Every literature has its own color symbolism and Iranian literature is not an exception to this rule. The two basic colors that express the contrast between good on the one hand and evil on the other are the colors black and white.²⁰ The color black coupled with *kafan* (shroud) in the title impart on the readers an immediate sense of gloom and darkness. The word *kafan* (shroud) is a burial garment that the dead person after the washing ritual is carefully wrapped in prior to being buried. The phrase “Kafan-e Siyah” is a curious phrase and is an oxymoron. In the Islamic-Iranian

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰ For more information on symbolism of color in Persian literature and art refer to the article “Color” in *Encyclopedia Iranica*: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/color-pers-rang#pt1>

burial tradition *kafan* (shroud) is of the color white. Therefore, a “black shroud” is a nonexistent object and it is the poet’s creation. Designating the color black, therefore, has a twofold function. On the one hand it exemplifies ill omen, and on the other it represents the customary color of the women’s veil at the time. Assigning the color black to a shroud which already is macabre in nature, therefore, is a deliberate choice on behalf of the poet that highlights the feeling of total despondency.

The poem is prefaced with a prose passage, which provides a snippet of what is to be revealed in the narrative. This short preamble also reveals the history that inspired the poet to write the poem. It reads:

These are a few tears that dropped on these papers from ‘Eshqi’s eyes after seeing the ruins of *Mada‘en* (Ctesiphon) upon entering “Mahabad.” The subject matter of this new and eloquent poem [is] the story of an ancient woman by the name of “Khosrowdokht” and the fate of “Iranian woman” in her eyes. (201)²¹

Both Persian phrases “*dideh-ye tab*” and “*manzumeh-ye now va shiva*,” which means, talent and new and eloquent poetic composition, besides demonstrating the poet’s confidence in composing new poetry, can convey a new form of content. ‘Eshqi also describes the poem as the outpouring of his emotional self by employing tears as metaphor to stand in place of words on paper. The metaphor *chand qatreh ashk* (a few drops of tear) while is a poetic imagery that compares words to drops of tear further communicates the image of the author who is crying. Coupled with the title, the preamble immediately establishes the tone of the poem as that of sadness and grief.

References to the ruins of *Mada‘en* or Ctesiphon are meant to remind readers of a chapter in Iranian history that at least evokes a bitter defeat. By invoking Khosrowdokht

²¹ ‘Eshqi, *Divan*, 201.

as the ancient character that the readers will encounter narrows down the poet's historical focus. Comprised of the words "Khosrow," which is the name of a prominent Persian king, and "dokht" (which is short for *dokhtar*), which means daughter, Khosrowdokht is supposedly the daughter of Khosrow II or Khosrow Parviz's daughter (r. 590-628) who was the last king of the Sassanid dynasty. Historical accounts confirm that Khosrow the Second indeed had a daughter; in fact he had two daughters Boran and Azarmidokht both of whom were killed over their claim to the throne.²² So, Khosrowdokht is simply a name that the poet has given his character and does not hold historical credibility. Given the details that can be gleaned from the preamble one can infer that the poet is trying to establish a cause and effect relationship between the Arab conquest of Persia and Khosrowdokht's death at their hands, which cannot be historically verified. But, why did 'Eshqi choose a royal woman to report on the *sarnevesh* (fate) of the lot of Iranian women? One response could be the historical accountability. Khosrowdokht, albeit a fictitious character, is presented here as an eye-witness of the Arab aggression. Furthermore, Khosrowdokht is not an ordinary woman but a royal; therefore, her word is more credible and carries more weight. In other words, her words lend more legitimacy to the story that the poet is about to tell.

The time that the poem opens with is dusk. In Persian culture dusk or *ghorub*, in addition to being perceived as a "moment of transition," is commonly associated with feelings of gloominess and anguish. Dusk is also that very moment which separates day and night and symbolically offers the most striking contrast between light and darkness.

²² For more information on Azarmidokht and her ascension to the throne see Touraj Daryaei's article "The Last Ruling Woman of Ērānšāhr: Queen Āzarmīgduxt." *International Journal of the Society of Iranian Archeologists*. no. 1 (Winter-Spring 2014): 77-81.

Coupled with the image of the crying poet, the timing further cements the expectation of a sad tale in the eyes of the readers. It is at this time that the speaker's caravan makes a stop at a village called Mahabad. The geographical details, both in the preamble and in the body of the poem, which the speaker provides, are not exactly accurate. Mahabad is a city located in Western Azerbaijan and is far away from Ctesiphon where the ruins of the Sasanian Palace (Eyvan-e Mada'en) are located. Ctesiphon, also known as Eyvan-e Mada'en, Eyvan-e Kasra, and Taq-e Kasra is located in modern day Iraq and east of Baghdad. In the poem, the traveler, upon entering Mahabad, begins to explore his surroundings until he sees in the distance the ruins of the famous palace and walks towards it. In reality the distance between Mahabad and the ruins of the Sasanian palace is greater, the palace would not have been visible, and this excursion would have taken much longer.

Most of the imagery in the first five opening lines, which depict the setting of the sun and the arrival of the night, are bleak. The lines read:

Dar takapuy-e ghorub ast zeh gardun khorshid
Dahr mabhut shod o rang-e rokh-e dasht parid
Del-e khunin-e sepehr az ofoq-e gharb damid
Charkh az rehat-e khorshid siyah mipushid
Keh sar-e qafeleh ba zamzameh-ye zang resid.²³

The sky is struggling for the setting sun
The world was dazed and the field lost its color
The sky's bleeding heart peeked out from the western skyline
The heavens wore black for the death of the sun
When the caravan arrived ringing its bell.

Phrases such as "*del-e khunin-e sepehr*" (sky's bleeding heart), "*rehat-e khorshid*" (the sun's death or departure), and words such as "*siah*" (black) leave little room for thoughts

²³ 'Eshqi, *Kolliat*, 201.

of happiness and conjure violence. In other words, the death of the female sun is one of the very first imagery of its kind.

It is at this precise moment (the death of the sun) that the speaker's caravan reaches the historical village (*deh-e tarikhi*) around Ctesiphon. The speaker explains the village and the depressing scenery:

Deh beh daman-e yeki tappeh panah avardeh
Gard-e tarikvash-i bar tan-e khod gostar-deh
Chon siahpush yeki madar-e dokhtar mordeh
Kolbehhayash hameh fartut o hameh kham khordeh
Algharaz hey'ati az har jahati afsordeh
Caravan chon keh beh deh dakhel shod
Har kasi dar sadad-e manzel shod.²⁴

The village has sought refuge in the skirt of a hill
It has spread a dark dust over itself
Just like a mother wearing black for her daughter who has died
Its huts are all crooked and old
In short, a group truly depressed
When the caravan entered the village
Everyone started to think about accommodation.

Located on the foot of a hill, the village is also described in gloomy terms. The village readers will learn is tucked under the skirt of a hill as if hiding itself. The Persian word for skirt is *daman*, which is traditionally worn by women. To seek refuge in one's skirt is typically associated with children taking solace on their mother's laps: a place where they consider themselves safe and are calm. The femaleness of the images is overwhelming and describes dead women. While in the above lines the gender of the bleeding sun is left to the imagination of the readers the femaleness of the village is clearly established. Therefore, one can imagine that that the sun could also be utilized as a metaphor for the

²⁴ Ibid., 201-202.

dead girl, whose death has brought so much despair to the village much like the gloom that the setting of the sun had brought to the sky.

In the next two sections that immediately follow, readers are presented with a drastic shift in the descriptions of the images that the speaker sees. Contrary to the somber and bleak imageries of the first two sections the descriptions of nature surrounding the old village are quite beautiful and poetic. Portrayals of a small pool that is illuminated by the reflections of the stars with ducks swimming in it impart a romantic sense, which delights the readers.²⁵ This does not last long and the calm of this scene is interrupted by the appearance—in the distance—of a gloomy looking (*deltang*) house that belongs to a *biveh zan* or a widow.

Entering the house marks the beginning of the traveler's adventure and brings with it a sense of anticipation and suspense. The readers will not learn much about the woman or how she came to be a widow. But, the inclusion of a widow while maybe random is a reminder of the recurring themes of death and misery. The house, as the speaker describes, is without light and the darkness that comes with the dusk has given the house the appearance of graves (*guran*).²⁶ These descriptions are congruent with the constant allusions to the bleakness of a situation that the speaker is about to unravel. Without any ceremony, the widow leaves the house and her guest in the care of an old man; a relative of hers (*pirmardi zeh kasanash*) who engages in conversation with the speaker about the village. Once again, the text does not offer any reason behind the widow's decision to leave, nor is it clear why 'Eshqi elected to put the speaker in

²⁵ Ibid., 202.

²⁶ Ibid., 203.

conversation with the old man and not the widow. However, the portrayal of the village as a mother who is grieving her daughter's death (*madar-e dokhtar mordeh*) at the beginning of the narrative and the inclusion of a woman who has lost her spouse (another woman in mourning) stress the vicissitudes that seems to have mostly befallen on women.

When inside the house, the speaker is looking through the window and sees a castle emerging in the distant illuminated by moonlight. The castle is however, desolate:

Ju'i az nur-e mah, az panjareh-i dar jarayan
Ruyash espid keh ruy-e siyah-e shab zeh miyan:
Bord o, az panjareh-i shod qal'eh-i az dur 'ayan
Ba shokuh anqadar an qal'eh keh nayad beh bayan
Lik viraneh cho sar ta sar-e asar-e kiyan.²⁷

A thread of moonlight was coming through the window
It lifted the night's black face with its brightness
And a castle became visible in the distance
My tongue is incapable of explaining its majesty
But, like all of the historical sites it was destroyed.

The speaker, now a guest of the old man, expresses his grief upon seeing of the sight (*matam az in manzareh man*).²⁸ He follows this sentiment by asking the old man: "*an kharab abniyeh kaz panjareh peydast kojast?*" (What is that ruined building that one can see through the window?).²⁹ Bleak descriptions of the house dovetail with the portrayal of the majestic ruins of the ancient castle. This connection appears arbitrary and devoid of

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

logic, but as the narrative develops and as the speaker probes further into (and reveals at the same time) the reasons behind the ruins everything seem to fall into place.

The dialogue between the old man and the speaker is the first one in the poem. What is remarkable in this dialogue is the speaker's absolute ignorance of what he is looking at or the historical significance of these ruins. The old man, as if educating the speaker, explains that "this ruined building" (*makhrubeh*) belonged to "your" kings (*shahan-e shoma*). By virtue of separating himself from the speaker and by using the second personal pronoun *shoma* (your), the old man alludes to the Iranian territory that once included the castle. The old man begins to explain to his guest about the history of the ruined castle:

In "Mahabad" boland eyvan ast
Keh sarash hamsar ba keyvan ast
Na gomandar: Mahabad hamin in budeh?
Na Mahabad sad inguneh beh takhmin budeh!
Fasl-e dey khorram o gardeshgah pishin budeh
Qasr-e qeshlaqi-e shahan-e mah-a'in budeh
Hejleh o kamgah-e khosrow o shirin budeh
Liken emruz mahabadi nist
Qeyr-e in kureh deh abadi nist.³⁰

This is "Mahabad," with its high arc that reaches the sky
Do not assume that *Mahabad* has always been like this
Nay, it was hundred times better
It used to be green in winter time and a resting place
The summer palace of the Zoroastrian kings
The nuptial chamber of Khosrow and Shirin
But, today Mahabad is no more
Besides this forsaken place, there are no villages in sight.

These lines provide more information on the once prominent Mahabad to the oblivious speaker. It is like a history lesson. The reference of *shahan-e mah-a'in* associated with

³⁰ Ibid., 203-204.

Mahabad's kings reveal the ancient kings' religion to the speaker. *Mah-a'in* is a curious phrase that references Zoroastrianism, a monotheistic religion of ancient Iranians.

Zoroastrianism is usually referred to as *a'in-e behi* or *din-e behi* and *mah-a'in* could be a play on words. Another phrase which is often time tied with the Zoroastrian religion is *a'in-e mehr*, or Mithraism, which is a reference to an earlier religion that was centered around worshipping of the sun. The Persian phrase *mah-a'in* then although not exactly accurate is definitely a reference to Zoroastrianism, however, the inaccuracy one might argue is rooted in 'Eshqi's confusion as to what exactly constituted Zoroastrianism or its history. The reference to the story of the love affair between Khosrow Parviz (r. 590-628) the Sasanian king, and Shirin, a beautiful princess,³¹ who, according to the poem, were once residents of Mahabad while romanticizes the history of the palace could also be telling of where 'Eshqi's source of history comes from. The love story of *Khosrow o Shirin* (Khosrow and Shirin), which is immortalized in Nezami's (1141-1209) *Khamseh*, a quintet of narrative poems, although set in a historical setting like many works of literature is not exactly a historical document.³² After relaying the information regarding Mahabad's history the old man goes out the door (*zeh dar birun shod*) and leaves the speaker alone with his thoughts. Troubled by them, the speaker is reminded of a *vaq'eh-ye khunin*: a bloody event. Having heard of Mahabad's history reminded him of an episode in Iran's ancient history: the Arab Conquest of Persia in the seventh-century. He recalls:

³¹ There are speculations regarding the origins of Shirin in historical accounts. For more information of the story of *Khosrow o Shirin* see Paola Orsatti's "Kosrow o Shirin" on *Iranica*.
<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kosrow-o-sirin>

³² For more information on Nezami's *Khamseh* see Domenico Parrello's "Kamsa of Nezami" on *Iranica*.
<http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/kamsa-of-nezami>

Harf-e akharsh hamin bud o zeh dar birun shod
Lik az in harf cheh guyam keh del-e man chun shod
Yad shod vaq'eh-ye khunini o zeh an del khun shod
Guy'i an jang-e 'arab dar del-e man aknun shod
Van voqu'at chenan ba nazaram maqrun shod
Keh shod an qal'eh degar vaz'e degar
Manzar-e diagram amad beh nazar.³³

His last words were these and left
But, what can I say about how I felt when I heard his talk
I was reminded of a bloody event and my heart broke
It was like that 'Arab War came to life in my eyes
And then, the castle became something else
And I saw another image.

This could be considered as a moment of epiphany for the speaker, since his ignorance of his whereabouts gives way to total awareness of a precise moment in history. In other words, seeing the ruins of the palace literally brings to life in the eyes of the speaker what had taken place over a thousand years ago: "as if the Arab War (*jang-e 'Arab*)³⁴ became present in my heart" (204). Thus begins the speaker's depiction of the process of a series of transformations that take place in the text from an aesthetic and stylistic perspective. Fantastical changes transform places and characters within the narrative. The first of such drastic transformations takes place in the last lines of the first section and serves as a gateway to the next episode of the poem entitled: *Cinema-i az Tarikh-e Gozashteh* (A Cinema of the Past History). This section is preceded by the transformation of the palace and its situation (*keh shod an qal'eh degar, vaz'eh degar*) in the speaker's eyes (*nazar*) as the details of the palace's past history and the Arab war take shape in another form in his mind.

³³ 'Eshqi, *Kolliat*, 204.

³⁴ By *jang-e 'Arab* 'Eshqi could very well be referencing the Battle of Qadesiyyeh of 637 C.E. in which the Persians under the rule of the Sasanians were decidedly defeated.

What is striking in the title of the second section is the poet's use of the word "sinema." A cognate in Persian, *sinema* implies a new industry making its way into Iranian society and by employing it here 'Eshqi is literally producing a narrative similar to a motion picture; or at least this is the impression that the use of this word gives to his readers. The reference to a word that is one of the most pronounced markers of modernity within a narrative of an episode in Iran's ancient history is meant to underscore the importance and consequences of historical events as such in shaping the modern history of a country. Furthermore, cinema as a modern medium is capable of showing facts from a distant history and making it readily available to a wide range of audiences: something that 'Eshqi perhaps hoped for his poem to accomplish.

Aside from acknowledging cinema as a modern public space as well as a modern industry that had made its way into Iranian society, 'Eshqi is presenting his poetry as a cinematic production, which suggests innovation in the composition of poetry (as he professes in the preamble to his poem) and thematic novelty. In this section, the speaker talks about Iran's history as if it was unfolding in front of his eyes. Based on the title one expects the narrative to revolve around or at least include references to cinema or cinematic productions. What follows is astonishing:

Ancheh dar pardeh bod az pardeh be dar mididam
Pardeh-i kaz salaf ayad beh nazar mididam
Vandar an pardeh basi naghsh o sovar mididam
Bargah-haye por az zivar o zar mididam
Yek be yek padshahan ra be maqar mididam
Hameh bar takht o hameh taj beh sar mididam
Hameh ba sowlat o ba showkat o farr mididam
Saf beh saf lashkar-e ba fath o zafar mididam
Vaz sa'adat hameh su sabbt-e asar mididam
Van asarha samar-e 'elm o honar mididam
Jomleh ra baz, cho doran beh gozar mididam
Har shahi ra zeh pas-e shah-e degar mididam

Chunkeh nagah be bostan sar-e khar mididam
Yazdgerd akhar-e an pardeh pakar mididam
Shah o keshvar hamah dar chang-e khatar mididam
Sepas an pardeh degar zir o zebar mididam
Na zeh kasra khabari ney taqi
Van kharabeh beh kharabeh baqi.³⁵

What appeared on the screen was no longer a secret
It was an episode of the past on that screen
I saw many images and faces on that screen
I saw opulent courts of many kings
All on the throne and crowned
I saw them all possessing authority and glory
I saw row after row of victorious armies
Prosperity I saw everywhere
I saw that art and science were the key to the success that I saw
everywhere
I saw everything as time passed
I saw each king succeeded by another
Suddenly in the gardens I saw an intruder
I saw that Yazdgerd [most probably Yazdgerd III who was the last king of
Sasanians] at the end of the screen looking somber
I saw the king and country in the claws of danger
I saw in between the images a picture of ‘Omar [the second Muslim caliph
after the death of Mohammad]
Then, I saw that [everything] on the screen was upset (*zir o zebar*)
There was no news of King Khosrow (*kasra*) or the palace
All that was remained was the ruins.

In the above lines the speaker gives a very detailed description of what appeared in front of his eyes (or in front of his mind’s eyes). Despite the promise of encountering modern elements related to cinema this expectation immediately falls short. Here, ‘Eshqi relays his story using the word *pardeh*, which in Persian means curtain, screen, tableaux, and/or painting. *Pardeh* and its various usages such as *pardeh-bazi* and *pardeh-khani* refer to a form of traditional story-telling that involved a screen with pictures of Shi’ite Imams or different stories from the *Shahnameh*—mainly stories involving the main hero Rostam—

³⁵ ‘Eshqi, *Divan*, 204-205.

which would be hung in the streets or in cafes (*qahveh khaneh*). A professional storyteller called *naqqal* would usually tell the story in a dramatic fashion to an audience. The speaker's descriptions and his story, unlike a usual cinematic production that requires multiplication of scenes that follow a linear story line, are conjoined together on one screen within a single scene (frame). On that single scene an array of ancient kings of Iran are lined up as if chronologically. Amongst them all one single Arab ruler is present: 'Omar second caliph of Islam. The juxtaposition of cinema and *pardeh*—the pairing of a modern establishment with a traditional one—is perhaps symbolic of the interconnectedness and constant battle between the old and the new at the time as the latter was making room for the former. The order in which 'Eshqi has chosen to mention the two and the way that he has given precedence to cinema emphasizes his partiality to the modern, but shows that he is not oblivious to the merits of his own culture either. The fact that he gives the entire description, as it would be depicted on a *pardeh*, is testimony to his regard for the old tradition of storytelling.

At this point in the narrative, the speaker reports that he is on the brink of *jonun* (madness) as *vahemeh* (fear) penetrated his thoughts (205). He compares his madness to that of Farhad's: the legendary romantic hero of Nezami's *Khamseh*. Farhad, a sculptor, is the rival to the Sasanian king Khosrow who competes with the ruler for the love of Shirin. Khosrow challenges Farhad to cut a path through Bisotun Mountains. In return, Khosrow promises to give up his own claim on Shirin. Farhad accepts the challenge. When Khosrow learns that Farhad is completing the seemingly impossible challenge he sends Farhad fabricated news of Shirin's death. Heartbroken by the news, in a moment of madness, Farhad takes his pickaxe and strikes his own head with it, which results in his

death; thus Farhad's passion and madness become legendary and find their way into the Persian culture.³⁶ This is the second time that 'Eshqi references Nezami's *Khamseh*. The allusion to the story of *Farhad and Shirin*, however, is less direct as the speaker stresses on the madness (*jonun*) as the driving force behind Farhad's decision to take his own life than his love affair with Shirin.³⁷ Although the indication to Farhad's story is implied one can draw similarities between the emotional status of the legendary hero and the speaker. In both cases death and destruction are the impetus behind the madness that drives the hero and the speaker to act on their passion (*shur*). It is important to quote the Persian lines:

In hameh vahemeh chun rekhneh dar andisheh nemud
 Andar andisheh-ye man bikh-e jonun risheh nemud
 Van jonun-i keh zeh Farhad talab-e tishah nemud
 Sar-e por shur-e mara niz jonun pisheh nemud
 Akhahr az khaneh mara rahsepar-e bisheh nemud
 Begereftam rah-e sahra o ravan
 Shodam az khaneh su-ye qabrestan.³⁸

All this fear penetrated my thoughts, and there madness took root
 The kind of madness that demanded a pickaxe from Farhad
 And, my head was filled with passion and madness
 Finally it drove me out of the house and into the thicket
 I followed the road to the desert
 And left the house for the graveyard.

Aside from being heartbroken like the legendary lover, the speaker declares madness to be his emotional status in which logic has no place. In fact, the verb *nemud*, conjugated from the infinitive form *nemudan* is another way to mean *kardan* meaning to do or to

³⁶ To learn more about the love story of *Farhad and Shirin* see Heshmat Moayyad's "Farhad (1)" on *Iranica*. [http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/farhad%20\(1\)](http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/farhad%20(1))

³⁷ 'Eshqi, *Kolliat*, 205.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 205.

carry out. The subject of the verb *nemud* for the most part in the above lines is *jonun* or madness. Therefore, the speaker is effectively not the “doer” of the fevered actions (such as going towards a graveyard) that follow. In a way, the declaration that he had been overcome by a sense of frenzy shields the author from becoming accountable for what he is about to reveal in the rest of the narrative. As it was mentioned earlier, ‘Eshqi’s harsh criticism of the social and political issues at the time cost him his life. So, although ‘Eshqi inserted himself as the speaker of his poem, it is safe to assume that authors like him who feared some sort of persecution and were not free to state their dissatisfaction with the status quo resorted to employing stylistic techniques such as using pseudonyms or presenting their critique in the form of fiction, and in the case of ‘Eshqi hiding behind the façade of madness. ‘Eshqi has employed this stratagem in some of his other works where he hides behind madness and dream. At the end of another long and famous narrative poem called “Seh Tablow” (The Three Tableaux), the speaker who is frustrated with the dire political situation in Iran sees the solution in purging the country of incompetent traitors (*kha ‘en*). He beseeches his readers not to be surprised if a poet is mad and desires annual bloodbaths in his heart (*‘ajab madar agar sha ‘eri jonun darad / beh del hamisheh taqaza-ye ‘eid-e khun darad*) (193). ‘Eshqi frequently talks about the necessity of identifying and killing traitors on a regular basis. He proposed that on a particular day all traitors should be rounded up and purged. He called this event *‘eid-e khun* (feast of blood) in an essay with the same title and alludes to it in his poetry as well. Similar to using madness as a buffer for his inflammatory remarks ‘Eshqi employs the element of dream that plays the same protective role. For example, in closing his first operatic verse-drama *Rastakhiz-e Shahriyaran-e Iran* (The Resurrection of Persian

Kings), ‘Eshqi, a participating character in the story, wakes up from his sleep in panic. Both poems include the poet’s general portrayal of a country that is in shambles. They serve as an outcry of his frustrated and passionate soul. ‘Eshqi’s use of such rhetorical devices is meant to protect the author from the possibility of persecution, but it also undermines his stance on the statements that he makes. In *Black Shroud* ‘Eshqi uses themes of madness and dream on more than one occasion.

The section “At the Graveyard” (Dar Gurestan) begins with the speaker’s meanderings through a cemetery as he walks through the fields surrounding the village. The imagery and descriptions of this part of the narrative are decidedly morbid and filled with horror. As a poet whose preoccupation besides writing social criticism was bringing newness to Persian poetry, ‘Eshqi’s utilization of expressive mechanisms in this section of the narrative is worth mentioning. The passage begins with the description of a moonlit night:

Man beh dasht andar o dasht agheshteh beh simin mahtab
Noqreh, gerdi beh zamin kardeh zeh gardun partab
Dasht aqeshteh, karan ta beh karan dar simab
Rokh-e zesht-e falak, anja shodeh birun zeh neqab
Hameh afaq dar an afsordeh
Mah ravan hamsar-e sham‘e mordeh.³⁹

I wandered through the fields as they were smeared with the silvery
moonlight
The moon looked like a silver round thing thrown out from the sky
Fields were enveloped in a silvery sheet on both sides of the horizon
Bringing the ugly face of the world out of its veil
The entire world is despondent
Besides the moon and dim candles there is no light.

³⁹ Ibid., 205.

The Moon is the closest celestial body to planet earth and in Persian classical literature it is known by various names such as *mahtab*, *maah*, and *mah* and is for the most part a reminder of the beauty of the beloved and a moonlit night usually constructs an ideal romantic scene.⁴⁰ The application of the moon and its silver light that brightens the earth at night in ‘Eshqi’s depiction of the natural phenomenon (i.e. the rising of the moon), completely defies the classical description of the same event. Here, the glimmering of moonlight unveils (*birun az neqab*) the “ugly face of heaven” (*rokh-e zesht-e falak*), which is the binary opposite of its classical usage. While as mentioned above, ‘Eshqi in his poetry is determined to challenge the classical representative system, he is at the same time confronting the old ways of his society. The emerging of the ugly face as if unveiled by moonlight can also be associated with women’s veiling. The word *neqab* according to *Dehkhoda* is a piece of cloth that is used to cover the face.⁴¹ Emerging from it, is the “ugly face of the haven” (*rokh-e zesht-e falak*), which could be a reference to the ugliness in the world that is represented by so much destruction and veiled dead women.

The rest of the narrative in this section is interspersed with references to suffering (*mehnat*), shroud (*kafan*), death (*mowt* and *marg*) and horror (*vahshat*).⁴² The once silent scene is now filled with the deafening sound of the dead, as the speaker describes it:

“anyways, this scene is filled with horror and death / I have gone deaf because due to

⁴⁰ For a discussion of the literary utilization of the moon in classical literature see “Mah va Karbordha-ye an dar Khamseh-ye Nezami” (The Moon and its Literary Application in Nezami’s *Khamseh*) by Ahmad Amiri Khorasani and Hakimeh Mojahedi. *Nashriyeh-ye Zaban va Adab*. no 34 (2013): 53-74. Also, see “Mah va Khorshid dar She‘er-e Khaqani” (The Moon and the Sun in Khaqani’s Poetry). *Adabiyat-e Fasri (Daneshgah-e Azad-eMashhad)*. no. 21 (2009): 74-89, by Parvindokht Mashhur.

⁴¹ The word is mostly known today with the spelling *niqab* that defines women’s face veil in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Afghanistan amongst others.

⁴² ‘Eshqi, *Kolliat*, 207.

multiplicity of sounds” (*bari in sahneh, por az vahshat o mowt / gush-e man kar shodeh az kesrat-e sowt*) (207). The contradictory effect of the “deafening sound of the dead” adds to the gravity of the dramatization of the scene and heightens the expectation of the readers of what is to ensue. Directly addressing his readers the speaker moves on to point out the land (*zamin*) that has now become the resting place of those who are forgotten (*mahd-e asudan-e az yad faramushan ast*).⁴³

The two following sections, entitled respectively “Emotional Reflections” (*Andisheh-ha-ye Ehsasati*) and “Mystical Reflections” (*Andisheh-ha-ye ‘Erfani*), interrupt the course of the narrative and open a window into the speaker’s mind. The title of the first passage creates the expectation that what is to follow would be the speaker’s emotional outpouring. Once again, this expectation does not materialize. The wind begins to blow fiercely and brings with it the dead king Khosrow’s lamentation over the destruction of his palace after he was long gone to the traveler instead. Here, the speaker merely echoes the king’s articulation of despair rather than expressing his own emotions.⁴⁴ The palace, Mahabad, upon the invocation of Khosrow’s name begins to cry out and assumes the role of the speaker (*man cho az khosrow-am in shekveh hami yad amad / dar o divar-e mahabad be faryad amad*).⁴⁵ As we have seen earlier, ‘Eshqi’s or the speaker’s most forthright assertions are articulated through other speakers or other modes of narration during the course of the poem. In this section, the speaker’s “emotional reflections” are mainly expressed through the personified palace. The palace

⁴³ Ibid., 207.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 208.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

of Mahabad, which has been the focal point of the poem since the beginning, but is otherwise a mere geographical location, unable to speak, is suddenly vocal. Such transformations, as I have pointed out previously, should be considered as ‘Eshqi’s constant violation of poetic norms on the one hand, and his effort at the dramatization of the events in order to incite his readers’ patriotic emotions on the other. The poet brings parallel images of destruction and prosperity vis-à-vis one another and essentially creating two poles of categorical good and evil. Addressing king Khosrow, the palace of Mahabad begins to ask a series of rhetorical questions of the legendary ruler bringing the desolation of the palace’s current state compared to its glorious past to his attention. Phrases such as “loving nuptial chamber” (*hejleh-ye mehr*) versus “devastations of enmity” (*viraneh-ye kin*) and “Shirin’s palace” (*qasr-e shirin*) as opposed to “ill-omen place” (*joghd neshin*) attest to the poet’s categorization of Iran’s ancient past as glorious and its current state (during the poet’s time) as humiliating. The palace’s tone is almost remonstrative that aims at stirring up emotions. In *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beard: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*, Najmabadi has argued that it was in nineteenth-century Iran that patriotic love, in a sense that ‘Eshqi is employing it, and in its modern form had emerged (97-98). *Vatan* (homeland) became a territory with clear borders. This newly founded notion of the homeland, was reconfigured as a “female body: one to love and be devoted to, to possess and protect, to kill and die for” (98). The following lines demonstrate ‘Eshqi’s attempt at developing this node as well as spurring the king’s emotion regarding the destruction of his palace, the occupation of his land, and the violation of his daughter:

Dar khor-e taj-e sarat az ham-e ja baj resid!
Sar bar avar, cheh bebin bar sar-e an taj resid?
Keh haman ba hameh-ye molk-e to beh taraj resid!
Hormatat dar haram-e ka'beh beh hojjaj resid!!
Kar-e dokht-e to dar an vahleh beh harraj resid!!
Bar khalaf in cheh khalafat bod o shod?
In cheh toghyan-e khorafat bod o shod.⁴⁶

Deserving of your crown, riches came from all corners!
Lift up your head; behold what has become of that crown?
That and the rest of your kingdom have been pillaged!
Your honor was given to the pilgrims at Ka'beh!!
It was at that time that your daughter was sold.
What is this caliphate unlike what was?
What is this rising of superstition.

The above lines reveal the identity of the wrongdoer and the victim. Arab conquerors are the villains of the story and king Khosrow's daughter is the victim. These lines then further confirm the idea that sexual violence against women is a tool in nation building as warring parties employ it to undermine the enemy who is unable to protect its women and its territory (Schott 25). Inviting king Khosrow to lift up his head (presumably from the grave) (*sar bar avar*) and behold (*bebin*) the devastation that befallen his kingdom and his daughter, the speaker (i.e. the palace) establishes a link between the king's territory and his daughter as the king's unequivocal possessions. The king's lowered head can also signify the shame that the monarch must be experiencing in his failure to protect his daughter and his realm from the outside aggression. The speaker is further humiliating the king by asking him to lift his head up (*sar bar avar*) and witness the pillaging of his lands and the sale of his daughter.

Although there is no direct mention of rape in these lines, references to the lost honor (*hormat*) and the sale (*harraj*) of the king's daughter are strong enough

⁴⁶ 'Eshqi, *Kolliat*, 208.

implications that sexual transgression had taken place as these lines confirm: “Your honor was given to the pilgrims in Ka‘beh / it was at that time that your daughter was sold” (*hormatat dar haram-e ka‘beh beh hojjaj resid / kar-e dokht-e to dar an vahleh be harraj resid*). In her book *Veils and Words*, Farzaneh Milani explains how nationalist writers such as ‘Eshqi when wanting to “portray the plundering of their country by outside forces” had to “resort to metaphors of woman’s virginity, its loss made to represent the loss of honor and national resources.”⁴⁷ These authors were aware that in order for the larger *vatan* to become “loved” it had to be explicitly reconfigured (Najmabadi 99). In addition, sexual violence, as discussed above, plays a decisive role for political transformations (Schott 25). Here, the king’s violated daughter (i.e. the female body) is thus reconfigured into the homeland—the actual territory of Iran—under assault. By the end of this section, the identity of the assailants becomes even more specific. Their religion for the first time is confirmed as Islam. Words such as *hojjaj* (plural form of *hajji* for male pilgrims) and *ka‘beh* (the holiest site in Islam) point the blaming to Muslim Arab men. Also, words such as *khelafat* (caliphate), as a system of governance, that replaced monarchy is another sign of the political transformation that the speaker says brought with it *khorafat* (superstition) and *kharabi* (destruction) to Iran.⁴⁸

In “Mystical Musings,” the speaker philosophizes about life, death, the world, and the purpose behind it all, but finds such speculations useless: “I found more philosophizing to be loquacious” (*bish az in falsafeh ham rudeh-derazi didam*).⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1992, 130.

⁴⁸ ‘Eshqi, *Kolliat*, 208.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 209.

Abandoning these thoughts, the speaker carries on walking until he reaches the ruined castle (*qal'eh-ye kharabeh*); the one that he had seen through the window of the widow's hut at the beginning of the narrative. Meandering through the ruins of the palace the disheartened poet discovers the "footprints of bare-footed Arabs" (*ja-ye pa-ye arab-e berahne payi didam*).⁵⁰ Here, one can argue that the speaker finally found the evidence that he was looking for as this line suggests: "I learned what I had to learn from this world" (*ancheh bayast befahmam zeh jahan fahmidam*).⁵¹

In the next section, "The Mysterious Mausoleum" (*Boq'eh-ye Asraramiz*), the speaker begins to put his findings together and turns his accusations against Arab men into full-fledged conviction. He enters the mausoleum where he is faced with a strange scene (*didam andarsh shegeft-ar yeki manzareh-i*).⁵² Next to a burning candle, the speaker discovers a black mass (*tudeh-ye siyah*) that had sought refuge in the corner of the mausoleum (*bordeh dar gusheh-ye an boq'eh panah*). He begins to make sense of what he was witnessing:

Pish-e khod goftam: in tudeh siyah anbani ast
 Ya por az tusheh, siyah kish-i az chupani ast
 Dast bordam negaram, jameh dar an ya nani ast
 Didam in har do, na, kalbod-e bijan-i ast
 Goftam: in na'ash-e yeki jeld siyah heyvan-i ast
 Didamash heyvan na, na'ash-e zan-i ast
 Jeld ham jeld na, tireh kafan-i ast.⁵³

I thought to myself: this mass must be a black sack
 Or it is filled with a shepherd's supplies
 I reached to see whether there are any clothes or bread in it

⁵⁰ Ibid., 211.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

I realized that it is a lifeless body and it is neither clothes nor bread
I thought: it must be the coat of a black animal
I saw that it was not an animal, but a woman's corpse
And that the animal skin is not a skin, but a dark shroud.

As the black mass takes the shape of a woman in front of the speaker's eyes he ventures guesses regarding its nature. From a shepherd's black sack (*siyah anban*) to a woman's lifeless body (*kalbod-e bijan*) the speaker's presumptions have one thing in common: they are all described as black or dark and lifeless. His initial speculation regarding the nature of the black mass speaks of some sort of an animal. Upon more careful examining he discovers that the black mass is indeed a woman's corpse (*na 'sh-e zan-i ast*) wrapped in a dark shroud (*tireh kafan*). Comparing a female body, albeit lifeless, to the carcass of an animal is both degrading and dehumanizing. The color black further adds to the macabre bearing of the scene. In light of his findings, petrified and alarmed, the speaker is unable to move.

In the following lines the ghastly images of the corpse are balanced by descriptions of the woman's face. The text does not offer any evidence as to how the speaker was able to see the corpse's face. We do learn, however, that in that dark place (*tireh saray*) the woman's face was burning brighter than the candle (*behtar az sham 'rokhash miafrukht*).⁵⁴ Although described as bright, the rest of the description of her face is depressing. The speaker explains the sadness of the woman's face (*chehr*) in these terms: it was as if her face had been crushed in the grip of sadness (*chehr-e siminash zeh bas panjeh-ye gham befshordeh*). Then he compares it to a withered bud (*cho yeki*

⁵⁴ Ibid.

ghoncheh keh dar tazeh goli pazhmordeh), which highlights the imagery of sorrow.⁵⁵

Other references to dying in one's prime of life such as "died in youth" (*nowjavan-mordeh*) and "dying young" (*javanmargi*) suggest a life not fully lived. The emphasis on cutting a young and promising life in her prime short, much like a bud that withers before getting a chance to bloom, is perhaps imbued with more tragedy than simply dying. In other words, these lines intimate that something that seems to be more oppressive than death must have happened to the woman. Similar to what we have seen in previous sections, the speaker once again employs the element of dream (*khab*) to tell his tale in the next phase of the narrative, which is the climax of the story.

In the next section entitled "The Appearance of the Queen of the Shrouded Ones" (*Tazahor-e Malakeh-ye Kafanpooshan*) the speaker continues his tale filled with feelings of strong horror (*bim*) and sorrow (*hasrat*), which aggrieves him to the extent that he loses strength (*keh bepashid qovayam zeh ham*), falls to the ground, and hits his head. In a state between consciousness (*hoshyari*) and unconsciousness (*bihushi*), a purgatory (*barzakh*) of some sort, he exclaims that whatever he remembers that happened next is a dream (*khab*) and speculation (*goman*) (*pas az in har cheh be khater daram / hameh ra khab o goman pendaram*).⁵⁶ Here, the speaker's dream is a reminder of the Freudian *Tagtraum* or day-dreams. Freud specifically used these terms to emphasize their function of wish-fulfillment (*Wunscherfüllung*). "Given the fact that these fantasies can remain unconscious, their distinctive trait is in this case their meaning" (Lodge 75). In other words, if we take the Freudian idea that the dream, as psychic phenomena of full value, in

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 213.

fact represents a wish fulfilled, then the speaker's dream in the poem in the least offers a meaning if not the speaker's exact wish. So, what does it mean for the speaker to dream about finding a woman's lifeless body, wrapped in a black shroud, and deserted amongst the ruins of a historical site? Of course we are not able to determine the exact meaning of the speaker's dream. However, given the textual evidence we can deduce its significance and hopefully get closer to the message of the poem.

In that in-between state of sleep (*khab*) and wakefulness (*bidari*), the dark shroud begins to move staring the speaker in the face. The black mass addresses the speaker with a terrified and trembling groan (*naleh-ye larzandeh-ye vahshatangiz*) saying: "She said: get up sleeping stranger / what are you doing in this mysterious mausoleum?" (*goft ey khofteh-ye biganeh az inja barkhiz / chist kar-e to dar in boq 'eh-ye asraramiz?*) (213). Referring to the speaker as *khofteh* and *biganeh*, which means a person who is asleep and a stranger or foreigner respectively, is remarkable here. The word *khofteh* not only is a reference to a person who is actually sleeping, but in Persian it also alludes to a state of unawareness and ignorance. In Persian, *khab* (to sleep or dream) and *khofteh* (a person who is sleeping), along with their various derivatives and collocations—often time with the word *gheflat* (neglect) as in *khabe gheflat* for example—suggest negligence, desertion, and abandonment. Addressing the speaker as *khofteh* and *biganeh*, the dead queen, as the representative of Iranian women, seems to be addressing the lot of Iranian men represented by the speaker.

As the woman begins to speak she tells of all the "secrets" (*asrar*) and "magic spell" (*telesm*) that have filled the place.⁵⁷ Once again, the word "secrets" suggest that the

⁵⁷ Ibid.

speaker is not privy to the information that the woman possesses. Secrets go hand in hand with magic spells and create an even more secretive and out of control situation. *Telesm* as charm, spell, or magical incantations are generally verbal formulas recited to prevent and ward off harm by magical powers. Here, though the queen's use of the word in "*in telesm ast...*" (this is a spell) suggest the act of putting someone or something under the spell. However, the difference between the usual plot development of the folktales, where the gallant intruder breaks the spell and rescues the damsel in distress, in this story the speaker is not exactly the hero and does not or rather cannot break the spell that the woman is bound by.

The following lines are crucial as they disclose the reason behind the woman's miserable condition and her death. Once again directly addressing the speaker, the woman blames the spell for the destruction of *his*—and we can assume her—*diyar* (country) and explains that her *jameh* or vesture generally refers to clothing attest to this fact.⁵⁸ Here, the queen establishes a direct link between the destruction of Iran and her garb or clothing. Knowing that the speaker found the body wrapped in a black shroud we can now safely assume that despite no direct mention of the word *hejab* or the veil, by *jameh* the queen is referring to her black veil. Before beginning to expand on her tale of woe, the woman introduces herself in the following words, which is quite curious: "I am the monster of happiness" (*man hayula-ye sa'adat hastam*) (214). The Persian word *hayula* is an intriguing choice by the author here. The immediate meaning of this word is listed as monster, ghoul, or an imaginary, un-human, and shapeless creature. However, when it is used metaphorically it can also mean the essence (*johar*) and origin (*'asl*) of

⁵⁸ Ibid., 214.

something.⁵⁹ This can lead interpretation of this line into two directions. If we take the Persian word *hayula* to mean monster the compound phrase *hayula-ye sa'adat* becomes an oxymoronic phrase. One can then argue that this phrase might refer to 'Eshqi's own convictions that most probably viewed veiled women as shapeless monsters. This can be corroborated with the use of other phrases such as *kiseh-ye sar basteh*, which literally means a sack that is tied on the top instead of a woman that we will see later on in the poem. The combination of a shapeless monster could very well refer to the unattractiveness of the veiled woman as well.⁶⁰ Veils are then introduced as the element that interferes with this particular function of women. Should they be covered in veils then these women will resemble a *hayula*, as a symbol of ugliness and doom that will disrupt any sign of happiness.

Now, if we take *hayula* to mean the essence and the origin of something the woman is suggesting that she is the essence or the origin of happiness, which is not true in her case. The lines that follow further contradict the notion that women are the essence of happiness since the reality of Khosrowdokht's situation in this *tireh-sara* or dark house is that of tragedy and not of felicity.⁶¹ The next few lines read:

Mar mara hich gonah nist beh joz ankeh zanam
Zin gonah ast keh ta zendeh-am andar kafanam
Man siyah pusham o ta in siyah az tan nakanam
To siayh bakhti o badbakht cho bakht-e to manam
Manam an kas keh bovad bakht-e to espid konam

⁵⁹ All these different definitions are listed in *Farhang-e Sokhan*. Ed. Hassan Anvari. 8 vols. Tehran: Entesharat-e Sokhan, 2002.

⁶⁰ 'Eshqi, *Kolliat*, 215.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

Man agar geryam, geryani to
Man agar khandam, khandani to.⁶²

I have not committed any sin except being a woman
It is because of this sin that for as long as I live I will be wrapped
in a shroud
I am clad in black and as long as I am wearing black
You will be wretched and miserable since I am your fortune
I am the one who can brighten up your destiny
Should I cry, you will too
If I laugh, you will too.

The above lines are the avowal—and the confession—of the woman’s virtue as well as her innocence. In most Abrahamic faiths, such as Christianity and Islam, the biological differences between men and women, especially due to women’s reproductive physiology, justified women’s fallen nature. Discussions of “Eve’s Sin” and women as *fitnah* (chaos) in Christian and Islamic theology respectively are deeply rooted convictions within the people who practice these religions.⁶³ We also know that the enforcement of women’s veiling was a regulating tool to control women. Women’s veiling has been a time-honored tradition that existed in Iran even during its pre-Islamic history. The black cover that the woman is referring to then becomes the symbol of a practice that the writer is determined to regard as a non-Iranian imposition. So, the woman’s “confession” of her sin (*gonah*) of actually being a woman (*zan*) and her miserable status as not-living highlights, questions, and condemns the old-established

⁶² Ibid., 214.

⁶³ I found Mary Poovey’s discussion of the medical treatment of Victorian women very useful in my understanding of sin and its relationship with women and suffering. Poovey talks about the Church’s opposition to the use of chloroform in child delivery arguing that the pain that women suffer in childbirth is the punishment for Eve’s sin. I have also benefited from Fatima Mernissi’s discussion of women as *fitnah* due to their uncontrollable sexual desire and energy.

idea of women's inherent sinful nature. She warns that the speaker's ill-fate is due to her unfortunate situation. She proposes the removal of the dark cover as the condition that determines both their fates. She follows this up by declaring herself as the agent (*manam an kas*) who is capable of transforming the speaker's destiny from doom to that of improvement. Her warning that the speaker's happiness and sadness is contingent upon her situation further emphasizes the urgency of taking action. Based on the woman's account, she is unable to shed this dark garb for the fear of committing a sin (*bekanam gar zeh tan in jameh gonah ast mara*). Although once gain there is no direct allusion to Islam, one can assume that since women are *ordered* to cover up in Islam; therefore, the woman's statement is testimony to her lack of choice in the matter and her fear of potential persecution. A couple of lines later, however, the woman mentions the number of years that she has been left in that mausoleum and in that situation which provides the speaker and the readers with temporal approximation:

ta beh aknun keh hezar o sad o andi sal ast
andar in boq'eh dar in jameh mara in hal ast.⁶⁴

It has been over a thousand and one hundred and some years since
That I have been in this mausoleum clad in this garb.

The length of the woman's miserable non-living existence coincides with the Advent of Islam in Persia. Her being "clad in this garb" (*andar in jameh*) is the real calamity as she complains: "should I not shed it [this garb] my life will be for naught" (*nakanam 'omr dar in jameh tabah ast mara*) (214). As the previous line suggests, the woman is caught between two impossible choices: to wear the veil and not remove it. Wearing the veil on one hand has rendered her existence as "wrapped in a shroud" (*kafan-kardeh*), "a lifeless

⁶⁴ 'Eshqi, *Kolliat*, 215.

being” (*mojud-e jamad*), and “a mournful dead person” (*mordeh-ye matamzadeh*) leaving little hope that she will be saved or that there will a change in her situation. She awaits her grave and has given up.⁶⁵ However, if she removes the veil she will be chastised for it and she is certain that she will commit a sin by doing so.

The following lines are crucial as the details that they reveal further verify the historical originary point of the events that were responsible for the destruction of the palace and her misery. By this point in the narrative the readers are aware of the woman’s identity, but the speaker is still in the dark. So, when he interrupts the woman to ask about her lineage, she grows increasingly upset and is shaken up. She laments: “I was the daughter of Khosrow the ancient king of kings;” thus establishing her lineage.⁶⁶ Pointing to the ruins and the desolate place, the woman reminds the speaker of the land’s glorious past. Questioning the fairness of it all, she also talks about the cooling (*sard shodan*) of the fire in the fire temple (*atashkadeh*).⁶⁷ The allusion to the fire temple is a sign of Iran’s ancient religious establishments specific to Zoroastrianism. In the line “the fire of the fire temple has been put out” we do not learn about the enforcers who “put out” the fire. But, based on the rest of the textual clues so far one can with confidence deduce that Islam is the religion that replaced Zoroastrianism and the people who brought it with them are the Arabs. With these remarks the princess ends her tale and looks at the speaker with a blank stare. Stunned (*khireh*) by her mysterious story (*qesseh-ye asrar amiz*), the speaker is once again overcome by madness. In a hallucinatory state, when he sees that the

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 216.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

mausoleum was turning into devilish forms in front of his eyes he decides to leave.

As we have seen so far, often times, parts of the speaker's narrative take place in a state other than wakefulness. The same scenario applies to the next section of the poem: "The Return from the Mausoleum to the Village" (Bargasht az Bogh'eh beh Deh). Distraught from what had happened to him at the mausoleum, the speaker runs aimlessly when he bumps his head into a column (*setun*), falls to the ground, and loses consciousness.⁶⁸ He stays in that position until the next morning. After he wakes up, he finds himself at the gates of the village and close to a stream. Still stupefied from the previous night's events, the speaker manages to stand up when he sees that a woman, identical to the woman in the mausoleum, that he had seen the night before is approaching the water carrying a jug. To his horror he sees two more women, one carrying bowls and plates and the other carrying an armful of stuff, looking just like the first one are approaching the river as well.⁶⁹ At this point, the three women, described as identical to Khosrow's daughter (*dokhtar-e Kasra*), are at the water and congregate there.⁷⁰ The horror of this scene—basically the multiplication of his nightmare—once again makes the speaker incredibly restive. So, he begins to run towards the village in a confused state (*sarasimeh*). On his way, he sees the same woman poking her head out from every corner and every house. Once he gets to his caravan, he sees that every woman there also looked exactly like the daughter of Kasra. There was however an exception: "Everyone looked like the daughter of Khosrow to me / Except one woman

⁶⁸ Ibid., 217.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ *Kasra* is the Arabic form of Khosrow.

who was not Muslim, but Jewish” (*hameh chon dokhtar-e kasra beh nazar jelveh nemud / joz yeki zan keh mosalman nabod o bud yahud*) (218). This is the first instance in the poem that Islam is clearly referenced in relation to the appearance of women wrapped in black shrouds compared to another Abrahamic faith. The distinction of the Jewish woman from the lot of Muslim women explains a few things. Besides the portrayal of a society in which different religious communities coexisted, it points to the speaker’s resolve in isolating Islam as the main factor responsible for the Muslim women’s miserable situation. This is while Jewish women at the time were for the most part wearing modest clothing as prescribed by Judaism. Some wore elaborate head gears (such as Jewish Kurds) that marked their religion as well as their ethnic makeup. Because Jews have lived in Iran for hundreds of years it is safe to assume that ‘Eshqi was familiar with the Jewish sartorial customs. But, the distinction that he makes demonstrates his ardent nationalism rooted in anti-Arab sentiments than his larger knowledge of the Jewish community’s take on women and modesty in clothing.

At this point in the narrative the speaker moves towards ending his story (*qesseh*) as the Persian word *bari* meaning “anyhow” suggests. The speaker mentions that this particular experience during his travels had such a great impact on him that he told the story (*hekayat*) everywhere that he went afterwards. After he returns to Iran in three years only to witness that his “story” is no longer a story, but a reality in Iran he exclaims:

Har cheh zan didam anja hameh ansan didam!
Hameh ra zendeh darun-e kafan ensan didam!
Hameh ra surat-e azadeh-ye Sasan didam!
Saf beh saf dokhtar-e Kasra hameh ja san didam
Khishtan ra pas az in qesseh harasan didam
Hameh in qesseh beh nazm avardam
Fahm-e an bar to havalat kardam.⁷¹

⁷¹ ‘Eshqi, *Kolliat*, 218.

Every woman that I saw there was like that [the dead woman in the
mausoleum]
I saw them all human and alive wrapped in a shroud
They all resembled the one born to Sasan
Rows after rows I saw daughters of Kasra who looked the same
I found myself after this story fearful
I wrote the story in verse
I left its meaning for you to deduce.

These final lines end with a most remarkable message. The speaker-poet is not telling his readers what they should understand from his “story” (*qesseh*). He is asking them to determine its message on their own. In a way, despite his impassioned patriotism, the poet remains faithful to his artistic pursuit when he says: “I wrote the story in verse” (*hameh in qesseh beh nazm avardam*). As I have alluded above, by referring to his experience traveling as *qesseh* (story) ‘Eshqi has composed a clever juxtaposition of reality and poetic imagination. There is no doubt that ‘Eshqi in his travels encountered the historical sites belonging to ancient Iranian history and felt a sense of grief as he avows in a few of his famous works including this one. However, his meeting with the woman in the mausoleum and his delirious encounters with women wrapped in black shrouds are of course the dramatization of a social phenomenon that he deemed was in dire need of reform. The remarkable aspect of these final lines correlates with the closing section of the poem aptly entitled “At the End of the Story” (Dar Payan-e Dastan).

In this section, ‘Eshqi despite his efforts throughout the poem, to keep his distance from the personas of his poem (i.e. the speaker and the poet) and to refrain from stating his stance on the matter (i.e. women’s veiling) candidly delivers his opinion most assertively and clearly in the concluding section of the narrative. As we have seen in the course of the narrative the poet accentuates his presence and participation while

containing a discursive control over the narrative. What is remarkable in this final section is how ‘Eshqi posits himself as the omniscient and stable speaker. As if facing his own image in a mirror he begins to address ‘Eshqi the poet in the most assertive manner. Using the second person personal pronoun *to* (you) that lends a rather informal and intimate quality to the pronouncements, the poet reminds himself of some sort of an obligation that he had forgotten he had. Taking an imperative tone he commands the speaker:

to sezad bar degaran bedahi dars
sokhan azad begu hich matars.⁷²

It is fitting that you should teach others
Speak freely, don’t be afraid.

As we have seen in the closing lines of the previous section, ‘Eshqi leaves the responsibility of “understanding” (*fahm*) the message of his work to his readers, which is testimony to the interactive environment that he creates in the poem where poet and reader are “bonded in a relationship which bestows a position of near equal subjectivity on both.”⁷³ By doing so, ‘Eshqi, rhetorically at least, positions himself alongside the readers in the position of an onlooker exposed to the vicissitudes of the narrative. This posturing though changes suddenly when ‘Eshqi the all-knowing speaker decides to incite the speaker of the poem—the other ‘Eshqi—into taking action. But, this posturing does not last and we see in the final stanzas of the poem a sudden shift in the addressee. The speaker asks rhetorically about the purpose of *chador* and *rubandeh* (face veil). He also advocates for equality between men and women. It is then that his impassioned tone

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Karimi-Hakkak, *Recasting Persian Poetry*, 230.

becomes tempered and his message is no longer didactic. Here, “the collective entity to whom the poem is addressed also moves the poem’s sphere of action toward public domain.”⁷⁴ The final lines of the poem read:

Ba man ar yek do seh guyandeh, ham avaz shavad
Kam kam in zemzemeh, dar jame‘eh aqhaz shavad
Ba hamin zemzemeh-ha ruy-e zanan baz shavad
Zan kanad jameh-ye sharmar o sarafraz shavad
Lezat-e zendegi az jame‘eh ehraz shavad
Var na ta zan beh kafan sar bordeh:
Nimi az melat-e Iran mordeh!!⁷⁵

If a few others begin telling this story with me
Gradually, the society will begin to tell it as well
It is by telling these stories that women’s veil will be removed
Women will remove their shameful clothing and will be proud
And the enjoyment of life will be obtained
Otherwise as long as women are wrapped in a shroud
Half of Iranian people is dead.

Using the conditional clause *if* implies term(s) on which something depends on. Thus, the assertiveness of the poet’s message a few lines back dissipates and is replaced by a sense of uncertainty. Expressing a deep sense of concern, the speaker’s warning at the end further questions his confidence in the improvement of women’s situation and their freedom from the veil.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 196.

⁷⁵ ‘Eshqi, *Kolliat*, 219.

Dead Women & Their Association with Nation in “The Black Shroud”

One can read “The Black Shroud” as a narrative of the founding or reconfiguring of a political community that has at its kernel a story of violence against women.⁷⁶ In this verse-drama ‘Eshqi tells the story of the aggression of Arab men not only against Iran per se but particularly against Iranian women. The word *kafan* (shroud) provides the central locus for a network of semantic units in this poem that coalesces the actual usage of a shroud and the veil—that is, the transformation of women into dead bodies upon wearing the veil. In this poem, ‘Eshqi makes his opinion about the veil clear. He identifies it as the responsible factor in Iran’s backwardness and the metaphorical death of half of the country’s population. The poem attracted the attention of women’s journals at the time, which were mushrooming across Iran, such as Shahnaz Azad’s *Nameh-ye Banuan* (Ladies’ Journal) and was published in their first two editions in 1920.⁷⁷

Without a doubt “The Black Shroud” is part of ‘Eshqi’s contribution to the continuation of the debate on women that his predecessors, including Akhundzadeh, had started. He does make some of the same observations and touches on many of the topics that writers before him had already discussed, but adds to it by including his voice. He wrote on the issues of homosexual relations, pederasty, alchemy, magic, romantic love, and the libertine Western woman that Talattof define “a continuation of backward classical themes,” were still controversial amongst the Constitutionalists.⁷⁸ However, ‘Eshqi, not only in “The Black Shroud,” but in some of his other poems, honed in on the

⁷⁶ Robin May Schott, *Birth, Death, and Femininity*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010, 28.

⁷⁷ Eliz Sanasarian. *The Women's Rights Movements in Iran: Mutiny, Appeasement, and Repression from 1900 to Khomeini*. New York: Praeger, 1982. 33.

⁷⁸ Talattof, *Modernity, Sexuality, and Ideology in Iran*, 168.

issue of women's veil more than other pressing issues such as women's integration into the society or their education. In his critique of the veil, he focuses on one isolated historical event (i.e. the Arab conquest of Persia) as the originary point of Iran's demise and presents the imagery of presumably dead women wrapped in black shrouds as markers of this devastation. 'Eshqi in this poem establishes a direct correlation between the institution of veiling and the Arab Conquest of Persia in seventh-century. In forming this connection, 'Eshqi ignores the history of veiling that existed in the pre-Islamic period in Iranian history. Scholars have found numerous passages in classical texts that find women covered with some sort of veiling or a head dress. There are reports that veiling was not limited to women and was also practiced by kings.⁷⁹ Therefore, the institution of veiling is not necessarily Islamic in its origin. Whether 'Eshqi was aware of this history is up for debate, but his insistence in making his case is rooted in the anti-Arab rhetoric at the time. In other words, such observations from the pro-modernity camp was prevailing and was at best essentialist and inchoate. However, what distinguishes 'Eshqi's critique of the veil lies in his portrayal of veiled women as lifeless. Nobody before him had provided such grim and bleak critique of the practice of veiling. The association that he has established in "The Black Shroud" between women and death is powerful.

In the introduction to *Birth, Death, and Femininity: Philosophies of Embodiment*, Robin May Schott has discussed the gendered aspect of classical philosophical discourses (mainly Western philosophy) about death, birth, and an entire chain of human activity. In this piece Schot has challenged prevailing feminist articulations of death and birth. I

⁷⁹ For more information on the veiling in the Islamic and pre-Islamic periods see "Chador (2)" on *Encyclopedia Iranica*. <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/cador-a-loose-female-garment-covering-the-body-sometimes-also-the-face>

found Schott's discussion of "the coupling of sexual violence and political conflicts" extremely pertinent to my analysis of 'Eshqi's poem.⁸⁰ Bringing examples of recent incidents such as rape committed by Serbs against Bosnian Muslim women and Hutus' rape of Tutsi women as well as examples from ancient and classical texts such as the rape of Sabine women and the founding of Rome, and the rape of Lucretia and the founding of republicanism in Rome, Schott reminds us that often time political beginnings take place over the dead bodies of women (Schott 25 & 28). She then proceeds to ask: "What logic underpins stories in which a woman who is a member of a community is portrayed as suffering violence so that her community can take new shape?" (25). We can ask the same question regarding 'Eshqi's poem. Why did 'Eshqi's criticism of the veil *had* to be depicted in the form of violated and dead women? Is the representation of death merely a tool to stress the damaging effects of the women's veil on the society? It does seem so on the surface. There is no in depth scholarship that provides an answer to this question apart from stating the obvious; 'Eshqi viewed veiling as detrimental to the process of progress in his society. But, can we interrogate 'Eshqi's associating of women and death with more scrutiny? For 'Eshqi, the very moment in which the body of the Iranian woman was violated and was subjected to the ways of their violators (i.e. wearing the veil) becomes the transformative moment that according to the poem shaped Iran's political and social posturing. A powerful dynasty—the Sasanian dynasty—fell and a foreign system of ascendancy with new sets of rules and customs replaced it. Subsequently, a new nation began to take shape based on the propagation of a new religion: Islam. In this struggle for power lives were lost, but how are we to understand the sexual component of 'Eshqi's

⁸⁰ Schott, *Birth, Death, and Femininity*, 25.

story, that sexual identity marks the victim of violence? If we take the body as the mirror of social system, as scholars like Mary Douglas and Schott have argued, then it is the women's dead bodies that represent victimhood and defeat. "The Black Shroud" exemplifies a certain innate victimhood that is particular to women.

Muslim, Arab Men as Violators of Women in "The Black Shroud"

As discussed earlier, the anti-Arab sentiment, which equated Iran's backwardness with the advent of the Arab Conquest of Persia, became a popular topic in the discourse on modernity and remained so for at least over a century. Referencing Iran's glorious past, many members of the new intellectuals "located the 'vice' in the domain of Arabo-Islamic backwardness." Secular modernists like Akhundzadeh and later on Kermani in their discussion of women saw gender segregation and the practice of veiling as remnants of the Arab invasion and as impediments to women's progress. Akhundzadeh, for example, went as far as to blame the system of polygamy based on the person of Prophet Mohammad and his string of wives in *Maktubat (Correspondences)*. What 'Eshqi and his generation of writers did with this particular theme was to morph it into what Homa Katouzian has termed "romantic nationalism."⁸¹ This notion saw its rise and influence in politics and literature after the Constitutional Revolution. In "The Black Shroud" the princess's tale of woe regarding the aggression of the Arabs is a metaphor for Iranian's doomed fate in the hands of an invading force.

Prior to writing "The Black Shroud" 'Eshqi had written an operatic verse drama, while he was reportedly in Istanbul, entitled "Rastakhiz-e Shahriyaran-e Iran" (The

⁸¹ For more information see "Iranian Culture and Romantic Nationalism," in Homa Katouzian's *Sadeq Hedayat: The Life and Legend of an Iranian Writer*. New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002.

Resurrection of Persian Kings) that included an array of mytho-historical characters from pre-Islamic Iran as well as himself. This poem became the first of several compositions that meant to incite nationalistic feelings amongst Iranians in the aftermath of the Constitutional Revolution. “The Black Shroud” in a way is a more polished and focused version of the former poem. In the latter Iranian women and their veil become the focal point of the story and the devastating consequence of the Arab Conquest of Persia: the main theme of “The Resurrection.” These poems due to their glorification of ancient Iran and fierce sense of patriotism have received some scholarly attention. In fact this aspect of ‘Eshqi’s poetry thoroughly corresponded with the mainstream themes of the plays, which was written during the Constitutional era. These plays covered themes of *e’eteraz* (protestation) and *efshagari* (revelation), as Hassan Mirabedini suggests, rendering the theater at the time to an ideological institution.⁸²

⁸² Talattof, *Modernity, Sexuality, and Ideology in Iran*, 15.

Conclusion

On the surface “The Black Shroud” can be considered as a semi-fictitious travelogue. However, the poem only accounts for one night of a long a trip that young ‘Eshqi took during the first decade of the twentieth-century. Passing by the ruins of the old Sasanian palace prompts ‘Eshqi to direct all his dissatisfaction with the course of political and social development in Iran towards a particular *Other*. Building on his predecessors’ anti-Arab and anti-Islam rhetoric, the story that ‘Eshqi tells is a hybrid of reality and artistic imagination. Its historical references, mainly to the Arab Conquest of Persia in the seventh century, are posed as the turning point in Iran’s history—including social and political. The veiling of Iranian women is presented as a lingering and devastating consequence of that invasion. Images of destruction and ruin such as the ruined castle and desolate village could stand for an Iran that the poet viewed was in demise. The main inhabitants of this nightmarish place, however, seem to be scores of violated and abandoned women wrapped in black shrouds, not living. With the exception of the speaker and an old man who tells him about the story of the glorious palace of Ctesiphon, there is no sign of any man Iranian or otherwise.

All in all, the poem in its entirety, including the preamble, must ultimately be seen as a young poet’s fatalistic and frustrated outburst against the political situation in Iran during the last years of the Qajar period. ‘Eshqi’s poem is an expression of his nationalist project in which positions and positioning of women are manifestations of gender relations and the ways they affect and are affected by national projects and processes.⁸³

“The Black Shroud” is a perfect prototype of positioning women within the large

⁸³ Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation*. London: SAGE Publications, 2004, 1.

discourse on modernity, but as victims and as they pertain to nationalism. Having said that, it is important to note that although women in this poem are described as good as dead due to their veil, yet they exhibit a great deal of agency. Although death marks the end of a process, but for the Queen of the Shrouded Ones it seems to be the beginning. In other words, although Khosrowdokht is practically a corpse and has assumed a seemingly passive position for over a thousand years, she is the one who speaks up and tells of the atrocities that she and her family had undergone in the hands of the enemy. This is remarkable in the sense that Khosrowdokht's account is the one that directly and without any interruption outlines her and the rest of the women's desperate condition.

The final section of "The Black Shroud" comes back full circle to the poet himself. Addressing himself, 'Eshqi as if thinking aloud, expresses his frustration over not speaking against the veil clearly as the Persian phrase *dar hejab sokhan goftan* suggests. 'Eshqi invites other to join him in criticizing the veil and promises that their collective voices can lead into women's unveiling. He ends with a bleak promise that should women remain veiled it is as if half of Iran's population is dead.

Although 'Eshqi's poem is subtitled as a play (*namayeshnameh*) and in that sense one can say he is experimenting with a genre that generations before him dabbled in. However, his poetry goes beyond Akhundzadeh's work in a sense that it is a fusion of the poet's personal and real life experiences that gives his poem a more subjective direction. It also puts the onus on the readers to look for ways to improve an unpleasant situation. In essence, the final lines of the poem are an invitation that asks people to action.

In the next Chapter, I will discuss another poet by the name of Iraj Mirza who looked at the issue of veiling as well. His explicit language, however, is different from

'Eshqi's coy approach in tackling the issue. Iraj says what he wants with conviction and pays little heed to appropriateness. While the mood of 'Eshqi's poetry is dark, pessimistic and fatalistic, Iraj brings humor and levity into his poetry. His polarized views of ignorant veiled women as opposed to intelligent unveiled women are at best contradictory and allude to the negative consequences of veiling.

Chapter Four

Veiled Wantons: The Unveiling of the Female Body in ‘*Arefnameh*’¹

‘*Arefnameh*’ which is a long poem by Iraj Mirza is one such work that even if one reads it in private it will cause one to blush all the way up to their ear. Now, imagine what would happen if such a work is performed on stage without being censored. It actually did go on stage on May second in Paolo Alto, California.²

These are the opening lines of a BBC article that reports on a play called “‘*Arefnameh*” directed by Shahrokh Moshkin Qalam, a well-known Iranian-French modern dancer, choreographer, actor and director. Works of literature are often adapted for movies, plays, and other forms of performing arts. So, the fact that a poem was adapted for a stage production is nothing of an anomaly. But, the poem in question is a famously infamous poem by Jalal Al-Mamalek better known as Iraj Mirza (1874-1926), one of the most famous poets in early-twentieth century Iran and a grandson of Fath ‘Ali Shah Qajar (r. 1797-1834). The performances of “‘*Arefnameh*” in California open only to an audience of eighteen and over were sold out. Besides the celebrity of Moshkin Qalam as the main actor—also the director of the play—what drew spectators to this performance, lies in the text of “‘*Arefnameh*” itself. Due to its graphic language describing sexual intercourse and other allusions to same-sex relations, readers and publishers alike have always had

¹ ‘*Arefnameh*’ the title of Iraj Mirza’s long poem has been translated in multiple ways amongst which “Letter to ‘Aref” and “The Book of ‘Aref” are most notable. ‘Aref is the name of Iraj Mirza’s friend and fellow poet who is one of the addressees in the poem, but not the only addressee as the poem begins with the speaker reporting that his friend is in town. These ambiguities make the task of adopting either translation difficult. Since it is not clear whether the part that is the focus of this chapter is indeed addressed to ‘Aref, I have decided to keep the original title of the poem.

² Sam Farzaneh, “‘*Arefnameh*,” *Namayeshi az Harfha-ye Magu-ye Iraj Mirza*” (Book of ‘Aref; A Play of Iraj Mirza’s Untold Words,” BBC website, May 17, 2015.

serious qualms to read the poem and to publish it.³ In the same article, Sam Farzaneh, the BBC reporter, writes about Moshkin Qalam's ambivalence about the play's success:

The director and one of the actors of this play is Shahrokh Moshkin Qalam, who had directed a play called *Zohreh and Manuchehr* based on another *masnavi* by Iraj Mirza before. But, the poet's fearless criticism of Perso-Islamic norms and traditions made even the director nervous to appear on the stage fearful that the audience might leave upon becoming shocked, provoked, and offended.⁴

Contrary to the director's concerns the play went on as planned. This is not the first time that such statements are uttered and extra caution is regarded with respect to "Arefnameh." Such hesitation is not limited to public. Some academics have also exhibited prudence in their analysis of "Arefnameh." Scholars such as Homa Katouzian despite his praise for Iraj's mastery in writing poetry, has glossed over the parts of the poem that could not "be repeated in polite society" and discussed his poetry without referring to the parts in question.⁵ Mohammad Ja'far Mahjub, whose edition of Iraj's *Divan* still holds authority, in the introduction to his edition laments the poet's foul mouth:

All in all, one of the biggest flaws of Iraj's poetry, a flaw that one can never ignore, is the existence of vulgar (*rakik*) concepts and references. It is bewildering that despite his deep understanding of French literature and his awareness of how French authors and men of letter prescribe satire

³ As far as I am aware the most authoritative edition of Iraj Mirza's poetry was put together by the eminent Persian scholar Mohammad Ja'far Mahjub, and was first published in 1963. After the Islamic Revolution of 1979 Iraj Mirza's poetry was never published in its entirety. Illegal copies of Mahjub's books are being sold by street vendors and on the black market. In the age of advanced information technology Iraj's *Divan* is one of the most uploaded books and electronic copies of his poems, especially *Arefnameh* is only a click away.

⁴ Farzaneh, "Arefnameh," BBC, 2015.

⁵ Homa Katouzian in his analysis of Iraj's poetry in "Iraj, the Poet of Love and Humor" has simply skipped the parts that he deemed impolite to repeat.

(*tanz*) and humor (*hazl*), seeing how they write in a way that the stain of vulgarity does not soil their works and poetry and their prose should not offend public decency (*'effat-e 'omumi*) and good morals (*akhlaq-e hasaneh*), Iraj still disregarded virtues of the pen (*'effat-e qalam*) and sullied such sweet, fluent, and eloquent poem with indecency. (36)

It is this very unmentionable aspect of Iraj's poetry that has drawn many readers—including myself—to “Arefnameh” for years. The allure of the poem stands true for Moshkin Qalam and his team. Yet, one can see in the same BBC article mentions Iranian readership's uneasiness when it comes to Iraj's poetry. In a section of the article aptly entitled “Laughter in Darkness” (Khandeh dar Tariki), Moshkin Qalam talks about the reason behind the audience's applause during the show:

Moshkin Qalam believed that a series of factors were the reason as to why the audience enjoyed the performance; from the eloquence of the poem to the criticism of the society and of course the manner of this criticism, as the play's director compares it to a bucket of cold water over one's head in scorching heat.

The comparison between reading Iraj's poem to pouring of cold water over one's head in scorching heat highlights its shock effect. It also shows the unease with which the audience may have reacted to the performance. Moshkin Qalam, in the same article, is said to have believed that: “the intensity of the audience's laughter and applause was to the darkness of the performance hall.” He also tells a personal anecdote that further underscores people's scruples when it comes to reading “Arefnameh.” In the article, the artist is quoted remembering that at a gathering he was reading the text of the poem out loud to a group of people, which unease the company. He told to the BBC reporter:

Close friends of mine who would laugh and talk about the poem in private, would not laugh at that gathering lest the person who was sitting next to them think that they must be enjoying this, so they must be thinking like this and talk like this.

Laughing and discussing the poem in private versus refraining from showing any sign of pleasure is not only emblematic of Moshkin Qalam's circle of friends, but the majority of Iranians who know of Iraj and his poetry.

In this chapter I would also like to draw attention to the reluctance in dealing with "Arefnameh" and argue that such trepidations may have left gaps in our readings of the poem. The apprehension that many experience when reading its text is perhaps partly due to the fact that it is replete with references to nether parts of the body. The print versions of this poem in particular are full of ellipses for the obscenities. In *Suppressed Persian* Paul Sprachman explains the practice of printing such manuscripts. He writes:

Since the advent of lead-type printing in Iran, it has been the practice to edit and publish manuscripts that bluntly refer to 'awrat by substituting ellipses for the obscenities. But, because the number of classical obscenities in Persian is limited, experienced readers often have a good idea of what the author of the original had written. Typically printed with their initial consonant followed by dots are the three "kaf" words (so-called because they begin with "k", the 26th letter of the Persian alphabet): *kos* (cunt), *kir* (cock), and *kun* (asshole). Also, often "dotted out" with or without initial consonants are *khaya* (balls), and the verb *gaidan* (fuck). Perhaps the only readers who are fooled by this naïve placement of ellipses are children who never read these words, but certainly have heard them in the schoolyards and the street.⁶

The word 'awrat,⁷ which generally refers to the most private part of the body, is key here as Iraj places it at the center of his literary creation.⁸ So, it is my contention that such vigilance in *not* discussing a work of literature due to its explicit nature is a form of

⁶ Paul Sprachman, *Suppressed Persian: An Anthology of Forbidden Literature*. Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 1995, xxxi.

⁷ According to Sprachman *awrat* is defined differently for men and women. For men, their private parts include the region that stretches from the naval to the knees, but for women it extends to the rest of the body except face and the hands as far as the wrists. Sprachman quotes the Quran directly in his book. Needless to say what exactly constitutes *awrat* is debatable.

⁸ Sprachman, *Suppressed Persian*, ix.

ensorship and worthy of examination. Iraj, and his contemporaries like ‘Eshqi—although to a lesser degree—and Farrokhi Yazdi (1889-1939) all used lampoons, invectives, and obscene language mainly for political ends, but the notoriety that Iraj gained by writing “‘Arefnameh” is unparalleled (Katouzian 532).

As the name of the poem—‘*Arefnameh*—in Persian suggests the poem is a narrative that involves Iraj’s friend named ‘Aref. In real life, ‘Aref Qazvini (1882-1934) was a poet and a musician who was also Iraj Mirza’s friend. It is general consensus that ‘Aref and Iraj who were once good friends and shared many political views had a fall out in the summer of 1921 when ‘Aref had visited Mashhad (a city in north-east of Iran) where Iraj was living at the time. During his trip, ‘Aref had refrained from paying a courtesy visit to his old friend. The tension between two friends forms the premise of “‘Arefnameh,” but as Arianpur argues, the poem is more about the Iranian people’s grave condition rather than bickering between friends.⁹ One of these calamities that Arianpur points out is the situation of women. So, in order to show this aspect of Iraj’s poetry this chapter will go beyond the discussion of the feud between the two poets and underscores that this is not what has conferred the poem its value and notoriety. Issues of sex, gender relations, and gender politics are some of the most critical and controversial questions that this poem brings to the fore.

“‘Arefnameh,” a long poem of five hundred lines, touches on many socio-political topics specific to the time of its composition and a full analysis of the poem falls outside of the scope of this project. The part in this long poem that is most pertinent to the overall discussion of the present work, however, is a story that the speaker tells to his addressee

⁹ Yahya Arianpur, *Az Saba Ta Nima* (From Saba to Nima), 399.

(‘Aref), which I will call “The Story of the Effect of the *Chador*” (Dastan-e Ta‘sir-e Chador). The story targets the veil (*chador*) as the symbol of gender segregation and the main barrier—which is one of the meanings of the word *hejab*—in the path of women’s progress and emancipation. As we have seen in the previous chapter, ‘Eshqi too viewed women’s veiling as the cause of women’s metaphorical death. The comedy of Iraj’s poem is starkly different to the fatalistic mood of ‘Eshqi’s “The Black Shroud.” Iraj’s discourse on women’s veiling is both shocking and polarizing. His argument regarding women’s veiling is polarizing because he equates veiled women with ignorant hypocrites and blames the veil for their double standards. Furthermore, his use of pornographic imagery of female genitalia and sexual intercourse leaves his readers stunned. The advocacy for women’s unveiling that both poets discuss in their works are couched within the larger discourse on modernity and driven by nationalistic tendencies. However, the ways they present their argument vary considerably. While ‘Eshqi criticizes Arab men and Islam as reasons behind Iranian women’s demise, Iraj criticizes women’s seclusion to be the reason behind men seeking to have sex with young boys. In this poem and particularly in the parable that the speaker relates about *hejab* a woman’s vagina becomes the simulacrum for the homeland. The speaker asks men to perform their patriotic duty by rejecting same-sex relations as represented by the “asshole” and direct their attentions to the “vagina.”

As mentioned above, Iraj’s explicit language that is sometimes considered a necessary element of *hajv* (verbal aggression)—a subcategory of humor literature—aims to shock readers. The story calls all veiled and modest women (*zan-e mahjubeh-ye mastureh*) ignorant (*nadan*). This chapter will interrogate the highly sexualized and

explicit language of the story that advocates for women's unveiling, education, and emancipation, and argues that this language is rooted in a phallogentric discourse that represents women's bodies as a site for males to discipline and regulate. Iraj advocacy for women's unveiling aimed at transforming the absence of women from the public space hoping to bring them into public presence unveiled.¹⁰

“Arefnameh” as Woman’s Body

The most provocative part of “Arefnameh,” told within the larger narrative, is a personal tale in which the speaker encounters a veiled woman who is passing by. The story is meant to reveal the influence of the veil on the addressee (whom we can assume is ‘Aref). This section is arguably the most compelling part of Iraj’s argument regarding the reason for male same-sex relations in Iran and the adverse effects of the veil on women’s lives. In his anecdote, the speaker expresses his ardent opposition to women’s veiling. In a way he is undressing the text—unveiling the truth, revealing a body figuratively represented as female.¹¹ He firmly believes that *chador* or *hejab*, a barrier both literally and figuratively, is tantamount to Iranian women’s ignorance. He advocates for women’s education and training and further, argues that a woman’s virtue is not necessarily dependent on the veil. In his conclusion, Iraj points out the deceitful characteristics of the veil Iraj reasons that a veiled woman can be as lascivious that an unveiled woman can be chaste.

¹⁰ Najmabadi, “Veiled Discourse-Unveiled Bodies.” *Feminist Studies*. no. 3 (Autumn 1993): 487-518, 487.

¹¹ Caroline Dinshaw, *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics*, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989, 21.

His account is a short walk down memory lane and begins by the speaker inviting his addressee (‘Aref) to listen to a story about the effect of *chador* (a long cloak-like black cloth that covers the entire body). The story begins at the threshold of the speaker’s home and begins by him reminiscing about a time when he saw a veiled woman passing through his street:

Bia guyam barayat dastani
Keh ta ta‘sir-e chador ra bedani
Dar ayyami keh saf o sadeh budam
Dam-e keryas-e dar estadeh budam
Zani bogzasht az anja ba kesh o fesh
Mara ‘erq al-nesa amad beh jonbesh
Zeh zir-e picheh didam ghabghabash ra
Kami az chaneh qadri az labash ra
Chenan kaz gusheh-ye abr-e siyahfam konad yek qat‘eh az mah ‘arz-e
andam. (ll. 99-103)

Come, let me tell you a story
So, that you learn about the effect of the veil
In the days that I was still a simple boy
I was standing at the threshold of the house
When a woman passed by with a rustling sound
Which made the blood in my veins move
I saw from underneath her veil, a part of her neck
A part of her chin and lips
Just like from the corner of a black cloud
A part of the moon would present itself.¹²

The first two lines of the above section spell out the speaker’s intention in telling his story: a lesson to be learned. The words *saf* and *sadeh* imply that the speaker at the time was quite young, so the incident could have been a learning experience for him as well. This idling youth is distracted by the rustling sound (*khesh o fesh*) of a woman’s *chador* as she is passing through. This sound appears to be seductive to the point that it is

¹² In my translation of “‘Arefnameh” I have consulted with Sprachman’s translation in *Suppressed Persian*, but my translation is more literal. I have tried to stay faithful to the original text for the purpose of analysis, whereas Sprachman’s translation is more aesthetically concerned.

arousing to the speaker as he feels it in his nether parts (*mara 'erq al-nesa amad beh jonbesh*). There is no textual evidence to suggest that the woman was deliberately trying to attract the young man's attention by making her veil rustle, but we do read a few lines later that the speaker could see parts of the woman's neck (*ghabghab*), chin (*chaneh*), and lips (*lab*). We know that in addition to wearing *chador* the woman of the story was also wearing a *picheh*, which traditionally was a piece of cloth made out of horse hair that women wore over their faces as face-veil. The white of the woman's face against the black of her face-veil and her veil is compared to the moon peeking out from behind clouds. One can argue that this revealing and concealing on part of the woman is deliberate as the wearing of so many items of clothing can make it hard for a chance exposure. The fact that the speaker could actually see different parts of the woman's face (from nose down) suggests that perhaps the woman meant to make her presence known. This only highlights her agency rather than her "asking for it" as the speaker sets out to argue later on in the poem.

Next thing we know the speaker has approached the woman and greeted her (*shodam nazd-e vey o kardam salami*).¹³ He then pretends that he has a message for her. Hearing this, the woman is hesitant (*do del*) contemplates about the messenger and the person who sent the message:

Shodam nazd-e vey o kardam salami
 Keh daram ba to az jay-i payami
 Pariru zin sokhan qadri do del zist
 Keh peygham avar o peygham deh kist
 Beh du goftam keh andar share'e 'am
 Monaseb nist sharh o bast-e peygham
 To dani har maqali ra maqamist

¹³ Iraj, *Divan*, l. 104.

Bara-ye har payami ehteramist
Qadam bogzar dar dalan-e khaneh
Beh raqs ar az sha'af bonyan-e khaneh. (ll. 104-108)

I went towards her and greeted her
I told her that I have a message for her from somewhere
The fairy-faced was a bit hesitant
Thinking about who the messenger is and who the message is from
I told her that it is not appropriate to explain the message in the public
alleyway
You know that every word has a place
Every message has its own respect
Come step inside the corridor
Bring the house to dancing with your merriness.

The word *payam* (message) suggests a degree of secrecy. The inappropriateness of the public alleyway, as the speaker explains, to relay the message alludes to the inappropriate nature of interaction between men and women in public. Under the pretense of having a message and upon his insistence (*semajat*), the woman steps inside the corridor. The desire to stay away from the public eye reinforces itself in a few lines later when the speaker asks the woman to go inside a room as the corridor was also quite busy:

“Because the corridor was also very busy / I took her into the adjacent room quickly”
(*cho dar dalan ham amad shod fozun bud / otaq-e janb-e dalan bordamash zud*) (l. 112).

Once inside the room the woman sits down holding her face-veil tight. The speaker explains: “She sat there with much coquetry and twisting / She held on to her face-veil tight” (*neshast anja beh sad naz o cham o kham / gerefteh ru-ye khod ra sakht mohkam*) (l. 113). The coquettishness and the suggestive manner of the woman in the first instance of her being alone in the room with a strange man designated by the words *naz* (coquetry) and *cham o kham* (turning and twisting) contradict her strict observance of the veil.

In an attempt to charm his guest and sooth the woman's hesitation the speaker goes on a tangent. He explains that he began telling a marvelous tale (*shegetft afsaneh*)

talking about men and women, of legendary lovers, and of Germany and of Rome, but he says; “Everything was clear from the very beginning” (*vali matlab az avval bud ma ‘lum*)

(l. 116). Inching towards his heart’s desire the speaker makes his first move:

Beh narmi goftamash ey yar-e damsaz
Bia in picheh ra az rokh bar andaz
Chera bayad to ruy az man bepushi
Magar man gorbekh mibasham to mushi
Man o to har do ensanim akher
Be khelqat har do yeksanim akher
Begu, beshno, bebin, barkhiz, benshin
To ham mesl-e mani ey jan-e shirin
To ra kan ruy-e ziba afaridand
Baray-e dideh-ye ma afaridand
Be bagh-e jan rayahinand nesvan
Be ja-ye vard o nasrinand nesvan. (ll. 119-124)

I told her softly, O my dear
Come lift your face veil
Why should you cover your face in front of me?
Am I a cat and you a mouse? We are both humans after all
We are both created the same after all
Speak, listen, see, rise, sit
You are the same as me, my dear soul
If they have given you a beautiful face
It is because it was created for our eyes
Women are the flowers to the garden of the soul
They are like roses and jonquils.

The game of cat and mouse is once again a repetition of the theme of revealing and concealing that runs through the narrative and adds to its humorous tone. Despite maintaining this humorous tone, the speaker brings to the fore important points regarding equality between men and women. Yet, the association of the woman with the matter (i.e. flower) or the physical body as opposed to the male’s association with the soul is a defining characteristic of the female in patriarchal discourse as represented here. The speaker does tell the woman and his readers that men and women are *both* human (*ensan*)

and that they have been created equally (*beh khelqat har do yeksanim akher*). However, in the lines that follow Iraj contradicts this notion of equality by suggesting that women's beautiful faces have been created for "us" indicated by the plural possessive pronoun *ma* in Persian (which can mean we, us, our, ours). By using "us" the speaker is not only joining the ranks of his addressee, but male readers. This collective entity who are to enjoy the beautiful woman are later described as *bagh-e jan* (the soul's garden), which is a direct reference to the association of the male with the soul and form. Different types of flowers (*vard o nasrin*) as women (*nesvan*) as on the other hand evoke the imagery of the delicate and the weak in need of protection.

The speaker's request for the woman to lift her face-veil is not received well by the woman. She becomes incensed, springs to her feet, and retorts in fury:

Keh man surat beh namahram konam baz?
 Boro in harfha ra dur andaz
 Cheh lutiha dar in shahrand vah vah
 Khodaya dur kon allah allah
 Beh man miguyad va kon chador az sar
 Cheh por ru-ist in allah o akbar
 Jahannam show magar man jendeh basham
 Keh pish-e gheyr bi rubandeh basham
 Az in bazit hamin bud arezuyat
 Keh ru-ye man bebini tof be ruyat
 Elahi man nabinam kheyr-e showhar
 Agar ru va konam bar gheyr-e showhar
 Boro gom show 'ajab bi cheshm o ru-i
 Cheh ru dari keh ba man hamcho gu-i
 Baradar showhar-e man arezu dasht
 Keh ruyam ra bebinad shum nagzasht
 Man az zanha-ye tehrani nabasham
 Az anha-yi keh midani nabasham. (ll. 129-138)

Me? Unveil? Show my face to a stranger?
 Go away and don't speak about such nonsense
 What rascals one can find in this town, oh oh.
 Keep them away, oh Lord Almighty.
 He tells me to take my *chador* off

How dare he, the nerve
Go to hell. Am I some kind of whore?
To be without my face-veil in the presence of a stranger?
So, your intention from all this was your wish
To see my face? I spit on your face.
May I never see any goodness from my husband
Should I open my face to others than him.
Get lost. You are so rude
How brazen are you to speak to me this way
My brother-in-law's wish was
To see my face, but my husband never allowed it
I am not a woman from Tehran
I am not *that* kind of a woman that you know either.

The woman's outburst contains three objections: she will not lift her face veil and reveal her face to *namahram* (a man who is not a kin or husband), she is not a prostitute (*jendeh*), and she is not a Tehrani woman or she is not from Tehran (*zanha-ye Tehrani*). These points, respectively, mean to stress the woman's moral convictions as pious, virtuous, and traditional. Her insistence that she is not from Tehran refers to the reputation of the sprouting urban centers as the loci of vice. Not exposing one's face to another man other than a husband, father, or brother is a commandment that the woman must have been taught from a young age. To this woman, the shame and the disgrace of unveiling are as great as the actions of a prostitute who occupies the lowest position on the moral and social strata. In other words, to her, there is no difference between the understood immorality of a woman who sells her body and a woman who exposes her hair and her face. The total lack of delineation between the shame of being a prostitute and being an unveiled woman also points to the woman's regressive views regarding the possibility of unveiling. It further stresses the speaker's if not progressive, but a more tolerant view of the same issue. The difference between their views becomes starker when the woman brings up the teachings of the *mojtahed* and *mullah* as traditional

interlocutors and superstitious beliefs with respect to veiling versus the speaker's attempt at reasoning with her by introducing modern concepts such as equality between men and women. She fires back:

‘Ajab bargashteh oza‘e zamaneh
Namandeh az mosalmani neshaneh
Nemidani nazarbazi gonah ast
Zeh ma ta qabr char angosht rah ast
To miguyi qiyamat ham shulugh ast?
Tamam-e harf-e mollaha dorugh ast?
Tamam-e mojtahedha harf-e moftand?
Hameh bi gheyrat o garden koloftand? (ll. 145-149)

Strange how times have changed
No sign of Islam has remained
Don't you know that looking is sinful?
There are only four fingers [distance] between us and the grave
Are you saying that Day of Judgment is a busy day?
Are you saying that the *mullah*'s words are all lies?
Are you saying that the *mojtahed*'s words are for naught?
Are you saying that they are all bullies and cowards?
Go and listen to a sermon one day
So, you learn from the *mullah*'s sermon.

The conformism of the woman's beliefs and her imitation of Muslim clerics and religious authorities designated by the words *mullah* and *mojtahed* are apparent. Her invitation of the speaker to attend religious sermons further solidifies her conventionality. So, the woman's source of knowledge regarding issues pertaining to her life (and after-life for that matter) is religious teachings and traditional in nature. Her ardent display of religiosity and outrage at the speaker's proposal to remove her face-veil are enough to put a stop to his pleas. He apologizes profusely and tries to calm her down by offering her some mix nuts. He begins sweet talking her again while trying to get closer to her:

Dobareh ahanash ra narm kardam
Sarash ra rafteh rafteh garm kardam
Degar esm-e hejab aslan nabordam

Vali ahesteh bazuyash feshordam
Yaqinam bud kaz rafter-e in bar
Beghorrad hamcho shir-e madeh dar ghar
Jahad bar ruy o mankubam namayad
Beh zir-e khish kos kubam nemayad
Begirad sakht o pichad khayeh am ra
Lab-e bam avarad hamsayeh am ra
Sar o karam degar ba lengeh kafsh ast
Tanam az lengeh kafsh inak banafsh ast. (ll. 156-162)

Again I softened her temper of steel
Slowly I kept amusing her
I did not speak of the veil at all
But, I began to press her arm
I was so sure that from my behavior this time
She would roar like a lioness in a cave
She would pounce on me and subdue me
And, beneath her I would be pussy-whipped
[I thought] she would grab and twist my balls severely
Whereupon my neighbors would come to their roofs
[I thought] that I would have to deal with her beating me with her shoe
And my body would turn blue under her beatings.

In the above lines we see what seems like the simple display of courtesy that one shows towards a guest. The pleasant gestures of hospitality and the speaker's refrain from mentioning the removal of her veil seem to have calmed the woman down, which gives the speaker the audacity to begin touching his guest's arm. He is, however, surprised to see that the woman does not react indignantly towards him. In the above lines, the speaker expresses a sense of certainty (*yaqin*) regarding how the woman would behave that also explains his expectations; a woman should react vehemently in the face of sexual assault. He imagines the woman's rage in wild and violent terms. He pictures the angry woman as a roaring lioness (*madeh shir*). He further visualizes the woman attacking his private parts in particular and beating him with her shoe. The act of being beaten by the woman is described by the phrase *kos-kub*, which is made up of the words

kos (vagina) and *kubidan*, which means to pound, to grind, or to mash. The combination of the phrase *kos-kub*, which rhymes with *mankub* meaning to subdue other than suggesting a thorough beating by the woman indicates the fear of castration. Although the woman is the subject of the hypothetical violent attack, it is her vagina (*kos*) that is being highlighted and not another body part. This, in a phallogentric narrative is indicative of the ultimate representation of humiliation. His imagination, however, proves to be more animated as he is neither subdued under the woman's attacks (perhaps by a shoe) nor is he in any danger of castration as she remains placid while the speaker is touching her arms trying to "soften" her "steel-like" temper. He continues:

Vali didam be 'aks an mahrokhsar
Tahashi mikonad, amma na besyar
Taghayyor mikonad, amma beh garmi
Tashaddod mikonad, liken beh narmi
Az an jush o taghayyor-ha keh didam
Beh "aqel bash" o "adam sho" residam
Shod an doshnamha-ye sakht-e sangin
Mobaddal bar javan aram benshin! (ll. 163-166)

That beauty, however, contrary to what I thought
Is rejecting me, but not strongly
She squabbles, but warmly
She sulks, but softly
From the anger and rage that I witnessed
I reached "be wise," and "be sensible"
Her heavy and harsh swearing
Turned into come young man, sit down!

Perhaps the readers are as surprised as the speaker when the woman does not behave as the speaker predicted. The anticipation of an outrage commensurate to what the speaker expected was certainly there due to her absolute fury over the proposal to remove her face-veil only a few lines back. Yet, as the text reveals, the woman's sudden change of behavior suggests a weak basis for her moral beliefs. Her yielding response to the

speaker's touch, however, is a disturbing reminder of the "rape myth," as Abedinifard argues.¹⁴ The commonly held rape myths aim to deny, legitimize, or justify sexual aggression and blame it on the victim. While the woman's warm (*garm*) and soft (*narm*) response to the speaker's sexual advances suggest some degree of acquiescence, the textual evidence in the following lines indicate that the speaker used force in order to satisfy his desire:

Goshadam dast bar an yar-e ziba
Cho molla bar polo mo'men be halva
Cho gol afkandamash bar ru-ye qali
Davidam zi asafel az a'aali
Chenan az hol gashtam dastpacheh
Keh dastam raft az pachin beh pacheh
Az u joftak zadan az man tapidan
Az u por goftan az man kam shenidan
Do dast-e u hameh bar picheh ash bud
Do dast-e bandeh dar mahicheh ash bud
Bedu goftam to surat khod neku gir
Keh man surat daham kar-e khod az zir. (ll. 168-171)

I reached and touched that beauty
Like *mullah* would dig into rice and *mo'men* (the pious man) would dig
into *halva* (a Persian sweet dish)
I tossed her on the carpet like a flower
I touched her hungrily from top to bottom
I was in such hurry that I became clumsy
And, my hands slipped from her skirt onto her thighs
She kept kicking and I was throbbing
She kept imploring, but I hardly listened
She held on to her face veil the entire time
But, my hands were exploring her thighs
I told her: hold on to your veil tight
I can take care of my business from down under.

¹⁴ Mostafa Abedinifard, "Ta'amoli Naqaddaneh bar Maqaleh-ye Jensiyyat va Alat-e Jensi" (The Gender Politics of Iraj Mirza's "Aref Nameh": A Critique of Ana Ghoreishian's "Gender and Sexual Organs." *Iran Nameh*. no. 28:3 (Fall 2013), 205.

This scene can be considered as the foreplay of the sexual encounter. With all the food imagery it resembles a feast. The degree of his excitement is described in terms of a famished person's intense appetite upon seeing food. And not just any food: *polo* and *halva* both of which are usually served in Iran at happy and elaborate occasions. The people who consume this food are two very specific types: the cleric (*molla*) and the pious man (*mo'emen*). The act of eating the food is described in less than sophisticated manner. The designation of the cleric and the pious man as the uncouth consumers of this rich food is not random. Iraj is known for criticizing the clergy and the inherent hypocrisy of religious people. Aside from this criticism of religious figures the callous consumption of the food is symbolic of women's sexual function at the time: impersonal and meeting one's basic need. The fact that her imploring (*por goftan*) was unheard (*kam shenidan*) by the speaker is evidence of his disregard for her. His unwillingness to listen to whatever she had to say (which we are not privy to) soon turns into forceful penetration. In the following lines, the speaker explains that he had to employ force in order to spread open the woman's legs and penetrate her:

Beh zahmat jowf-e lengesh ja nemudam
Dar-e rahmat beh ru-ye khod goshudam. (l. 174)

With a lot of trouble I opened her legs
And, penetrated her.

Beh zarb o zur bar vey band kardam
Jama'i chon nabat o qand kardam. (l. 180)

With blows and force I strapped her
And, the sex was as sweet as sugar and rock candy.

The dialectic of veiling and unveiling is once again repeated here in the speaker's descriptions of the episode, the woman's behavior, and even in his instructions to the

woman. The sequence of the speaker's actions is as follows: he throws the woman down on the floor (*afkandamash bar ruy-e qali*), begins exploring her body, he does not listen to the woman's pleas, with trouble (*be zahmat*) opens her legs, and with blows (*zarb*) and force (*zur*) proceeds to have sex with her; all of which indicates forceful entry. The speaker's actions and her choice of words such as *zarb* (blow), *zur* (force), *be zahmat* (with trouble), etc. leave little doubt regarding the violent nature of his interaction with the woman. In other words, his actions are congruent with the scenario of rape or simply a license for men to subject women to sexual violence. The violent behavior of "Arefnameh"'s speaker towards the woman has been largely ignored and downplayed by Iraj's critics in favor of the poem's emancipatory and anti-veiling sentiments.¹⁵ Coupled with the woman's seemingly coquettish behavior earlier, this scene is a good example of the widely held notion in rape myths that argues that women secretly wish to be raped and fantasize about it.¹⁶ The conclusion to this episode of the narrative further confirms the speaker's patriarchal views regarding the power dynamic in sexual relations. As Abedinifard observes, the final lines to this section are the perfect example of phallogocentric language that proves the speaker's sense of ownership over the sexual interaction:

Sarash chon raft khanom niz va dad
 Tamamash ra cho del dar sineh ja dad
 Bali kir ast o chizi khosh khorak ast
 Zeh 'eshq-e ust kin kos sineh chak ast. (ll. 181-182)

¹⁵ The indication of rape in this scene is most recently been discussed by Mostafa 'Abedinifard in his paper *The Gender Politics of Iraj Mirza's "Aref Nameh."* Anna Ghoreishian has also mentioned rape in her analysis in "Gender and Sexual Organs" of this section of the poem, but has presented it as a weak possibility.

¹⁶ 'Abedinifard, "The Gender Politics of Iraj Mirza's "Aref Nameh," 205.

As its head went in, the lady opened up
She placed the rest of it like her heart inside her chest
Yes, cock is indeed a tasty dish
It is because of the love of cock that the vagina is open so.

Now, some may argue that the above lines insinuate that the woman was also enjoying herself. This may be true and one cannot absolutely argue that the interaction between the speaker and the woman was purely forceful and the woman did not succumb to her desire as well. Having said that there is enough textual evidence to suggest that the man did in fact employ force and as the last line above indicates, he is in fact boasting about the appeal of the males' penis. His boasting of the penis's attractiveness is evident in the adjective *sineh-chak*, which can literally be translated as a breast with a slit in the middle. Moreover, *sineh-chak* in Persian literary tradition is an adjective that is assigned to lovers who tear their own breasts due to the intense love that they feel towards their beloved. So, in the speaker's own words the vagina is in love with the penis; hence the opening in the middle. The speaker's reasoning then in a way is a form of justifying his actions. In other words, the speaker's argument regarding the appeal of the phallus as a matter-of-fact is not something negotiable, which shows that this anecdote is mainly about male primal fantasy in its heterosexual context.

In promoting this heterosexual fantasy, the speaker gives a very detailed description of the woman's vagina. He informs his addressee and readers what he saw:

Kosi chon ghoncheh didam now-shekofteh
Goli chon narges amma nim-khofteh
Borunash limu-ye khoshbu-ye Shiraz
Darun khorma-ye shahdalu-ye Ahvaz
Kosi bashshash-tar az ru-ye mo'men
Monazzah-tar zeh kholq o khu-ye mo'men
Kosi hargez nadideh ru-ye nureh

Dahan por ab kon manand-e ghureh
Kosi bar 'aks-e kosha-ye degar tang
Keh ba kiram zeh tangi mikonad jang. (ll. 175-179)

I saw a cunt that looked like a half-budding blossom
A flower like narcissus, but half-awake
Outside of it smelled like the fragrant lemons of Shiraz
Inside, it was like the sugary dates of Ahvaz
A cunt, brighter than the face of a believer (*mo'emen*)
Purer than the disposition and trait of a believer
A cunt that has not seen the sight of depilatory powder
It will make your mouth water like tasting sour grapes
A cunt so tight, unlike other cunts
It is so tight as if it is fighting with my cock.

The above lines reveal that the speaker got to see the woman's vagina. He then proceeds to explain in detail what he witnessed from its shape to the sensation that the experience imparted on him. His descriptions provide an opportunity for his readers to savor the poem as he savors his sexual encounter with the woman. In the first two lines the phrases “*now-shekofteh*” (budding) and “*nim-khofteh*” (half-asleep) are vibrant imageries of flowers in bloom gradually opening up. One cannot ignore the delicacy with which the speaker speaks of the female arousal in this particular scene; a scene that indicates her excitement during sex.

Furthermore, references to *qoncheh-ye now-shekofteh* (budding blossom), *gol* (flower in general but rose in the classical literature), and *narges-e nim-khofteh* (half-awakened narcissus) are clearly borrowed from the classical tradition. In classical Persian literature, as discussed earlier, the beloved's eyes are often compared to narcissus. The comparison of the vagina to narcissus disrupts the common understanding of the same allegory that used to traditionally describe the eyes. In other words, the appropriation of familiar imagery that in the classical tradition were used to describe the beloved, who is

generally male, shifts the gender of the beloved from male to female. The speaker then adds tantalizing sensory descriptions, which adds to the eroticism of the scene. In a way, reading these pages becomes a substitute for sexual intercourse and itself has an erotic valence (and that erotics, in turn, expresses relationships of authority and power between author and reader).¹⁷

The food imagery continues here that adds olfactory and gustatory sensations in addition to the visual. The fresh scent of lemons and the sweetness and sourness of dates and sour grapes tantalize different palates. Adding the tactile imagery of a tight vagina completes the entire experience and renders it sweet like sugar and rock candy (*jema 'i chon nabat o qand kardam*).¹⁸ The employment of imagery pertaining to the four senses of sight, tastes, touch, and smell heightens the pleasure of reading. It is as if the speaker is holding his readers hands and walking them through the experience.

What remains unknown to the speaker and to readers, however, is the woman's reaction to the events. All readers learn about the woman are the descriptions of her vagina, its smell, taste, and feel. Here is how the anecdote ends in the speaker's terms:

Vali chon 'esmat andar chehreh-ash bud
Az avval ta beh akher chehreh nagshud
Do dasti picheh bar rokh dasht mohkam
Keh chizi nayad az masturiash kam
Cho khordam sir az an shirin kolucheh
Haramat bad goft o zad beh kuche. (ll. 183-185)

But, because virtue was in her face
She did not open her face-veil from start to finish
She tightly held on to her face-veil
Lest, she lose something of her chastity

¹⁷ Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, 15.

¹⁸ Iraj, *Divan*, l. 179.

When of that sweet cookie I ate enough
She said: May this pleasure be wasted on you. And ran to the street.

The entire time that the speaker is having sex with the woman, she does not open her face-veil and holds on tight to it. The reason for this strict observance of the veil, as the speaker explains (albeit sarcastically) is the woman's virtue ('*esmat*). The exposure of her face to the speaker would mean the loss of her virtue that she so ardently was protecting by keeping her *picheh* (face-veil) on. Having sex with a strange man outside of her marriage is then not an action that she considered wrong: an action that did not cost her virtue as long as she did not unveil.

The tale ends with one final food imagery the sweet cookie and the woman's hasty run for the street. But, before she leaves the scene we hear one last word from her: an optative sentence. In Persian the phrase that she utters is *haramat bad*, which is literary for *haramat bashad*. This phrase is comprised of the word *haram* (forbidden) and the verb *budan* (to be, to exist). In *Suppressed Persian* Paul Sprachman's translation of the final line reads: "She cursed my parents and went down the street" (Sprachman 88). While, Sprachman's translation is artfully done and is in verse, this particular line is inaccurate. The utterance of the phrase *haramat bad*, as mentioned above denotes some sort of a wish. What the woman tells the speaker after the sex is over is her wish for him to pay for the pleasure that he did not deserve receiving. Although this may seem like a small difference of opinion in translation, it does stress the woman's dilemma regarding the moral of her actions. The section above marks the end of the speaker's anecdote and the story about the "influence of the veil." The lines that follow may not be as colorful in terms of the explicit nature of its language as the previous section, but it does contain crucial information about the speaker's position on the issue of women's veiling, its

relation to women's education and intelligence levels. In order to make the influence of the veil known to his addressee he makes a blunt statement that pretty much sums up the moral of his story. He associates the veil directly with women's intelligence and says with conviction:

Hejab-e zan keh nadan shod chenin ast
Zan-e mastureh-ye mahjubeh in ast. (l. 186)

Such is an ignorant-woman's veil
This is what a veiled woman looks like.

Here, the speaker is giving a warning to his readers that what had happened to the woman of the story is the fate that awaits ignorant (*nadan*) women. This line categorically claims that veiled women are ignorant, veiled women are not necessarily virtuous, and that they are vulnerable. However, the way that the speaker makes his statement is not with sympathy. Rather, it is almost accusatory that sees his aggressive behavior towards the veiled woman as a natural consequence of her decision to observe the veil. Phrases of *chenin ast* and *in ast* that loosely mean "it is" or "this is" then come to stress the finality of his premonition regarding veiled women. The above line can easily be replaced by a sentence like: "behold, this is the fate of a veiled woman who is ignorant."

Immediately after this pronouncement, the speaker adds the element of modesty to the equation. He exclaims that the woman did not mind giving up her vagina (*kos dadan*), but cared about keeping her face veil tight:

Beh kos dadan hamana vaq' nagzasht
Keh ba rugiri olfat bishtar dasht. (l. 187)

She did not regard giving up her cunt
Because she cared more about keeping her face veil.

In Persian, the phrase *kos dadan*, which is a crude term, connotes loose moral and promiscuity on behalf of a woman. It also implies the willingness of the woman in pursuing her sexual desires. Placing it on the opposite pole of *rugiri*, which signifies virtue on behalf of the woman, once again creates the traditional binary opposition of angel/whore in sexuality and gender structures in this poem. What is remarkable here is that in the eyes of the speaker a wanton woman and a virtuous one not only are one and the same, but are not acceptable models for women of a modern society. Instead, he advocates for women's education. References to colleges are direct indications that the speaker is indeed in favor of women attending educational institutions such as schools and universities. At the same time he argues that women should be taught honor (*namus*). The binding of traditional values of women's modesty and modern education is confusing. Here is the speaker's argument:

Bali sharm o haya dar chashm bashad
 Cho basti chashm baqi pashm bashad!
 Agar zan ra biyamuzand namus
 Zanad bi-pardeh bar bam-e falak kus
 Beh masturi agar pey bordeh bashad
 Haman behtar keh khod bi-pardeh bashad
 Borun ayand o ba mardan bejushand
 Beh tahzib-e khesal-e khod bekushand
 Cho zan ta'lim did o danesh amukht
 Ravaq-e jan beh nur-e binesh afrukht
 Beh hich afsun zeh 'esmat bar nagardad
 Beh darya gar biyoftad tar nagardad
 Cho khor bar 'alami parto feshanad
 Vali khod az ta'arroz dur manad
 Zan-e rafteh kolej dideh fakulteh
 Agar ayad beh pish-e to dekolteh
 Cho dar vey 'effat o azarm bini
 To ham dar vey beh chashm-e sharm bini
 Tamanna-ye ghalat az vey mahal ast
 Khiyal-e bad dar u kardan khiyal ast. (ll. 187-197)

Yes, shame and virtue are both in the eyes
 If you close your eyes to them the rest is nonsense
 If they teach a woman to be honorable
 She would come out in the world unveiled
 Should she know what virtue really is
 It is for the better if she is unveiled
 She would come out and mingle with men
 She would try to refine her qualities
 Should women study and get educated
 Should she enlightens her soul with flames of intelligence
 Her chastity will be immune to all tricks
 Should she fall into the sea she will not get wet
 Like the sun she will light up the world
 But, she will stay away from aggression
 A woman who has gone to college and been to *le faculté*
 If she comes to you with décolletage neck line
 When you see her virtue and modesty
 You would never look at her with bad intentions
 It will be impossible to request from her something that is wrongful
 To think impure things about her is just a delusion.

In “Veiled Discourse-Unveiled Bodies,” Najmabadi writes that: “stepping into the heterosocial world of modernity was coterminous with the construction of a disciplined female language and body” (489). The speaker in the above lines is doing precisely that: disciplining the female body. He is making a case for others to invite women to step out into society. He is expressing his desire for women to mingle with men; hence turning the male dominant public spaces into an arena for both sexes to occupy. But, before they are able to do so, he is asking women to observe *sharm* (shame), *haya* (modesty), *esmat* (chastity), and *namus* (honor) in order to refine their qualities. This is in fact another form of disciplining women. “Before the physical veil was discarded, it was replaced by an invisible metaphoric veil, *hijab-i ‘iffat* (veil of chastity), not as some object, a piece of cloth, external to the female body, but a veil to be acquired through modern education, as some internal quality of self, a new modern self, a disciplined modern body that obscured

the woman's sexuality, obliterated its bodily presence."¹⁹ Conditional phrases such as “*agar zan ra biyamuzand namus*” (If they teach women to be honorable) and “*cho zan ta 'lim did o danesh amukht*” (If a woman is trained and educated) suggest that women up to this point are neither honorable nor have they been educated. So, they need to attend colleges in order to learn how to be modest even if they are wearing revealing clothing (*dekolteh*). Such pronouncements, as Najmabadi observes, are another way to regulate sexuality and sexual relations. The conservatism and the religiosity that the veil purports do not wane despite “Arefnameh's” speaker's advocacy for its removal. In fact he invokes the Qur'an and the prophetic tradition in order to solidify his claim that the outer veil is not necessarily comparable to being chaste (*'esmat*):

Payambar ancheh farmudast an kon
 Na zinat fash o na surat nahan kon
 Hejab-e dast o surat khod yaqin ast
 Ke zed-e nass-e Qoran-e mobin ast. (ll. 213-214)

Do what the Prophet said
 Neither sell your charms nor hide your face
 To hide your face and hands behind veils
 Is for sure against the holy Qur'an.

These lines suggest that to the speaker, the veil is a separate phenomenon than the religion of Islam, its prophet, and its holy book. The speaker here is providing a new interpretation of the relationship between veiling and Islam. He does so by separating the two. He suggests that the way women in his society observe the veil is neither in accordance with the Prophet's accounts nor with the Quranic textual evidence. In fact, his pronouncement above insists that women's full veil is in opposition to those religious

¹⁹ Najmabadi, “Veiled Discourse-Unveiled Bodies,” 489.

teachings (*zed-e nass-e Quran-e mobin ast*).²⁰

The speaker's unwillingness to identify Islam as the root of the veiling tradition or at least to recognize it as a contributing factor in its perpetuation can be construed as his unwillingness to disturb the patriarchal order of gender relations that the Islamic tradition provided. Therefore, contrary to his stance on the issue of women's unveiling and education, his advocacy, as we have seen, is still imbedded in patriarchal views and traditional perceptions of gender roles. In a way, the speaker views himself as the figure of authority who can then tell what women ought to be doing. To order women to unveil does not shift the focus on the management of women's bodies; it only changes the manner of this management. While women have been covering themselves by religious and familial authorities, they must *unveil* by other forms of male authority. In the below lines, as we will see, the speaker dictates a whole new set of veiling rules. He orders women to cover their charms (*zinat*) from men:

To bayad zinat az mardan bepushi
Na bar mardan koni zinat-forushi
Chenin kaz pay ta sar dar Hariri
Zani atash beh jan, atash nagiri!
Beh pa putin o dar sar chador-e faq
Namayi taqat-e bi-taqatan taq. (ll. 208-210)

You should hide your charm from men
Not selling them your beauty
Since you are cloaked from head to toe in silk
You set fire on souls, be careful not to catch fire!
Your feet in boots and you wear silk *chador*
You turn up like that and the impatient ones will lose all patience.

Presenting his argument from another angle, the speaker contends that a veiled woman is more likely to attract unwanted attention as he describes the veil to be seductive.

²⁰ Iraj, *Divan*, l. 214.

Considering his personal experience that supports his claim of the veil's tempting function, the speaker is debunking the long-held belief that the veil provides modesty and protection to women. In other words, veiled women in his eyes lack virtue. Believing virtue to be an internal trait, in need of nurturing, the speaker lays out a set of directives for women.

The first two lines of the above section in Persian reads: “*to bayad zinat az mardan bepushi / na bar mardan koni zinat forushi.*” The word *zinat* (charm) in conjunction with verbs *pushidan* (to cover) and *forukhtan* (to sell) is truly meant to convey one meaning: guarding one's virtue.²¹ Based on what the speaker reveals in his personal story regarding his encounter with the veiled woman, the “covering of one's charm” and “not to sell one's charm” are imperative phrases that order women to be virtuous. The speaker's new set of rules not only polices women's clothing and taking the freedom to choose their clothing away from them, it aims at regulating women's sexuality as well much like what the proponents of the women' veiling would argue. Both camps claimed authority on women's bodies as well as their sense of morality.

Later on in a comical scene the speaker compares the veiled woman to onions, garlic, and other vegetables. One might argue that this comical comparison of women to onions and root vegetables is in contradiction to the speaker's previous contention that considered the veil to be seductive. While it may be so, in the previous lines the speaker is simply talking about the veil, but here he is specifically talking about *veiled women*. He exclaims:

²¹ I am aware of the Qur'anic connotations and definitions of the word *zinat*. I do not wish to delve into that discussion. However, I find it useful to at least talk about *zinat* and its immediate definition as “charm” or “adornment” as it pertains to the overall discussion.

Beh qorbanat magar siri? Piyazi?
Keh tu-ye boghcheh o chador-namazi?
To mer'at-e jamal-e zoljalali
Chera manand-e shalgham dar javali
Sar o tah basteh chon dar kучeh aye
To khamom jan na, bademjan-e mayi. (ll. 202-204)

My dear, are you some kind of onion or garlic ball?
Then, why are you wrapped in a bundle or a prayer shawl?
You are the mirror of God's Divine Splendor
Why are you then wrapped up like a turnip?
If you come to the streets bound at both ends
You are not a lady, but an eggplant.

Later on, and in the same vein, the speaker compares veiled women to monsters and boogeyman:

Bedan khubi dar in chador karihi
Beh har chizi beh joz insan shabihi
Koja farmud peyghambar beh Quran
Keh bayad zan shavad ghul-e biaban
Kodam ast an hadis o an khabar ku
Keh bayad zan konad khod ra cho lulu. (ll. 205-207)

You are so hideous in that *chador* despite being so good
You resemble anything but a human being
Where did prophet say in the Qur'an
That a woman should turn into a monster
Where is that *hadith*? Report what you can
That women should turn themselves into a bogeyman.

Comparing women to anything, but human (*be har chizi beh joz insan shabihi*), as well as *ghul-e biaban* (a desert monster), and *lu lu* (bogeyman or beast) resonate with 'Eshqi's description of veiled women to monsters. The dehumanization of women is another sign that the male discourse on modernity, where it concerned women, viewed women as subordinates to male authority and demanded that they behaved according to men's caprice.

Before reverting back to his addressee ('Aref), and as he concludes his discussion on women, the speaker mentions two other themes that were popular in the discourse on modernity: the freedom of village women versus urban women's constraint and the virtues of companionate marriage as opposed to arranged marriages. These themes were taken up by men and women at the time. Many of them argued that women in the villages did not wear the veil and worked alongside their men on the farm, therefore they contributed to higher rates of productivity. In the same vein, they questioned urban women's secluded life and their lack of contribution to the society. For example, in her *Khaterat* (memoir), Taj Al-Saltaneh (1884-1936), the most famous Qajar princess writes about the veiling of women as "the obstacle to its [the country's] advancement in all areas" and women's "employment in meaningful work" (Amanat 290). She explains the differences between the lives of women in the villages and in the city based on her own observation during her travels. She recalls:

Traveling along the Tabriz road, I saw men and women everywhere working side by side in the villages, the women unveiled. In no village could a single idle person be found. When I tried to hire one of the peasants as an attendant, none of them was willing to give up his or her life in the wilderness. All these peasants and farmers are honorable, proud people. There are no prostitutes in any of the villages, because so long as a man and a woman are not equal in wealth neither will marry the other. Besides, since the women do not cover their faces, mates are able to choose one another for themselves. After they are married, they always work together as partners in their farming and herding.²²

²² Taj Al-Saltaneh. *Crowning Anguish: Memoirs of a Persian Princess from Harem to Modernity*: 1884-1914. Trans. Anna Vaznan and Amin Neshati. Intro. Abbas Amanat. Washington D.C.: Mage Publishers, 1993, 292. For the Persian version see Taj's *Khaterat*, edited by Mansureh Etehadyyeh, 101.

The speaker of “Arefnameh” echoes Taj’s sentiments in the concluding lines of his discussion of women. He makes the same observation and asks poignantly:

Magar na dar dahat o beyn-e illat
Hameh ru baz bashand an jAMILAT
Chera bi ‘esmati dar kareshan nist?
Ravaj-e ‘eshveh dar bazareshan nist?
Zanan dar shahr-ha chador neshinand
Vali chador-neshinan gheyr-e innand
Dar aqtar-e degar zan yar-e mard ast
Dar in mehnat-sara sarbar-e mard ast. (ll. 216-219)

Is it not that in villages and amongst the tribes
Those beauties [village women] do not cover their faces?
Why aren’t they disgraced?
Why aren’t they trading with coquetry at the market?
Women in the cities are clad in tents [*chador*]
But, people who live in tents are not like that
In other parts women help men
In this miserable place women are men’s burden.

In the above quotation from Taj’s *Memoir (Khaterat)* the economic benefits of a society in which men and women work alongside is apparent. The speaker in the above lines touches on the same issue, but frames it differently. While Taj speaks of women as partners, the speaker talks of women as men’s burden (*sarbar*). The distinction between how the two authors, one male and the other female, only highlights the depth of patriarchal roots in the male discourse on women. The parochial distinction between the village women and women in the cities respectively as virtuous and as debauched further confirms the popular categorization of women as angels or whores. “Urban women were illiterate, imprisoned, idle, and frivolous, or particular oppressed by backward Islamic teachings, ignorant families, and unconcerned rulers; peasant and tribal women were

upright, hardworking, and almost equal with their spouses.”²³ By now in the poem such binary oppositions are to be expected and the speaker’s adherence to male-dominant values are a given. Yet, they only point to the complex quiddity of the modernization process in Iran at the time. Representation of the villages and country life in literature of the time were often romanticized and they remained a place devoid of corruption, whereas cities in the wake of rapid urbanization became the loci of vice.

Another theme that the speaker in his closing lines on the issue of women puts forth is his disapproval of the arranged marriage. The speaker views the conditions of an arranged marriage ludicrous as men and women had to marry without knowing what their future spouse looked like let alone know about their personalities:

Khodaya key shavand in khalq khasteh
Az in ‘aqd o nekah-e cheshm basteh
Bovad nazd-e kherad ahla o ahsan
Zena kardan az in san zan gereftan
Begiri zan nadideh ru-ye u ra
Bari na-azmudeh khu-ye u ra
Cho ‘esmat bashad az didar mane‘
Degar basteh beh eqbal ast o tale‘
Beh harf-e ‘ammeh o ta‘rif-e khaleh
Koni yek ‘omr guz-e khod navaleh
Bedan surat keh ba ta‘rif-e baqqal
Kharidari koni kharbozeh-ye kal
Va ya dar khaneh ari hendevaneh
Nadanesteh keh shirin ast ya nah
Shab andazi beh tariki yeki tir
Do ruz-e digar az ‘omrat shavi sir
Sepas juyid kam-e khod zeh har kuy
To az yek suy o khanum az degar suy. (ll. 234-244)

²³ Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men Without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*, 164.

Dear God, when do these people get tired
 Of this blindly marrying and wedding business
 It is sweeter, better, and more wise
 To fornicate and not marry like this
 To marry without seeing the face of your spouse
 To take her home without knowing her habits
 Since virtue prohibits us from meeting
 Everything is then up to chance and luck
 Upon your aunts' praise and talk
 You will eat your own fart for a lifetime
 Just like based on the grocer's recommendation
 You would buy an unripe melon
 Or just like you would bring a watermelon home
 Not knowing if it is sweet or not
 At a dark night you would release an arrow
 Two days later you wish you were dead
 Then, you look to satisfy your desire anywhere
 You go one way and the Mrs. another.

The speaker here incorporates three concepts within Shari'a law to denounce arranged-marriage, to advocate for the interaction between partners before marriage, and to warn about the consequences that an arranged-marriage could have on the society's mores. Marriage in Iran and according to Islamic rules includes a contract that is specified by the word '*aqd*'. The word *nekah* or *nikah* is another Arabic term that is used for sexual relations. So, in order for a marriage to complete the contract has to be binding before the sexual relations can take place.²⁴ It does not seem that the speaker is categorically against the process per se. He is, however, adamantly opposed to people carrying these processes out blindly (*cheshm-basteh*). His frustration with the marriage tradition is so severe that he proposes *zina* instead of entering into an arranged-marriage. A major sin, *zina* indicates having illicit sexual relations or as it is understood generally it simply means adultery. Comparing arranged-marriages to committing adultery does undermine the

²⁴ For more information on Islamic marriage in Iran see Willem Floor's *A Social History of Sexual Relations in Iran*.

traditional aspects of marriage. For example, marriages that take place due to the facilitation of family members such as *'ammeh* and *khaleh*—which respectively mean paternal and maternal aunts—confirm the speaker's distaste for such outdated practices that are more cultural than religious. At the end, the speaker, through humor, warns that an arranged-marriage will cause both spouses to stray and seek satisfaction elsewhere.

“Arefnameh” as Anti-Homoerotic/Anti-Homosexual Manifesto

There is no question that the language of “Arefnameh” is explicit and even obscene, but this is not the first instance of obscene literature in the history of Persian literature and it is not specific to Iraj. Many great Persian poets of the classical tradition, such as Sa‘adi, Molana, and ‘Obeyd-e Zakani, have poems that contain parts that as Paul Sprachman states in *Suppressed Persian* are “outright unmentionable.”²⁵ Many such works did not use “circumlocutions when referring to private parts and functions in literary works” and contain direct terms for sexual members of male and female anatomy and sexual relations (Sprachman viii). Why is it then that “Arefnameh” attracted so much attention and gained such notoriety? Aside from the obvious explanation of the varying standards of the printing industry, readership, and distribution, what makes this poem an exceptional work lies in its social and political context.

We know that the time period that the poem was written was a critical and even volatile time in Iran’s history of modernity and that the topics embedded in Iraj’s long poem, named after his friend ‘Aref, mostly endorsed ideals of progress. Many have

²⁵ Sprachman, *Suppressed Persian*, xiii.

argued that not only “‘Arefnameh” has broken many taboos regarding sex, but it is in fact encouraging of sexual relations.²⁶ Yet, the language of “‘Arefnameh,” as Mostafa Abedinifard aptly observes in his article “Ta‘amoli Naqaddaneh bar Maqaleh-ye Jensiyyat va Alat-e Jensi” (The Gender Politics of Iraj Mirza’s “‘Aref Nameh”: A Critique of Ana Ghoreishian’s “Gender and Sexual Organs”) demonstrates that tantamount to the poem’s premise regarding power relations in sexual and gender relations the narrative is telling of an inevitable gender system that not only is not democratic and emancipatory, but is conservative and suppressive (202). This “phallogentric language,” as Abedinifard maintains, is the “axiomatic dominance of hegemonic masculinity in social, gender, and cultural relations,” which is the kind of masculinity that is dominant over femininity and other forms of masculinity (Abedinifard 202). So, Iraj’s poem is an example of the kind of male ascendancy that creates skewed binary oppositions. In this poem hegemonic masculinity is superior, but homosexuality as well as femininity is deemed inferior and passive positions within its gender dynamic. In doing so and as we shall see in the following lines Iraj divest ‘Aref of any phallic power by calling him *kuni* (catamite) and *namard* (unmanly): “Little did I know, you unmanly catamite / That you will choose to stay at Bagh-e Khuni” (*nemidanestam ey namard-e kuni / keh manzel mikoni dar bagh-e khuni*) (1. 10). The word *kuni* (or catamite) in Persian generally describes a man who has anal sex with other men and is usually the passive or receiving partner in the anal intercourse. Furthermore, *namard*, which is composed of two parts *na*, the suffix for less, and *mard* or man, consciously and

²⁶ See Ana Ghoreishian’s “Jensiyyat va Alat-e Jensi: Kandokavi dar ‘Arefnameh va Hajviyyat-e Iraj Mirza” (Gender and Sexual Organs: An Exploration of Iraj Mirza’s ‘Arif Namah and Hajviyyat). *Iran Nameh*. no. 27:4 (2012): 180-191.

deliberately places ‘Aref in an inferior position. A swearword reserved predominately for men, *namard* literally means “he who is not a man.” Therefore, calling ‘Aref *kuni* as well as *namard*—besides constituting a form of sexual insult—is meant to place the speaker in the opposite position: the position of the subject (the doer of the sexual act) or the dominant one in this exchange. Such use of the language is the perfect example of phallogocentric language at play and confirms the prevailing patriarchal discourse of sexual relations in the Iranian society and culture.²⁷ It is interesting to note here that Sprachman in his translation of this particular phrase in “‘Arefnameh” has chosen to use “son of a bitch.” Although Sprachman’s translation is more literary and is composed in rhyme, but “son of a bitch” is not an accurate translation for analytical purposes and does not convey the same sexual connotation that the words *kuni* and *namard* possess.²⁸ In other words, it is true that *kuni* and *namard* can be used instead of “son of a bitch” to describe a person who is a scoundrel, however, ignoring the sexual connotation of such words is to ignore the power dynamic of sexual and gender relations in Iran as well as ignoring ‘Aref and Iraj’s sexual orientation. Following up his initial taunts, Iraj reminds ‘Aref of the time that he was an adolescent when he had not grown a beard (*rish*) yet: “Don’t you remember thirty years ago / that your face did not have a trace of a beard” (l. 15)? The reference to an adolescent boy with a beard is a reminder that such characters occupied specific positions within sexual dynamics in Iran. These beautiful young beardless men used to be called *amrads* or *sadahs* (*sadeh*) and in some occasions would operate as *saqi*

²⁷ Abedinifard, “The Gender Politics of Iraj Mirza’s “‘Aref Nameh.” 205-209.

²⁸ Sprachman, *Suppressed Persians*, 79.

or wine servers.²⁹ So, in a way Iraj is reminding ‘Aref that he was once that beardless youth that was the object of desire of older men. Now ‘Aref has transitioned from the state of beardlessness to an adult man enjoying the company of a *nasrin-tan* or *sarv-qad* as Iraj alludes to (ll. 18-19). Both *nasrin-tan* and *sarv-qad* meanings respectively flower-bodied and cypress-statured are highly stylized codes of idealized beauty that described the lover in classical Persian poetry. Utilizing such old conceptualization of the beloved only confirms the hypothesis that the figure of the beloved in Persian classical poetry was almost always male. The relationship that Iraj establishes between ‘Aref and his flower-bodied cypress-statured beloved—as markers of classical poetry that Iraj and his cohorts were distancing themselves from—is meant to highlight ‘Aref’s backwardness. Contrary to the indirect nature of allusions and metaphors used in the classical tradition, Iraj expresses his ideas bluntly and openly and asks rhetorically: “Why should I speak indirectly?” (*chera dar pardeh miguyam sokhan ra*).³⁰ Here, *dar pardeh sokhan goftan*, which literally means speaking from behind a curtain) is a way to say that somebody is speaking indirectly in Persian, which the speaker wishes to avoid. In doing so, he sets the framework for the rest of the narrative in which he speaks his mind with little regard for rules of propriety. The speaker reminds ‘Aref that he knows all about him and his past; about how ‘Aref used to frequent Lalehzar, a famous street in Tehran, and its cafes hoping to meet young men. He says:

²⁹ Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men Without Beard: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*, 15.

³⁰ Iraj, *Divan*, l. 20.

Khabar daram zeh a‘maqeh khiyalat
Beh man yek zarreh makhfi nist halat
To az kunha-ye gerd-e Lalaehzari
Yeki ra in safar hamrah dari
Kenar-e restoran qolla nemudi
Zeh kunkonha-ye Tehran dar robudi. (ll. 23-25)

I know the depth of your thoughts
Nothing of your being is hidden from me
You have a hot piece of ass from Lalehzar
On this trip with you
You lurked outside of a restaurant
And snatched *him* from other pederasts (*kun-kon*) in Tehran.

The foregoing lines, despite being testimony to the prevalence of same-sex relations amongst men, report on the budding urbanization movement in Tehran at the time. New establishments such as restaurants that had replaced traditional tea-houses courtesy of Europe, is one such example. Lalehzar, one of the oldest and reportedly first modern avenues in the style Europe, is another reference to the rapid urbanization and the replacement of modern values over traditional ones. Although the proponents of modernity were in favor of social reform, sprouting cities with modern establishments such as restaurants and urbanization of old ones were emerging problems. So, while the speaker deemed same-sex practice to be the marker of the old system, the emergence of restaurants on chic avenues such as Lalehzar in Tehran did not necessarily represent modernity either. In fact, one can argue that “a hot piece of ass from Lalehzar” (*kunha-ye gerd-e Lalehzari*) becomes a euphemism for male prostitutes.

In further discrediting his friend and solidify his accusations, the speaker censures ‘Aref’s family (*khish*) for being beardless and catamite (*bi-rish* and *kuni*): “Why is it that none of your relatives have a single hair on their face? / Why is it that all your relatives

are catamites?”³¹ In the next section the speaker tries to establish his own character as a person of trust and endeavors to distinguish himself as a man who has relinquished his old habits (i.e. having same-sex relations). In doing so, he calls himself a *pakbaz* or a person of honor who has nothing to lose and is not in need of such behinds (*kunha*) and vaginas (*kos*) (*az in kunha o kosha biniyaz ast*).³² The speaker, who at this point identifies himself as Iraj, and his lack of need for anal sex and heterosexual sex, as alluded to by the words *kun* (ass) and *kos* (vagina) is meant to express his noble ambitions: almost unworldly matters. He says:

Man ar sayyad basham seyd kam nist
 Hamana hajat-e seyd-e haram nist
 Shekar-e man dar atlal-e boland ast
 Na ‘Abdi keh ahu-ye sar dar kamand ast. (ll. 36-37)

If I were to be a hunter there is no shortage of prey
 But, surely there is no need to go after banned game
 My prey roams in high places
 And, is not ‘Abdi [apparently ‘Abdi was ‘Aref’s lover] like
 a deer with its head trapped in a lasso.

The imageries of hunting (*shekar*), hunter (*sayyad*), and prey (*seyd*) in the above lines allude to the lurking pederasts as hunters—such as ‘Aref—looking for sexual partners as prey. There is a difference between ‘Aref’s prey and Iraj’s prey. Iraj is aiming high as the word *atlal* suggests. Therefore, in creating these images Iraj ensures his position as the superior, which could very well be morally so, by differentiating the nature of the hunt between ‘Aref and himself. For the most part Iraj’s tone is petulant and he is harshly critical of his friend throughout the poem. However, time and again one can see his

³¹ Ibid., ll. 32-33.

³² Ibid., l.35.

devotion as well and a sense of yearning for a friendship that is lost, which is a characteristic of a type of *ekhvaniyyat* or fraternities. In this classical genre of poetry the poet writes to or talks about his friend.³³ As mentioned before, true events of Iraj's life inspired the poet to write "Arefnameh." During a trip to Mashhad, in Khorasan province, 'Aref had ignored his friend. Iraj's assumption regarding his friend's unkindness towards him revolves solely around an alleged lover who had accompanied 'Aref from Tehran. In an offended tone, Iraj objects to his friend's lack of trust in him. Explaining that he would never cheat a friend, Iraj complains:

Vali man jan-e 'Aref qheyr-e anam
 Keh namardi konam ba dustanam
 To yek kun aria az farsangha rah
 Man an ra qor zanam? Astaghforellah
 Boro mard-e 'aziz in su'ezan chist
 Jonun ast in keh dari su'ezan nist. (ll. 40-42)

But, dear 'Aref I am not like that
 But, I don't trick my friends I swear on your life
 You bring a piece of ass (*kun*) with you from miles away
 And, I should snatch him away? No way
 Dear man, what is this suspicion
 You are crazy to have doubts.

Although Iraj's sharp censure seems a bit tempered here, nevertheless he is trying to distinguish himself from 'Aref. In order to prove that he does not have any sexual urges to begin with, let alone have an appetite for 'Aref's young (male) lover, Iraj reminds his friend of his old age: "Don't you know that Iraj is old now? / If you have seen anything from him is in the past?"³⁴ References to the old days that he (Iraj) like 'Aref indulged in

³³ Homa Katouzian, "Iraj, the Poet of Love and Humor." *Iranian Studies*. no. 4, Entertainment in Qajar Persia (Sep 2007): 529-544, 534.

³⁴ Iraj, *Diva*, l. 48.

same-sex practices are another way of saying that he has rejected the old ways whereas ‘Aref has not. In a humorous section that follows Iraj confesses to his impotence and reveals that he cannot have an erection to perform sexually. He uses humorous metaphors regarding his limp penis and resembles his private member to a newly hatched chick’s weak neck that drops back down or to baby who has been weaned from breastfeeding who clings to its wet-nurse’s breasts.³⁵ Lines such as “Just like a newly hatched chick / who gets tired trying to straighten its head,” “My cock is stuck to my balls so tightly / like a newly weaned baby stuck to its nurse’s breast” and “If I did not have to pee / I would not have remembered that I had a cock,” although attest to Iraj’s inability as well as displeasure in having sex with young boys, evoke the poet’s sense of nostalgia about the time that he was once young and potent.

³⁵ Ibid., ll. 50-55.

“‘Arefnameh,” Nationalism, Heterosexual Hegemony³⁶, and its Relation to Sex with Women

As mentioned above, the odium directed at male same-sex relations was part of the discourse on modernity, which is reflected in “‘Arefnameh.” Instead heterosexual hegemony in relations was stridently encouraged. Iraj is of course not the first one to have abjured the old practices of pederasty and male sexual relations. However, he is the only one who has unequivocally associated *kos kardan* (vaginal intercourse) to *hess-e vatan khahi* or patriotic feelings.³⁷ In order to show how he makes his case, Iraj has devoted thirty lines explaining the mechanism behind men’s desire for same-sex relations. He begins by comparing the advanced European countries to Iran’s backwardness: a comparison that was nothing new. Europe was always used as the benchmark that Iranian intellectuals measured Iran’s progress against:

Keh ya rab bacheh-bazi khod cheh kar ast
Keh bar vey ‘Aref o ‘ami dochar ast
Chera in rasm joz dar molk-e ma nist
Va gar bashad bedinsan bar mala nist
Urupai bedan gardanfarazi
Nadanad rah o rasm bacheh-bazi
Cho bashad molk-e Iran mahshar-e khar
Khar-e nar misepuzad bar khar-e nar. (ll. 70-73)

Dear Lord! What is this business of pederasty
That ‘Aref and others are afflicted with?
Why is it that this custom is nowhere else but in our land?
And if there is, it is not so openly practiced
The lofty European
Does not know the ways of pederasty

³⁶ I have borrowed the phrase “heterosexual hegemony” from Judith Butler’s *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. London: Routledge, 1993.

³⁷ Iraj, *Divan*, 79.

Since Iran is bedlam
Male donkey fucks another male donkey.

This section reflects the speaker's frustration regarding Iran's backwardness in the face of modern European countries; a sentiment that as mentioned before many pro-reform authors and intellectuals shared. But, there is a lot more that Iraj weaves into this part of the poem that no longer exclusively discusses male same-sex relations. By including women, the issues of veiling, gender segregation, and sexual relations, the speaker is broadening the scope of his argument, which naturally complicates it at the same time. He brings in another voice into the narrative: the voice of a wise person (*dara-ye hush*).

Shenid in nokteh ra dara-ye hushi
Baravard az darun-e del khoroshi
Keh ta in qowm dar band-e hejaband
Gereftar-e hamin shey'e 'ejaband
Hejab-e dokhtaran-e mah ghabghab
Pesarha ra konad hamkhabeh-ye shab
To bini an pesar shukh ast o shangast
Bara-ye 'eshq varzidan qashang ast
Nabini khahar-e bi ma'jarash ra
Keh ta divaneh gardi khaharsh ra
Cho in mahjubeh an mashhud-e 'am ast
Na bar 'Aref na bar 'ami malam ast
Agar 'Aref dar Iran dasht bavar
Keh bashad dar safar metres moyyassar
Beh kun-e zir-e sar hargez nemisakht
Be 'Abdi jan o gheyreh del nemibakht
To ta'm-e kos nemidani keh chun ast
Va ella tof koni bar har cheh kun ast
Dar an mahfel keh bashad farj-e golgun
Zeh kun sohbat makon goh mikhorad kun. (ll. 74-83)

A wise person heard this story
Which caused him to shout out heartily
That, until this tribe is bound to the veil
They will be dealing with this strange phenomenon
The veil of the moon-faced girls
Will turn young men into lovers of the night
You will see that beautiful boy

Who is perfect for love making
You will not see his unveiled sister
So that you can fall madly in love with her
So long as girls are veiled and boys are not
One cannot blame ‘Aref or the common folk
If ‘Aref could believe that in Iran
He is able to find a mistress on his trip
He would never be satisfied with the kun (anus)
He would not have fallen in love with ‘Abdi or others
You do not know what kos (cunt) tastes like
Otherwise, you would spit on kun
In a gathering where there is a rosy vagina
Do not speak of kun, you shit.

This wise person’s outburst can be taken as the speaker’s outpouring of emotions. To utilize a third party speaker, who is said to be “wise,” to explain to ‘Aref the prevalent same-sex relations in Iran, is a clever attempt on behalf of the main speaker to enhance the credibility of the argument. The main argument that this “wise person” (*dara-ye hush*) brings forth contends that separating women from men, which results in limited interaction between the two sexes combined with women’s veil are the main reasons behind men’s desire to engage in same-sex practices. He makes his case by forming a series of binary constructions that places ‘Aref in the absolute abject position due to his sexual identity (i.e. as a pederast). It is in this part of the poem that the poet/speaker’s discursive argumentation touches on the intricate inner workings of heterosexual hegemony in the crafting of matters of sexual and political.

The prospect of including unveiled women seemed to remedy the situation in Iranian society where men preferred to engage in sexual relations with men. So, in order for Iranian men to repudiate the old ways lied in seeing the beauty of women unencumbered and would be to introduce men to vagina (*kos*). So, the speaker sees the veil as a barrier with far more destructive qualities than simply a piece of clothing. The

veil to him is the agent that is to ruin society's mores. He makes the clear assertion that for as long as "this nation" (*in qowm*) (i.e. Iran) is tied with the veil (*hejab*) they are bound to suffer from this "queer affair" (*shey'-e 'ejab*).³⁸ It is important to note that the speaker does not use the term woman (*zan* or *zanan*) and uses the collective term *qowm* which literally means tribe or in this case nation. In doing so, he presents the calamity as inclusive of everyone in the nation and not an issue that is specific to women tightening the link between women's segregation from men and men's same-sex desire. He then presents a series of cause and effect to explain this link. Lines such as "The veil of the moon-faced girls / Will turn young men into lovers of the night" (*hejab-e dokhtaran-e mah-ghabghab / pesarha ra konad hamkhabeh-ye shab*) or "You will not see his unveiled sister / So that you can fall madly in love with her" (*nabini khahar-e bi ma 'jarash ra / keh ta divaneh gardi khaharash ra*) clearly speak to the speaker's argument.³⁹ The speaker's general argument regarding the depravity of male same-sex relations is relegated to discussing the actual members of the human anatomy specifically *kun* (anus) and *kos* (vagina). The question that Iraj puts to his friend regarding his knowledge of *kos* (vagina) is meant to underscore his attempt at introducing a concept that seems almost foreign to his audience. In fact, Iraj's prediction that his friend would "spit on the asshole" if he knew what vagina tasted like further stresses his audience's obliviousness regarding not only women's anatomy, but the pleasures that one can take from it. The speaker's unwavering insistence on using the word *kos* (vagina) is so overwhelming that one cannot help but see that vagina is used almost independently from women despite *it* being part of

³⁸ Iraj, *Divan*, ll. 75-76.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, ll. 76 & 78.

the female anatomy. In other words, it is as if vaginal sex is an action that takes place in vacuum.

The next few lines are remarkable as Iraj solidifies his argument by incorporating nationalism. He convincingly informs ‘Aref (his addressee):

To ra ‘asl-e vatan kos bud kun chist
Chera hobb-e vatan andar delat nist
Magar hess-e vatan khahi nadari
Keh kos ra dar radif-e kun shomari
Begu an ‘Aref-e ‘ami-nama ra
keh gom kardi to surakh-e do‘a ra
Bovad kun kardan andar ra‘y-e kos kon
Cho jalqi lik jalq-e ba ta‘afon. (ll. 84-87)

The cunt is the heart of your homeland, what does asshole has got to do with it?
Why don’t you have any love for your homeland at heart?
Don’t you feel patriotic?
That you equate *kos* with *kun*?
So, tell ‘Aref, that public spectacle, that catamite
That he has lost the right way to pray
In the opinion of a *kos-kon* (a heterosexual) a *kun-kon* (a homosexual)
Is like fetid masturbation

The speaker puts a reproachful question to his friend that asks: “Why don’t you have any love for your homeland at heart”?⁴⁰ He is accusing ‘Aref of not loving his homeland because he does not engage in sexual relations with women. In other words, the speaker here compares the vagina (*kos*) to the homeland (*‘asl-e vatan*) or the love of the homeland (*hobb-e vatan*). The word *‘asl* in Persian has a wide range of meanings such as origin, true, base, birth, etc. all of which can be attributed to women and their ability to give birth. Coupled with the love signified by the word *hobb* the speaker’s argument is reminiscent of the process of the feminization of patriotic love in modern nationalism of

⁴⁰ Ibid., I. 84.

the nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries in Iran.⁴¹

Including women in the new reformatting of sexual relations prescribed by the advocates of modernity meant that certain factors had to be excluded from the new formula. We learned in the previous pages that heteronormalization of sexual relations was one such factor. So, practitioners of such behavior represented by the poet's friend 'Aref had to become the object of opposition: the abject. Julia Kristeva's discussion of the "abject" is pertinent here. Defined as "neither subject nor object," Kristeva proposes that abject is a state of being that interconnects an improper act to an act of "unclean" nature. Yet, abjection, Kristeva maintains is not caused by lack of cleanliness or health, but "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."⁴² It is therefore, through the process of abjection that male same-sex relations was excluded from the cycle of sexual relations throughout the modernization process in Iran. The "uncleanliness" of the nature of male same-sex relations finds its articulation in lines such as "do not speak of *kun*, you shit" (*zeh kun sohbat makon, goh mikhorad kun*) and "what masturbation, but masturbation with a fetid smell" (*cho jalqi lik jalq-e ba ta'afon*).⁴³ Phrases such as *goh khordan* (literally meaning to eat shit) and *jalq-e ba ta'afon* (masturbation with a foul smell) place male sexual relations next to elements with disgusting nature, thus rendering same-sex

⁴¹ For a full discussion of the birth of modern nationalism in Iran and its relation to the feminization of the beloved, see Najmabadi's "Vatan, the Beloved; Vatan, the Mother" in *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beard: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*.

⁴² Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982, 4. I should mention here that I came across this argument in Mostafa 'Abedinifard's article "The Gender of Politics of Iraj Mirza's "'Aref Name,'" but his use of Kristeva is mostly with respect to his analysis of the humor in Iraj's poetry.

⁴³ Iraj, *Divan*, ll. 83 & 87.

relations repulsive and further humiliates the addressee.

Iraj's pronouncements; however, with respect to shunning the old ways of male same-sex practices or pederasty and promoting sexual relations with women should not be taken as an attempt on his part to vouch for women's liberation. Nor, does it mean that his differentiation between himself as an opponent of such practices and 'Aref's alleged indulgence in pederasty, exonerates him of the "vice" as scholars like Sprachman seem to accept.⁴⁴ In fact, as biographies of both men suggest 'Aref was mainly known for his womanizing ventures as Iraj was for his own young male beloveds.⁴⁵ As the text clearly suggests, it is not women who are compared to nationalism, the homeland, or the love of the homeland for that matter. It is the vagina (*kos*). So, Iraj here is charging 'Aref with lack of patriotism, who is betraying the motherland by engaging in sex with men. As Najmabadi argues the homeland transforms into the motherland in need of protection. She writes: "Man is born out of a woman's vagina (*kos*)," so, by suggesting that 'Aref does not know what vagina is, the speaker of "'Arefnameh'" is suggesting that 'Aref has betrayed the motherland "because of his presumed preference for anus (*kun*)."⁴⁶ As, Iraj continues with his censure of 'Aref's sexual preference he concludes: "'Aref you have lost the prayer hole."⁴⁷ In doing so, he is reducing women to their vaginas or "the prayer hole" (*surakh-e do'a*). The function of these orifices (vaginas) aims at stirring the illicit desires of men such as 'Aref away from same-sex desires (assholes) to heterosexual ones

⁴⁴ Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*, 149.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 149-150.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 1. 86.

(vaginas). The speaker then pleads with god and asks a series of rhetorical questions that argue for women's equal rights with men as humans and their equal intelligence levels.

He says:

Khodaya ta key in mardan beh khaband
Zanan ta key gereftar-e hejaband
Chera dar pardeh bashad tal'at-e yar
Khodaya zin mo'ama pardeh bardar
Magar zan dar miyan-e ma bashar nist?
Magar zan dar tamiz-e kheyr o sharr nist?
To pendari keh chador zeh ahan o rust?
Agar zan shivehzan shod mane'-e ust?
Cho zan khahad keh girad ba to peyvand
Na chadro mane'ash gardad na ruband
Zanan ra 'esmat o 'effat zarur ast
Na chador lazem o na chaqchur ast
Zan-e rubasteh ra edrak o hosh nist
Ta'atr o resturan namus kosh nist
Agar zan ra bovad ahang-e hizi
Bovad yeksan ta'atr o pa-ye dizi
Benashmad dar tah-e anbar-e peshgel
Chenan kandar ravaq-e borj-e ifel
Cheh khosh in beyt ra farmud Jami
Mehin ostad-e koll ba'd az Nezami:
"Pari-ru tab-e masturi nadarad
Dar ar bandi sar az rozan dar arad. (ll. 88-98)

O Lord, how long will these men sleep?
How long women are going to be tied to the veil?
Why should the lover's face be covered?
Lord, solve this riddle
Aren't women human beings amongst us?
Aren't women able to distinguish evil from goodness?
Do you believe that *chador* is made out of iron and brass?
That, it will stop her if a woman wants to play tricks?
If a woman wants to go in bed with you
Not her *chador* nor her face-veil will prevent her from doing so
Women should be chaste and pure
They do not need *chador* and *chaqchur*⁴⁸

⁴⁸ *Chador* and *chaghchur* are two pieces of outerwear that women wore up to the unveiling campaign in 1936. *Chaghchur* was a pair of wide pants that covered from the waist down and *chador* or the cape-like veil was worn over it.

A veiled woman is neither smart nor intelligent
Theater and Restaurant do not cause disgrace
Should a woman be licentious
She will be the same at the theater or eating *dizi*⁴⁹
She can be lustful in a barn filled with animal dung
Or she can be like that at the Eifel Tower
How well Jami put this
The great poet after Nezami
That: "A thing of beauty cannot tolerate being veiled."

The necessary qualities that women should possess according to the speaker, as discussed earlier, are *'esmat* (chastity) and *'effat* (virtue) and not the veil. The above lines advocate for women's unveiling and integration into the society as the mentioning of new urban establishment such as theater and restaurant suggest. Yet, this integration is conditional upon women's inner virtue. The speaker categorically views veiled women as ignorant, while arguing that in fact they can be quite lascivious. The veil, as he argued in the personal story about the influence of the veil where he had sex with a woman who held on to her face veil tight during sex, is not the marker of a chaste woman. The veil according to reform-minded intellectuals like Iraj had lost its functionality in protecting women from immorality. In other words, pro-modernity authors and thinkers, including Iraj saw the loss of Islamic identity as essential in the path towards progress. He argued that the way women in his society observe the veil is neither in accordance with the Prophet's accounts nor with the Qur'an's teachings. He insisted that women's full veil is in opposition to those religious teachings (*zed-e nass-e Qoran-e mobin ast*).⁵⁰ In order to support his claim, Iraj specifically alludes to the uncovering of a woman's hand (*dast*)

⁴⁹ *Dizi* is an Iranian dish like beef stew, which is one of the most traditional dishes in the Iranian cuisine and is still considered so.

⁵⁰ Iraj, *Divan*, l. 214.

and face (*surat*), which according to some interpretations of the *hadith* and the Qur'an is deemed insufficient. This is a bold and yet prudent statement on behalf of the author, since Iraj Mirza was not a religious figure and did not have religious training. Iraj Mirza's advocacy for the unveiling of women and his allusions to religious texts in support of his argument did not go unnoticed by some of his opponents. In a scathing article entitled "Peykar-e Sha'eraneh dar Ma'rekeh-ye Kashf-e Hejab" (The Poetic Battles of the Unveiling), Mohammad-Sobhan Rastgu, brings examples of the poetry that Iraj Mirza's opponents wrote in response to his pro-unveiling campaign. Pointing out Iraj's lack of religious acumen, as well as his royal heritage, Rastgu writes:

A study of Iraj Mirza's poetry shows that, just like other pro-modernity intellectuals, he was also looking for the total unveiling (of women) in accordance with the ways of Europe. However, he acted in a more complicated manner in order to deceive the society. This group of intellectuals, during the first phase of the unveiling process tried to prove that the total veiling of women (a veil that covered the entire body) was not religiously sanctioned, by alluding to the evidences from the Qur'an and the *hadith*. But, since they could not use religion to abolish veiling and in order to reach the next phase of the process, which was unveiling in the European style, they resorted to its social aspects and contentions. By and large, this way of conduct is indicative of Iraj Mirza and his cohorts' dishonest spirit. (9)

Rastgu's criticism of Iraj's poetry on the issue of unveiling is published in 2015, which goes to show the sensitivity of this issue to this date in Iranian society. By grouping Iraj with "other pro-modernity intellectuals," Rastgu refuses to acknowledge the nuances of their works. He then, argues that Iraj "acted in a more complicated manner" in advocating for women's "total unveiling" without explaining what he means by "complicated." Rastgu's use of the words "deceive" and "dishonest" betray his agenda. In "Arefnameh" and more specifically in the personal anecdote that the speaker relays the unveiling of women is for the most part about the face-veil. The veiling in the poem is designated by

the following words: *chador* (long outer veil that covers the entire body), *hejab* (veil), *pardeh* (curtain), *picheh* (face-veil), *rubandeh* (face-veil), *ma'jar* (veil), etc. all of which differ in terms of how much of the body they cover. So, to say that Iraj and “his cohorts” were deceiving people by advocating for the total unveiling of women is unsubstantiated. Rastgu’s rhetoric, however, is in line with the Islamic Republic’s idea of the appropriate ways of veiling for women: a topic that is contentious to this day.

Conclusion

Iraj Mirza belongs to a generation of intellectuals who saw women as the missing ingredient to their formula of reform. They reconfigured the category “woman” and the role that she ought to play in the modernization of Iranian society. Women were being defined as a man’s companion and integral to the country’s advancement. Many of these intellectuals, including Iraj, saw women’s veil as the marker of the society’s backwardness and a barrier. In order to remove this barrier, Iraj advocated for the lifting of the veil. He maintained that despite what the society had been taught according to Islamic teachings the veil did not guarantee a woman’s chastity. Iraj’s censure of the women’s veiling is not merely his rejection of religious beliefs, but all of the social and moral interdictions that drive from it. He believed the veiling of women was an impediment that prevented women from being treated as human beings and from learning. His advocacy for women’s unveiling and their education did not go unnoticed. After the poet’s return to Tehran from Khorasan, women had welcomed him with gifts and flowers in order to thank him for the work he had done on their behalf. As Arianpur notes in *Az Saba Ta Nima* (From Saba until Nima):

Upon his arrival in Tehran Iraj was received warmly by the literati, poets and the capital’s common people who had found many of their demands in his poems. Especially ladies rushed to welcome him with much enthusiasm as a sign of their gratitude due to the poet’s display of extraordinary courage in discussing women’s unveiling and emancipation. They brought him flower and silver cigarette case as gifts and presented him with a poem.⁵¹

⁵¹ Arianpur, *Az Saba ta Nima* (From Saba to Nima), 388. Iraj wrote a poem in response to the women’s expression of gratitude and called them “The ones who tear the veil of ignorance from the faces of girls” (*darandegan-e pardeh-ye jahl az rokh-e banat*).

What distinguishes Iraj's advocacy for the removal of the veil in comparison with poets like 'Eshqi, rests in the use of explicit language in "'Arefnameh,'" the poem that made its author notoriously famous. Highly moralizing, the poem's language shocks readers. This long poem is partly a ribald berating of sexual relations between men and young boys in which Iraj displays a bawdy sense of humor. In writing his narrative, Iraj does not spare any details from the grooming practices enjoyed by the likes of his friend 'Aref or even himself to detailed descriptions of orifices in the human body. "'Arefnameh,'" however, remains one of the most quoted poems of Iraj exactly due to the candidness of the discussion surrounding sexual relations. It is unique, and while rife with socio-political innuendos and commentaries, it displays a remarkable knowledge of the female genitalia, female sexual response, and views on same-sex relations.

In "'Arefnameh'" it is the "sexed body" that takes center stage and is in a way a form of sexual pedagogy.⁵² From the very beginning the speaker directly addresses his readers. The closing of the gap between the speaker and audience provides the opportunity for the enhancement of the erotic effect of the text. The narrative is interrupted by the author's references to real life facts that lend more credibility to the entire narrative rendering it more appealing. At the same time, these authorial interruptions are employed in a way to control the focus of the readers accordingly. In terms of women and their development, it is true that the speaker in "'Arefnameh'" is advocating for the unveiling of women and education. He argues that unveiled and educated women are less susceptible to deviate from the path of righteousness. He also

⁵² I have borrowed the term sexed-body from John Philips' discussion of the works of The Marquis de Sade. For more information see John Philips. *The Marquis de Sade: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

argues that men are less inclined to engage with other men sexually should women be unveiled. So, while the poem presents progressive ideas, by no stretch of the imagination can we say that he was a pioneering feminist as we know it in the twenty-first century. In other words, the overarching patriarchal values guided Iraj's discourse where it concerned women. He is not asking for the unveiling of women because he believes that it will pave the way for their progress. He wishes for women to be unveiled mainly because he wants to see same-sex relations eradicated. "The Constitutional order of things," as Najmabadi phrases it, was closely linked with sexual and gender order that crafted modernity as a heteronormalized patriarchal order.⁵³

During the early decades of the twentieth-century Iranian literary society saw a surge of authors who began writing melo-dramatic romantic tales. The list includes 'Ali Dashti (1894-1982): a prolific journalist and author. Hassan Mirabedini calls Dashti the ring-leader (*sar-halqeh*) of authors of love stories (*'asheqaneh-nevis*) (155). These stories present a vivid picture of a newly emerged middle class and specially include female characters that are modern and educated in fashionable Tehran. As we will see in the next chapter, the discourse on the women's issues finds a new articulation in the unveiled, educated, and modern female character central to the love stories that authors like Dashti wrote in the early decades of the twentieth-century. The female characters in Dashti's stories despite their achievements are flawed. The character of the modern woman that is depicted in Dashti's stories is a reminder of the "New Woman" of English literature. The "New Woman" is a term that was coined by Sarah Grand in an essay that was published in 1894. The term soon became popular in the press and books. This "New Woman" was

⁵³ Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*, 211.

educated, independent, and self-supporting and was often time criticized as she upset male supremacy. I believe the representation of Iranian women in the fiction of Ali Dashti corresponds to the anxiety that the figure of the New Woman had caused in English society. The “New Iranian Woman,” as I will call her, of Dashti’s fiction lacks good morals.

These contradictory views of women and their roles in society that reform-minded authors, such as Iraj, display in their works naturally percolated into the works of later generation of writers. This newly conceived woman, that Iraj is hoping to see, has a veiled language, and a disciplined body. Yet, the same figure, during the first half of the twentieth-century becomes a source of anxiety for men; she becomes the *fitnah* or the enemy within.⁵⁴ She is embodied in the character of a fallen woman: the incarnation of *fitnah* or chaos. ‘Ali Dashti’s *Fetneh* published in 1945, which is a collection of short stories, best shows the anxiety of the new Iranian woman and is the subject of the next chapter.

⁵⁴ Najmabadi in her discussion of the evolution of the female character in the imagination of the twentieth-century writers in *Women with Mustaches* alludes to women as *fitnah* or the enemy within who posed a threat to the “newly rearticulated Islamism.”

Chapter Five

A Dystopian Vision: Male Anxiety and the New Iranian Woman

“Tehran is like a woman who crosses her legs coquettishly, wears French perfumes, smokes Kent cigarettes, wears dark sunglasses, drinks vodka-lime, wears a bikini and sunbathes, but if you hear her talk you will die of boredom for her idiocy, provincialism, silliness, prattling, pretentiousness, and sloppiness.”

(Mohammad Eslami-Nadushan, *Karnameh-ye Chehel Saleh*)

As I discussed in the previous chapter, during the first half of the twentieth-century, the discourse on women's issues became more and more explicit and anti-veiling sentiments developed into the central concern for the reform-minded writers. Iraj Mirza's veiled woman in the story that the speaker of “Arefnameh” relates, proves to be a hypocrite and dishonorable. The picture that Iraj paints of the female character in his story is a picture of a typical woman as representing all Iranian women. Similar to his literary cohorts, such as Akhundzadeh and ‘Eshqi, Iraj continues the anti-veil discourse. He attacks the veil, but acknowledges the spirit of Islam by suggesting that true virtue has to do with a woman's inner self-restraint and not the observance of the outer veil. His disavowal of the veil becomes an occasion for him to criticize women's lack of education and their absence from the public space. He also blames the veil for men's lack of interest in engaging sexually with women, since it is literally the barrier that prevents men from seeing women's faces. Iraj's use of deliberately explicit language separates Iraj's discourse from Akhundzadeh and ‘Eshqi's works and elevates the issue of veiling. His insistently explicit language in the *Story of the Effect of Chador* dubbed veiled women as immoral and argued that educated women are more likely to remain chaste.

The watershed event of the unveiling campaign (*kashf-e hejab*) in 1936 by Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925-41) made way for many Iranian women to shed their veils and enter the society unveiled.¹ By the mid-1940s some of Iraj's cultural expectations regarding women that he had expressed in his poetry had materialized. Women had been admitted to colleges and universities, held jobs, had successfully established organizations, ran newspapers, and were inching their way towards their political enfranchisement and the right to vote.² Educated women could roam around freely and unveiled alongside men in society. Contrary to Iraj's premonition some authors, like 'Ali Dashti portrayed female characters that despite their modern appearance (i.e. unveiled and educated) are still flawed. The issue of sexual purity prevailed and the image of a virtuous, unveiled, and educated woman that Iraj desired and foresaw would populate Iranian society, as we will see in this chapter, did not quite emerge. Iraj's ideal image of a well-educated and virtuous woman who is well integrated into the society metamorphoses into an image of agents "of an alien world that evoked anger and anguish."³

¹It must be noted that The Unveiling Campaign (*Kashf-e Hejab*) was part of a larger reform movement that Reza Shah Pahlavi initiated. Sartorial change was part of this movement. Reza Shah set out to standardize and Europeanize Iranian people's dress by ordering women to appear unveiled in public and by ordering men to abandon their traditional hats for the French *chapeaux* hats. The unveiling of women was a process and was not successful due to its coercive nature. For more information on Reza Shah's sartorial reform see Houchang Chehabi's "Staging the Emperor's New Clothes: Dress Codes and Nation-Building under Reza Shah." *Iranian Studies*. vol. 26. no. 3 / 4 (1993): pp. 209-229.

² For more information on women's education, schooling, journals, associations, and grass roots activism see Camron Michael Amin's *The Making of the Modern Iranian Woman; Gender, State Policy, and Popular Culture, 1865-1946*, Janet Afary's *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution 1906-1911: Grassroots Democracy, Social Democracy, and Feminism*, and Eliz Sanasarian's *The Women's Rights Movements in Iran: Mutiny, Appeasement and Repression from 1900 to Khomeini*.

³ Elain Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at Fin de Siècle*, New York & London: Penguin Books, 1991, 7.

This alien figure is represented through the character of Fetneh in ‘Ali Dashti’s collection of short stories by the same title published in 1944. Fetneh’s virtue comes under scrutiny and she becomes the epitome of wickedness and moral depravity. A prolific writer, Dashti contributed little to prose fiction compared to literary criticism, yet a few of his short stories gained popularity and proved his skills as a short story writer. In some of his short stories and even in his non-fiction Dashti has discussed women. For example the prolific journalist wrote a prison memoir, *Ayyam-e Mahbas* (Prison Days), first published in 1924, in which he displays sympathy to “unveiling as a social reform but was also against the abrupt nature of Reza Shah’s policies” (Amin 108-109). Despite his support for reform regarding the Woman Question, Dashti in his fiction creates female characters who are immoral despite their apparent education and modern appearance.

This chapter analyzes the first short story from the collection eponymously named after the main female character. Fetneh in the story seems to be the embodiment of the type of woman that Iraj Mirza wished to see Iranian society populated with. She is privileged, exceptional, and educated, yet she is dishonest, sexually voracious, and fake. Critics such as Hassan Mirabedini and Parviz Khanlari explain that Dashti in *Fetneh*—and other stories such as *Hendu* (1954) and *Jadu* (1951)—has explored aristocratic women’s indulgence in sensuality and presented it under a psychological guise as Kamshad also mentions in his assessment of Dashti’s fiction.⁴ Alluding to the monotony of Dashti’s fiction, Hassan Mirabedini in *Sad Sal Dastan Nevisi-ye Iran (Hundred Years*

⁴ Hassan Mir‘abedini. *Sad Sal Dastan Nevisi-ye Iran (Hundred Years of Fiction Writing in Iran)*. 156.

of Fiction Writing in Iran) quotes Khanlari's observation regarding the one-dimensional female characters in Dashti's fiction:

This author has written about one subject only and that is the portrayal of aristocratic women's emotions in today's society...pretending to be modern, talking about equality with men without being prepared to take part in their social duties, idleness, caprice, and flaunting [her assets] in Tehran's pleasure-seeking circles are these women's exclusive characteristics. Men in the story expect pure love from her. The kind of pure love that is described in authors of the romantic bourgeoisie period and Tehran's pleasure-seeking circles talk of such love in order to be perceived as modern...the author is quite skilled in describing this kind of woman's speech, her attitudes, and spirit.⁵

As we will see Fetneh's characteristics in the story match the descriptions above for the most part, but to treat this story as serving only one purpose, which is to talk about the debauchery of Tehran's high society women's in 1940s is reductionist at best. In this chapter I will show how Dashti's creation of his female character, Fetneh, speaks to men's anxiety regarding the emerging New Woman and her sexual independence. I will show how Fetneh is representative of the Iranian New Woman who now belongs to middle to upper classes of the society, and despite being educated is still incapable of securing her own life financially and is still dependent on marriage as woman's only option for a fulfilling life. Her unveiled presence in public and her expression of sexual desire engendered intense hostility and fear as she seemed to challenge male supremacy at home and other social settings.⁶ I will question the reasons behind the condemnation of the so-called debauched New Woman of Iranian modernity and argue that traditional

⁵ This quotation is by Parviz Natel Khanlari from *Nokhostin Kongereh-ye Nevisandegan*, p. 164, which is quoted in Hassan Mir'abedini's *Sad Sal Dastannevisi dar Iran* (Hundred Years of Fiction Writing in Iran) in support of his own view of Dashti's talent in describing a certain type of woman.

⁶ Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at The fin De Siècle*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1994, 38-39.

roles and values were still in place at the time. Women did not find opportunities for self-development outside of the institution of marriage therefore; they had to compromise on love, sexual fulfillment, economic independence, etc.

“Fetneh,” The Story

“Fetneh” begins in a beautiful summer night and at a party set in Shemiran, a wealthy neighborhood of Tehran. The party is the main framework for the narrative. At this lavish party, the hostess asks one of the guests, Faramarz, a social butterfly, to tell the scandalous love affair between his friend, Hormoz, and a married woman Fetneh. Based on the conversations regarding the status of women that the guests are having in this gathering one can assume that the group’s candid discussion of women’s status and gender relations is representative of a society that is opening up to such debate. The hostess who is anxious to hear the scandalous story interrupts the group’s conversation and asks Faramarz to begin telling his story. Comments made by some of the ladies present at the party speak to Hormoz’s reputation as some sort of a Casanova who is unlikely to fall in love. One lady sarcastically exclaims: “Hormoz’s love story is a curious one,” while another slyly (*rendaneh*) remarks on the unlikelihood of Hormoz falling in love and mentions that if Hormoz’s love should be counted in as the world’s seven wonders (22). Readers and guests alike learn that Hormoz is in the habit of pursuing beautiful women and does not rest until he reaches his goal, but then he quickly becomes disenchanted with them and believes love to be a disease (*maraz*) (23). And with this brief introduction to Hormoz’s character, Faramarz begins to tell the much anticipated love story: About a month ago Faramarz says he had bumped into Hormoz in

front of the French embassy in Tehran. Although impeccably dressed, Faramarz had found his friend disheveled and broken-down. Knowing Hormoz, Faramarz had jokingly said “it is not necessary that one should be so bitter and glum and see the world as such over a woman” (24). After talking some more about the cause of his foul mood, Hormoz had suggested that they go into the Tehran restaurant, so that he can have some whisky while his friend (Faramarz) has dinner; they could talk then. The course of the narration is once more interrupted, Hormoz assumes the role of the speaker, and begins telling the story of his love affair with Fetneh.

Hormoz who is a diplomat and had been abroad for a little over five years had returned to Tehran. A little while after his arrival, Hormoz meets Fetneh, a married woman, who was an old acquaintance of his. He came across her at the waiting area of Cinema Iran; one of the sprouting movie theaters in town (33). Hormoz was immediately attracted to her. Fetneh had received him with a warm smile, introduced him to her husband, and made him promise to pay her a visit soon. Their chance meeting at the cinema marks the beginning of a tumultuous love affair between the two of them. But, it took two months before they embarked on a sexual relationship, for Fetneh was reluctant to sleep with Hormoz. Fetneh played the game of cat and mouse with Hormoz as he recalls, and dragged their torturous courtship until she finally gave in prompted by her husband’s infidelity. From that point on, Hormoz and Fetneh began to see each other regularly. One day when Hormoz knew that Fetneh’s husband would be out of town he had decided to pay her a surprise visit. The butler had left the door open after he had gone shopping, so Hormoz let himself in. He met one of the servants in the hallways when he was told that the lady is in the dining room. Sensing that something was not right and

overpowered by curiosity and jealousy Hormoz decided to look through the keyhole instead of going in when he saw Fetneh with her arms wrapped around another man. Devastated and betrayed Hormoz had left Fetneh's house without any words. At this point of the narrative, the story comes back full circle to the dinner party where Faramarz had been telling the story. Deeply impressed by what they had heard the audience at first falls into a heavy silence, but resumes their discussion over the moral of the story. The story ends with the following statement that one of the women present at the party makes: "women are not at fault, because they have been left with only one tool. They must triumph over men by the way of sexual desires..." (*zanha taghsiri nadarand, baray-e anha yek vasileh bishtar nagozashtehand, bayad az rah-e tamayol-e jensi bar mard mostoli shavand*) (76).

“Fetneh”/Fetneh: The Antithesis of The New Iranian Woman

Dashti in “Fetneh” portrays a vivid picture of the reform-minded intellectuals’ concern regarding the emerging of the much-anticipated figure of the New Iranian Woman by the said group. “Fetneh” is a story in which the main character who is portrayed as a modern woman fails to live up to her expectations. She is educated, looks modern, is unveiled, and at the same time she is corrupt. The story “Fetneh” and the vain female characters that populate it propose the unexpected emergence of a different kind of woman; a kind of woman that has brought with her a great deal of anxiety. She is portrayed as deceitful, exhibits a great deal of sexual double standards, is the figure of disorder, and is filled with uncertainties, and contradictions. Fetneh’s character becomes the representation of the types of women who had only achieved the appearance of modern women, but deep down they were still bound by the same traditional ties that precluded them from advancement.

As we have seen in the previous chapters, each text aspires for its female characters to attain certain qualities, such as education and freedom to choose to wear a veil, etc. Nessa Khanum in Akhundzadeh’s “Lankaran’s Vizier” must break free from an arranged-marriage. With remarkable exhibition of will power Nessa (which literally means woman) refuses to marry by force and at the end she is united with her fiancé in a romantic union instead. In “The Black Shroud” the dead princess wrapped in a black shroud in a desolate mausoleum represents veiled women. ‘Eshqi in this poem mourns the metaphorical death of Iranian women and argues that as long as women are wrapped in the black *chador* they are as good as dead. According to ‘Eshqi, women’s situation could improve if they were to remove their veils. Iraj reinforces this idea by adding the

element of education to the equation and argues that the veil cannot protect women from being sinful. Virtue, he claims, is something that women would gain by educating themselves. The veiled woman of “Arefnameh” is far from being an ideal figure. A married woman, she is portrayed as a wanton who sleeps with a total stranger.

In Dashti’s story, however, the unveiled and educated Fetneh at first glance—and according to Hormoz’s descriptions—is the embodiment of the ideal woman; an ideal woman who is desired by a self-proclaimed idealist. To an idealist, Hormoz explains to his friend Faramarz when they sit down at a restaurant to talk:

Not all women are the same. Such persons (i.e. the idealist men) would go after their ideals and dreams. They fall in love with a woman in whose face their dark desires, their unknown proclivities, and their entire abstruse wishes are illuminated. And, this woman who is the embodiment of one’s inner dreams and desires cannot be found everywhere. Therefore, when they cannot find her such people will end their lives. (26)

Hormoz implies that he might be one of those people who suffer hardship to attain his ideal woman and at the same time warns against the danger in being an idealist in pursuit of the perfect one. He reminds his friend that the destructive power of a failed ideal could be deadly. The woman that one falls in love with, according to Hormoz, is vague and dark as described by the adjectives dark (*tarik*), unknown (*majhul*), and abstruse (*mobham*). So, from the beginning of the narrative the picture that is given of the main female character is that of a confounding and dark character who sets out to destroy men. Fetneh in this story is one such woman. She destroyed Hormoz by pretending to be what he desired. After Hormoz finds out that Fetneh has been dishonest, he is as good as dead. Faramarz remembers Hormoz’s miserable condition when he had bumped into him. He recalls how Hormoz looked like as if he had a: “defect, an invisible defect, a mysterious

defect, just like a dusty ceramic jar or crystal dish that the dust does not let them shine and appear luminous; his forehead was like rainy autumn days at dusk, suffocated (*khafeh*), stifled (*gerefteh*); his shoulders were bent and droopy...(23-24). Fetneh is presented as responsible for Hormoz's miserable condition. She also is guilty of destroying his mental image of the ideal woman.

An elusive figure filled with contradictions Fetneh is made up of two different women: one that Fetneh really is and one that she really is. Hormoz sees and one that she is. In other words, Hormoz's view of Fetneh proves to be an illusion born out of Hormoz unfulfilled expectations. He projects his own ideals onto Fetneh. Admitting to have nurtured this misconception, Hormoz mourns the death of his ideal woman in the hands of Fetneh: the antithesis of the ideal woman. He explains despondently to his friend:

The woman that my emotions and my mind had created for me, she died...Fetneh killed her. That ideal face and that goddess-like who would give warmth to sun's rays and would give moonlight its brilliance, youth, and poetry, she died...vanished...disappeared... (28)

Fetneh is nothing but a poseur. She is a far cry from the liberated and educated woman that many had advocated for and Hormoz was expecting to meet. Fetneh's character transforms from the ideal figure of the New Iranian Woman into a murderous sham by the end of the narrative. By "killing" the ideal woman, Fetneh stands for the failure of the intellectuals' vision of the modern woman.

“Fetneh,” The Ambiguous New Woman

Following the model of European women Iranian male intellectuals desired Iranian women to step out of the confines of home, enter society, become educated, and appears unveiled in public. Most of these men believed that women’s emancipation was the driving force behind Iran’s move towards becoming a modern society. Despite the fact that the intellectuals’ wishes had mostly materialized by ‘Ali Dashti’s time, the figure of the New Woman in Dashti’s work did not seem to match the desired outcome as they had predicted it would. She is wrapped in the shroud of ambiguity and possesses many contradictory features. She is the cause of men’s anxiety and has created concern. Fetneh is a character that exemplifies this confusion. She is the representation of the synthesis between old and new. Throughout the narrative Fetneh, as the representative of a new generation of women in Iranian society, is shuttling back-and-forth between intense identification with and total rejection of tradition.⁷ One can argue that one of the reasons behind this oscillating sense of being modern or traditional is born out of men’s contesting ideologies regarding women’s role and place at the time.

Fetneh is not a dazzling beauty. She is Western educated, widely read, interested in the arts and movies, and is well-spoken. The discussion regarding Fetneh’s beauty raises a few questions. Faramarz, Hormoz’s friend does not find Fetneh anything special and confides in his audience and says:

⁷ Farzaneh Milani in *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voice of Iranian Women Writers* explains this movement between the old and the new as they are expressed in the works of Iranian women authors such as Simin Behbahani. See “The Birth of Nontraditional Feminism” in *Veils and Words*, 234.

Frankly, I have been thinking to myself for a while how could Hormoz who has seen a lot in his life, has traveled extensively, and has been with many different women become so infatuated with a woman whose beauty is nothing spectacular, is quite ordinary, average, even below average? Such instances are very plausible, feasible, and imaginable for young men. However, a man of thirty five or thirty six who has been to a thousand bars and has seen the beauty, elegance, taste, loveliness, art, and charm of European women, it was surprising to see such affection for an incredibly average woman. (28)

Faramarz had found Fetneh very ordinary (*kheili 'addi*) and even below average (*pain tar az motevvaset*). His comparison however, is based on the European standards of beauty. His assessment of Fetneh's beauty compared to European women is nothing new, since for centuries European women occupied the imagination of Iranian men as the embodiment of divine beauty. In his important work, *Refashioning Iran*, Tavakoli-Targhi proposes that the European woman (*zan-e farangi*) "was the locus of gaze and erotic fantasy" for many Iranian men especially during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁸ The figure of the European woman as educated, cultured, and unveiled becomes the ideal model in the discourse of modernity that most intellectuals advocated for. Faramarz's remarks regarding the elegance and beauty of European women compared to the commonness of Fetneh suggest that for many the figure of the European woman still represented the ideal woman at the time of *Fetneh's* composition. In fact, Hormoz complains at the beginning of the narrative how Tehrani women disappointed him time and again in their interactions with him. Thinking that the recent reforms in the country had made women into more sophisticated figures, his expectations are not met by what he encountered. He recalls:

⁸ Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and Historiography*, 54.

When I was returning to Iran I thought to myself that finally the aspiration of the intellectuals' circle has come to fruition and women are no longer bound to abjection and those despicable situations. They are able to work their spiritual and moral forces and become women, not be slaves and as paralyzed members of the society. (30)

He had reassured himself by thinking that:

During these few years that Tehrani women have gained their rights and freedom, they have for sure trekked a vast field in education and improvement. (31)

The changes that Hormoz was expecting to see could only be seen in the face of the city, Tehran. Tehran with its new cafes, restaurants, cabarets, etc. is unrecognizable to him. He remembers that he had detected noticeable changes amongst people, especially amongst the rich:

One could see ordinary and obscure faces peeping from inside these luxury cars such as Buick, Packard, and Chrysler. One could see strange numbers on newly-built homes. In grand parties many strange and suspicious faces wearing new and modern frocks with their chest hair sticking out of their starched shirts with backward bowties. (33)

Although the above passage suggests that Hormoz was equally unimpressed with men's superficial looks, it is women, who despite their modern look are most disappointing. Hormoz finds the New Woman, to lack intelligence and common courtesy, and to be impolite resembling a doll with glass eyes.⁹

Hormoz insists on women's discourteous behavior that disappointed him on a regular basis upon his return. The women that he used to know had received him coldly. These women's reception of other men was no better. He recalls to Faramarz at their chance meeting in the restaurant about one of his encounters with an old acquaintance, Afsar Khanum, with whom he had danced, dined, and wined. Yet, the lady, to his

⁹ 'Ali Dashti. *Fetneh*. 3rd ed. Tehran: Safi'ali Shah, 1948, 32-33.

surprise, had ignored him completely. Hormoz describes these women as lifeless just like statues (*mojasameh*) that one sees in a museum. Comparing Tehran's streets to Grévin in Paris, one of the oldest wax museums in Europe, and women to lifeless statues, Hormoz turns to his friend and asks bewilderingly:

I do not know if it has happened to you or not that at the Grévin museum, you mistakenly said something to one of the statues that are in the hallways and had asked them something? Then after you saw no traces of feeling and life in their faces you realized they were statues and not a human being? Believe me; if Afsar Khanum had not walked I would have thought that I had greeted a statue. (31)

Hormoz brings examples of his meeting with different women who had received him coldly and with little enthusiasm as if “they were ashamed of being in contact with me” (32). He compares the “lifeless” behavior of Iranian women to European women's (*zanan-e farang*) way of conduct. Hormoz is unable to make sense of the situation. The New Iranian Woman outwardly resembles her European counterpart, but she is unable to communicate with men. Why is it that Iranian women to Hormoz seem “lifeless” resembling dolls and statues? Hormoz's criterion in this case is the way Iranian women behave towards men. These women do not know how to behave towards the opposite sex. They ignore men in public, lest they are committing an act of indecency. They seem to be ashamed of their association with men as Hormoz has observed. Women's reluctance, one can argue, is still rooted in the absence of intellectual and national debate over the seminal subjects of gender and sexuality.¹⁰ These women might still believe that association with strange men translates to sinful behavior. So, although they have unveiled and are out and about in public they still harbor traditional views of gender

¹⁰ See Kamran Talattof's discussion of “the absence of a successful modernization process and a pervasive discourse of modernity in Iran” in *Modernity, Sexuality, and Ideology in Iran*.

relations. So, the change in women's status Hormoz soon realizes is merely cosmetic. Women attend lavish parties in a fast growing urban center such as Tehran without their veil, but deep down they are still traditional and observing old-established rules of decency.

Fetneh however, is neither boring nor is she cold and lifeless. She seems to be everything that most Tehrani women were not. Bored with Tehrani women's lack of socialization skills, Hormoz was planning his fast exit from Iran when he met Fetneh by chance in the waiting hall of Cinema Iran. The narrator's description of what first drew him to Fetneh is as follows:

I knew her from a long time ago, when she was still single girl (*dokhtar*) and living in her father's house. She did not have a striking beauty and was not considered one of Tehran's beautiful girls. In my view, what was so graceful about her was her figure. In my view, women should have such delicate figure that one should fear that if he squeezes her a bit more in his convulsive and angry embrace that her bones could shatter. In that respect, Fetneh was like a slender and delicate doll. She was my ideal. (34)

Hormoz's ideal woman, with respect to her physique, according to what he confides in his friend is a type of woman that resembles a fragile doll (*'arusak-e shekanandeh*). The idea of a frail woman is a reminder of the age-old patriarchal notion of the damsel in distress. The image of women as dolls is also not a novel comparison. A slender figured woman who resembles a doll then subscribes to the cliché portrayal of women by male authors. What stands out in Hormoz's descriptions of the young woman is as he says in the change in her look. He continues:

The woman (*zan*) that I saw talking to her young husband in the distance had not changed at all. Only her eyes sparkled more and the innocence and simplicity were gone from them. (34)

Hormoz admits that he had not seen Fetneh since she was still single and still living at home. Their chance meeting happens *after* she was married. She is unchanged as far as readers are concerned with the exception of a certain look; a look that lacks innocence (*bigonahi*) and simplicity (*sadehgi*). In other words, according to the narrator, Fetneh is no longer innocent and simple. Here we can establish a correlation between being single, innocent, and simple, and being married, guilty, and fake. The narrator also refers to Fetneh using two different words: girl (*dokhtar*) and woman (*zan*). While the former indicates sexual purity and virginity, the latter indicates sexual knowledge. So, Fetneh is no longer clueless about sexual relations now that she is married. Hormoz continues her description of Fetneh in these terms:

Notwithstanding her slender figure that many saw as a flaw, Fetneh possessed two things that whoever encountered them liked them: one was her transparent and youthful color that sometimes one imagined that life and youthfulness were fluttering under her matt-olive complexion. Second was her eyes and the fire that was burning inside them. Many Iranian women have beautiful eyes, but these beautiful eyes are mostly devoid of emotion and life. One cannot know anything from them. It is like someone is presented with an exquisite book of Chinese philosophy. Iranian poets have understood well to have compared the beloved's eyes to that of a doe's. Truly, the blackness, the elongation, and the beauty all resemble the eyes of a doe. But, just like a doe's eyes, they do not reflect any empathy, emotion, or soul. You cannot read anything in them. These eyes do not speak to you. They are not windows to the soul, or they cannot reflect any sentiments. Or we might assume that there is no such a thing as a sensitive and compassionate soul. Fetneh's eyes were devoid of this flaw. Her eyes spoke to people. It had fire and life. (34-35)

To the narrator, Iranian women's eyes are devoid of emotion (*hes*) and life (*hayat*) despite their exquisite beauty that he considers to be a flaw (*naqs*) rather than an

advantage. Earlier Hormoz had commented on Iranian women's lack of social decorum resembling dolls with glass eyes (*cheshmha-ye shisheh-i*) (32). To him, Tehran at that time seems to be populated with lifeless doll-like women who have no soul resembling the desolate landscape of 'Eshqi's poetry that is populated by dead women wrapped in black shrouds. They resemble statues (*mojasameh*). The only woman who seemed alive and animated is Fetneh. She had, as Hormoz explained to his friend: "...her [Fetneh] eyes were devoid of this flaw. They spoke to me. They had fire in them and were lively" (35).

Fetneh was not a striking beauty with a fragile figure. This quality is however, what exactly had made her so desirable in the eyes of Hormoz. In addition to her physical attractiveness for Hormoz, Fetneh seemed at first to be Hormoz's intellectual equal. She was cultured. She was interested in foreign movies such as *Anna Karenina* (1935) and *Camille* (1936), both of which were adopted for the screen based on famous works of literature *Anna Karenina* (1878) and *La Dame aux Caméllias* (The Lady of the Camellias) (1848). Both stories feature strong female characters who step outside of the accepted bounds of their societies and sacrifice their reputation for a forbidden love. Both women move between the worlds of propriety and moral depravity. Fetneh seems to be caught between the two worlds just like the characters in *Anna Karenina* and *Camille* are: a world in which she is required to conform to the societal norms and a more private world in which she wishes to love freely. Fetneh had admired the female characters in both movies and said: "I really admire the role of the woman in this film [*Anna Karenina*] because; the woman in the movie is beautiful, grand, majestic, and superior. She feels deeper, acts wiser, loves more earnestly, and loves devotedly" (39). One can deduce that Fetneh was probably wishing to have had the same qualities and status since,

immediately after she had stated her admiration for the adulteress Anna, her husband rebuked her and said: “I disagree with my wife again here. It is the man in the movie, who loves more earnestly, but the woman, like always, has always combined love with reason, calculation, and numbers... a woman’s love has always been mixed with hypocrisy (*nefaq*) and insincerity (*do-ruyi*)” (39). There is clearly disconnection between the doctor and his wife. Fetneh is desperately looking for the approval that her husband is clearly unable to give her. Hormoz finds her desperation attractive: a testimony to the “damsel in distress” theme. He says: “she expected that I defend her” (39). Somewhere else in the narrative Hormoz warns about the charm of a woman’s helplessness and hypothesizes:

When a woman asks for help it is as if she caresses and awakens masculine spirit in us. When a beautiful woman is asking for a man’s help she is in fact spreading a new trap in his way. If, like Fetneh, this woman is intelligent and bright and has studied all of her moves and methods in advance, she can drive a man crazy. (58)

In addition to her beauty, appreciation of the arts, and her propensity for intellectual conversation, it is mostly Fetneh’s virtue that is attractive to Hormoz and is considered to be her “trap.” Throughout the narrative, Fetneh sees the power of love to be women’s most precious virtue. She feels the need to prove this trait to Hormoz as she begins her romantic affair with him. She tells him: “I will prove to you, yes especially to you, that a woman is the source of love, kindness, self-sacrifice, and devotion” (41). From the beginning of the narrative, readers are informed that Fetneh is nothing like what she proclaims to be. Her aspirations are not what she outlines for Hormoz. Based on Fetneh’s own confessions at the end of the story to having designs on Hormoz, plotting to make

him marry her, it is safe to assume that she is consciously pretending to embody the ideal woman that Hormoz desired.

Hormoz differentiates between Fetneh and the rest of the “educated women” (*zanha-ye tehsil-kardeh*) who only speak loftily and “claim to be equal to men” (43). He believed her to be fair, since he had heard her say:

Women have been created to be owned by men and if we pay careful attention it is women who are most supercilious, which has not been noticed by men. And, due to jealousy and nature’s parsimony instead of forming families, which is women’s single social and vital duty, they go after education and accomplishment. (43)

The precedence that Fetneh gives to forming families and child bearing as the Persian phrase *tashkil-e khanevadeh* denounces, further renders her alluring in the eyes of Hormoz. An educated and worldly woman who is also in favor of the more traditional role for women makes her the perfect “educated housewife.” In “Crafting An Educated Housewife in Iran,” Afsaneh Najmabadi explains how as part of the reformists’ agenda and as men became more involved with managing the national politics the need for educated women to take charge of the household management rose (Najmabadi 102). So, in that sense, Fetneh’s expression of desire to be a man’s property and fulfill her duty as a homemaker fits within a man like Hormoz, who has the appearance of a modern man and yet is still intrigued by traditional roles for women. This is not to suggest that there were no confusions on Fetneh’s part. She is aware of certain social injustices that favor men over women. She knows that women have been systematically and historically were treated as inferiors to men. Therefore, she displays certain confusions about her nature and how she should be:

When I analyze myself I am faced with two different personalities: the first one, which is the superficial one is a woman who has studied in Belgium, finished highschool, has read Daudet, Anatole France, Dostoyevsky, Bourget, Maeterlinck, and other intellectuals, the one who considers herself equal to men in all of life's rights and ranks. She is the one who is able to argue that if women are staying behind it is due to social reasons and not natural ones. The second personality; however, which is a lot more profound and settled, is the true character of a woman who considers herself to be a part of man's properties (*mostakmelat-e mard*). Because, throughout centuries the legislating, training publications, and imposing regulations, which have all been against women and in favor of men, have made us women confused and fostered in us the origin of servitude. (44)

This statement is remarkable as it further emphasizes the contradiction of Fetneh's character regarding a woman's place and her achievements and what options are available to her. The educated personality of a woman according to Fetneh is the ostensible one, whereas the second one who is a woman that believes she is part of a man's belonging is defined as a persona that is more profound. Fetneh acknowledges her preference to be a conformist, yet she recognizes that *this* preference is a result of women internalization of male ideologies and ambiguities regarding the figure of "woman" (*zan*). As women began to claim political and social status and space and project themselves as equal to men, they were deemed a threat to the masculinity of the regulating body of the society that was—and continues to be—decidedly male. In *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beard*, Najmabadi discusses the ideological ambiguity of the figure of woman and the word *zan* as it pointed out "to the conflicting notions of womanhood" within the critical Constitutional period (late nineteenth century through early 1910s) (208-209). She writes: "The notion of *zan* itself included two contesting elements: the discourse of partnership/parity that imagined women as participating members of a modern nation, and the discourse of possession/protection that located woman within family subject to man" (209). This ambiguity, as one can see, from Fetneh's statement

had continued into the mid twentieth-century well after the critical Constitutional period. Her dilemma between choosing to be independent and being subject to men is a reflection of woman's unstable position within Iranian society at the time and men's hesitation to let women fully assume their place if not as men's equal, but as partners.

Fetneh's fascination with the heroines of *Anna Karenina* and *La Dame aux Caméllias* (*Lady of the Camellias*) is further suggestion of the volatile status of women at the time should they make any claim of independence and agency. It is also telling of her contradictory ideas on love and sexuality. Both Anna Karenina and Marguerite Gautier, the respective heroines of *Anna Karenina* and *The Lady of the Camellias*, in these classic novels are women who fall outside of the norm of the society. They stand alone as they choose their own path in life despite the current of their respective societies. They show a great deal of independence and agency in doing so and are condemned for they stray from the path of virtue. Their scandalous relationships with men cause them disgrace, and they are ostracized by their communities. It is this alienation and desertion that leave both women helpless and desperate to the extent that one ends her own life and the other dies a painful death. Anna jumps in front of a moving train and Marguerite dies, penniless, in pain, and alone.

Fetneh does not actually die in this story, and yet she brings about the metaphorical death of the main protagonist's ideal woman. In other words, Fetneh's actions kills Hormoz's ideal woman manifested in her. The common theme that ties these women together is their exhibition of sexual freedom. It is this particular trait that cannot be tolerated in all of their cases. They all struggle with it. Fetneh's hesitation between being chaste and embracing her sexuality is another confusing trait of the New Iranian

Woman as it is often times coupled with “love.” Fetneh constantly defends women’s ability to love unconditionally. She is particularly disturbed to learn Hormoz’s ideas on the subject of love and women.

In one of their earlier conversations Hormoz rejected the idea of women as disloyal and unstable beings. He further proposed that women are in fact devoid of love. Yet, he believed women to be shrewdly intelligent in using love (*‘eshq*) as a ploy to help them triumph over men (*mostowli shodan*). Hormoz’s view does admit to women’s intelligence, but in a negative way. In fact, his pronouncements are nothing short of the old notion of women’s guileful character that served as a popular literary genre in Islamicate cultures and societies.¹¹ In “Fetneh” women’s guile (*makr-e zanan*) as an essentially female characteristic is masqueraded by the term “intelligent.” Women’s guile further has been tied to the notion of insatiable female sexual desire.¹² In “Reading ‘Wiles of Women’ Stories as Fictions of Masculinity,” Afsaneh Najmabadi explains that at the core of stories such as *One Thousand and One Night* “it is the insatiability of this desire that drives the narrative unfolding of these tales: women cheating on their husbands, fooling other figures of patriarchal authority, committing crimes of all kinds, tricks of all sorts in search of more and an even bigger phallus” (147). Hormoz’s explanation of his feelings during his conversation speaks directly to Najmabadi’s argument. He recollects:

¹¹ Afsaneh Najmabadi, “Reading ‘Wiles of Women’ Stories as Fictions of Masculinity,” 147.

¹² Ibid.

I was overtaken by a particular sensation. And, this was the first time that an irrational appetite and desire—much like the dizziness that one can feel when standing on the edge of a cliff—was aroused in me. Flames of lust and desire were burning in her eyes and had also caught me. Poets were so right to compare a woman’s look to spell and magic. Except spell and magic what can upset somebody in the blink of an eye! (41)

In another part of the narrative Hormoz directly accuses women of being only able to think properly with respect to one topic: sex and survival. He meditates:

In my opinion women possess a strong sense of perception, but it is only so with respect to one topic and that is sexual issues and survival of the species, therefore, in this area of life they are skillful and prudent. However, a woman who should think well, feel well, have the independence and freedom of thought, a woman whose power of imagination is vast, and a woman who should possess vast views and surging imagination in all of life’s general matters is scarce. (43)

One can argue that one interpretation of “seeking more and even bigger phallus” could be a woman’s way to secure the “survival of the species” or part of her effort to look for a more capable mate. Fetneh’s approach to sex however seems a lot more calculating. Her affair with Hormoz has a seemingly romantic veneer. She fans the flames of his desire by not submitting to his sexual desires from the get-go. Her resistance to his overtures only makes Hormoz more interested. Hormoz remembers:

Fetneh’s soft and delicate hands first squeezed mine without any resistance. But soon after just like a person who does something involuntary according to their heart’s desire, pulled her hand away. She was overcome by feelings of shame and anxiety. This, more than any direct declaration and confession of love piques a man’s lust and love. (41)

Fetneh’s flirtatious behavior is a reminder of the hypocritical married woman in Iraj’s poem who refused to lift her face veil, but had sex with a stranger. The way that Fetneh differs from the woman in Iraj’s poetry lies in the women’s motive behind their actions. We know that Fetneh is playing the role of a righteous woman, while in reality she has

extra marital affairs, and does so for financial gains (such as lavish gifts) as well as a better choice for marriage should she leave her current husband. Iraj's poem does not offer a lot of information about the veiled woman. All we know is that she is married and that she slept with the speaker while holding her face-veil tight. Her identity as well as her motive is hidden from the readers. One can say, however, that her consent—if we can call it that—to the sexual act was conscious. The speaker believes her to be dishonorable as well as ignorant. But, one cannot help but imagine that she must have taken some pleasure out of that tryst. So, in a way her actions were induced by self-satisfaction.

The same logic does not hold true for Fetneh as her dishonest actions seem to be meticulously calculated and are prompted by her desire for physical satisfaction as well as a financially secured life. At the end of the story when Hormoz sees Fetneh in the arms of her much older and unattractive lover, Farsud, through the keyhole, he hears her confiding in him that:

I do not deny that I have been friendly to Hormoz, but this is for your benefit as well. You know that since the first week of my marriage I was disappointed with my husband as he could never satisfy my sexual needs. In my dreams I always liked a strong, charismatic, and a ladies' man. My husband turned out to be a lackadaisical and listless man. He is so laidback that in the name of trusting me I have never seen him get jealous over other men's bold and direct behavior towards me. He only possesses obstinacy and despotism from manly traits. Moreover, he is so incredibly stingy and miserly that I simply detest him for it and we will have to separate eventually. Financial issues aside having a husband is the most essential thing for a woman in society. She can then freely and truly socialize and live her life. You cannot marry me because you are married and have children. But, somebody like Hormoz who expresses his love for me and is prepared to... (71-72)

What Hormoz had heard behind the close doors regarding Fetneh's dissatisfaction of her love life as well as her financial predicaments, despite her education and outward

sophistication is the representation of the reality of Iranian women at the time. Despite many accomplishments with respect to their education and freedom of attire, they were still dependent on men to secure a future for themselves and were still considered to be a man's property as the Persian word *mostamlek* suggests. Despite women's attempts at seeking opportunities and self-development outside of marriage they were still curtailed by the lack of said opportunities. This, one can argue, was partly due to men's favoring traditional roles for women. Marriage at that point was still based on the economic dependence of the wife, which was restricting the women's path to self-development. Fetneh's candid confessions of her husband's physical impotency and his financial stinginess highlight women's need for both sexual satisfaction and financial security.

Male Anxiety and The New Iranian Woman

Fetneh is represented with some claim to intellectual sophistication as well as being morally corrupt.¹³ Aptly named, she is the embodiment of *fitna*: disorder or chaos (Mernissi 31). In the words of the Muslim feminist Qasim Amin, *fitna* “could be translated as chaos provoked by sexual disorder and initiated by women.”¹⁴ Amin, believed that the institution of veiling helped men to have control over their minds and prevented them from falling prey to *fitna*.¹⁵ According to Dashti’s “Fetneh,” Iranian women, at least the women from the upper classes in the cities, are unveiled and free to roam around. They have seemingly become what the intellectuals always wished for. The story, however, does not have a happy ending. It is open-ended and compared to the stories that were discussed in the previous chapters, does not come to a clear conclusion as to what the next steps would be. The confusion in the story lies partly with the main male character’s view of what this New Woman ought to be. He loves her and hates her. He adores her and despises her. He wants her and repels her at the same time. Ultimately, she terrifies him. What was it exactly about the figure of the New Woman that caused such anxiety in men? What quality had she acquired that rendered her a disruptive figure rather than a constructive one? Was it her sexual appetite? Is “Fetneh” all about the fear of female sexuality and female sexual attraction?

¹³ For more information on the characteristics of female characters who populated Dashti’s fiction see Faridoun Farrokh. “The Emergence of the Salon-society Discourse and the Fiction of Ali Dashti.” *Middle Eastern Literatures: Incorporating Edebiyat*. 2012: 153-160.

¹⁴ Qtd in Fatima Mernissi. *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987, 31.

¹⁵ See Amin’s views on veiling in Chapter two entitled “Women and the Veil,” in *The Liberation of Women*. I have used the The Cairo American University Press’s edition, 2000.

Fetneh not only betrays her matrimonial vows, she cheats on her lover as well. Her motivations behind her choices of men are self-serving and originate from lack of economic independence. However, what seems to be truly upsetting to Hormoz is Fetneh's calculating behavior in taking control. Her will to power seems to have upset the traditional relationship between the sexes. In her important work *Beyond the Veil* Fatima Mernissi talks about the "complementarity between the sexes based in their antagonistic natures" (32). She writes about the Muslim scholars' interpretation of the Quran with respect to the both sexes, which maintained that:

The characteristic of the male is the will to power, the will to conquer. The characteristic of the female is a negative will to power. All her energies are vested in seeking to be conquered, in wanting to be overpowered and subjugated. Therefore, she can only expose herself and wait while the man wants and seeks.' (32)

Mernissi brings this archaic idea of the complementarity of the sexes side by side with what she calls the "implicit theory of female sexuality," that casts women as hunters and men as victims and passive. She argues that both of these theories have one thing in common: the woman that takes over men not by force, but by cunning and intrigue.¹⁶

In this story, Fetneh is overpowering at least three men. She has a husband whom she must have married for the reasons that many women feel compelled to do in a developing patriarchal society. She took a lover in order to satisfy her sexual needs that her husband could no longer, would no longer satisfy, and finally began a romantic relationship with a man whom she thought could provide her with a better marital status. In all of these scenarios she is the one who is conquering and not the men. In fact, none of these men can claim to fully have her as they either expect it or wish it. Not only

¹⁶ Mernissi. *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*, 32.

Fetneh has played the role of an ideal woman for Hormoz, but also she has managed to play the roles of a dutiful wife for her husband and a seductive lover for Farsud. Fetneh is not passive. Fetneh's expression of sexuality is calculated and aggressive. Her engagement with all the men in the story is for her own gain. In doing so, Fetneh has upset the social order, safeguarded by men, thus creating chaos (*fitna*).

The behavior of Hormoz, who represents the progressive male in the story, regarding Fetneh's expression of sexuality, is confusing. He admires Fetneh's superficial show of virtue. He recalls Fetneh speaking about women's submission to men's sexual desires in negative terms:

But, it has happened many times that a man has offered himself to me with utmost desire and insistence of love. However, I felt an instant disgust and viewed myself as inferior and small for being seen as someone else's means for pleasure and enjoyment. I believe that for a principled woman there is nothing more degrading to be handled and disgraced by men. The only thing that should guard women from committing this mistake is this exalted and honorable thought that she should keep herself away from men's lust. She should view virtue, not simply as her religious duty, and not as social duty, but she should consider it as a kind of ornament and adornment. (48)

Fetneh's claim to virtue is perhaps her most attractive quality in the eyes of Hormoz. Based on her ultimate betrayal, it is safe to say that Fetneh is pretending to care about virtue, which in her mind is still held important in the eyes of men. In a way, she is utilizing virtue as a tool rather than a quality. In doing so, her expression of love is limited to the romance of courting at the beginning. She avoids any sexual contact between the two of them. The exchange between Hormoz and Fetneh generally takes place at parties where they cannot be totally alone. In one of her love confessions she had told Hormoz that she did love him but not in "that way" (*na towr-e digar*) (49). While Hormoz seems to admire Fetneh's self-restraint, he wants to take their relationship to the

next phase: the physical phase. He yearns for it. The text for the most part is quite elusive about the expression of sexual desire by both Hormoz and Fetneh. It alludes to sex by abstract words such as *qaziyeh* (issue) or *maquleh* (topic) even ‘eshq (*love*):

Despite the fact that Fetneh would promise love with her behavior, her tempting kindness, and her seductive caresses, she was surrounded by a halo of grace and poise that one did not dare to get close to the issue (*qaziyeh*) or talk about that topic (*maquleh*) to her. (47)

Compared to the explicit language of “Arefnameh” that does not exhibit any reserve when it comes to sex, the elusive language of “Fetneh” further indicates that sexual relations, even if it is fueled by romantic feelings between a man and woman, is not entirely an acceptable act. As the text suggests, the topic at that time is quite delicate and is handled with caution. Hormoz is cautious in broaching the idea of engaging in a sexual relationship with Fetneh, but he does not deny his intense desire for her and seems to endorse the act should she agree to sleep with him. He expresses delight to see that Fetneh is willing to take their relationship into the next level. At one of their meetings Fetneh had asked him a question that showed her interest in sleeping with him or at least had exposed the fact that she had thought about their relationship take a different shape. She had asked him: “Have you ever thought in what way and form we can have a relationship other than what we have and other than what we have confessed to one another at the moment?” (55) Fetneh’s question however, alarms Hormoz and catches him by surprise. He believed the question to be unbecoming for a chaste (*pak*) and upright (*boland-nazar*) woman such as Fetneh (55). He says bewilderingly:

This question was not improbable from a sly woman who has been around, but it was astonishing that a woman as chaste and as upright as Fetneh should ask it. The thought of a woman who has forgotten all tradition and custom and has even disregarded all outward formalities, will turn that woman in the eyes of a man whom she loves more attractive and more charming. In fact it drives an emotional man crazy. (56)

Hormoz's assertion suggests that the narrator is troubled by the thought of Fetneh's openness to embarking on a sexual relationship with him. He is troubled by the idea that in order for Fetneh to have sex with him she had violated social norm. At the same time, he finds it incredibly charming that she should do so. The fact that Hormoz finds Fetneh's transgression alluring does not suggest his approval of her actions.

Later in the narrative, when he proposes a few scenarios to Fetneh regarding organizing their trysts, Fetneh is not thrilled and asks for "some time to think" (*be man mohlat bedeh fekr konam*) (56). During this time that she is thinking about Hormoz's proposals, Fetneh feigns ignorance of her dealings with Hormoz every time that they see each other. Her dismissive behavior does not sit well with Hormoz. He compares himself to a child, who had requested something impossible of its mother. Her refusal angers Hormoz. He calls her cold (*sard*) and a stranger (*biganeh*), and laments his gullibility. He bemoans:

It does not matter how mature and experienced, and how understanding and dignified we men are. At the end of the day we are playthings in the hands of women's lust, and are prey to their deceitful fanciful spirits. Deception and lies of a woman who had presented herself as the paragon of candidness, honesty, integrity, and purity were so heavy on my soul that broke me suddenly. (57)

Hormoz exhibits signs of deep physical anxiety as well as emotional turmoil. He later says that he wanted to "escape, to run, I could not breath" (57). Why should he become so distressed regarding Fetneh's delay in sleeping with him? Regardless of Fetneh's

ultimate betrayal, her concern regarding Hormoz's proposals to meet in private is warranted. She is married and she admits to having doubts. One can argue that Hormoz is resentful of Fetneh's control over the matter. Fetneh is simply trying to protect herself and wants a guarantee (*zemanat*). She is aware of women's vulnerability and understands the consequences of stepping outside of the norms of the society. She alludes to men's total control and questions society's judgment and treatment of women should they exhibit the same sexual freedom that is expected of men and sanctioned. She explains:

Because, men have always been the ones who passed such regulations and they did so for their own benefit. Should you not love me and should you go after another woman, and change five lovers in the course of five years nobody will object. You will not be considered a fallen and despised man in the eyes of the society. If there were men and women who cared about virtue and honesty they might consider you frivolous, tawdry, and a squanderer at most. But, can women do the same thing and change lovers every year? And, should she do so doesn't she become disgraced and dishonored and wouldn't the society view her as a fallen and ruined woman? (59-60)

Fetneh's statement indicates the disparity between moral expectations of women and men. The narrator agrees to the legitimacy of her concerns, but dismisses them:

Such reasoning comes from a cold heart and a mind at ease that is capable of analyzing sexual matters like that. A woman who is in love submits herself and in doing so she will tie a tighter bond around the neck of a man whom she loves. If a woman is wanting, and if she like Fetneh is capable of understanding she can have the man wrapped around her little finger. (60)

The narrator's theory that women should give themselves to men if they truly love the man sounds authoritarian. He uses the verb *tafviz shodan* in Persian, which can mean to surrender, to submit, to hand over, and to grant, amongst other definitions all of which

have in common the idea of transferring the control from one person to another. In a way, he is asking to have total control over his relationship with Fetneh and ignores her choice in doing so. His statement further signifies the weight of moral expectations that men had to live up to as well. According to his claims, a man, and we can assume he means an honorable man, would not simply sleep with a woman and leave her fearing for his honor and hers, hence the reference to a “tight bond” (*reshteh-ye mohkam*). It also implies other complications that may arise as a result of such union, for example pregnancy that might bond a man and a woman together legally, economically, and emotionally to say the least.

The anxiety that the narrator harbors for Fetneh alludes to the anxiety that Iranian men at the time must have experienced with respect to all the changes in women’s status. Fetneh as the representative of a new generation of Iranian women, who is educated, cultured, and free to choose is deemed dangerous. Men like Hormoz, came to admire the figure of the New Woman as long as she did not threaten their guardianship over moral control of the society. In *The Making of the Modern Iranian Woman*, Camron Amin alludes to the fear that men felt regarding women and their claim over moral authority.¹⁷ He writes: “Male guardianship could not trust women to exert upon themselves the moral control that male guardianship demanded of them. This mistrust manifested itself in a demonized image of women as the source of evil and discord” (Amin 205).

Indeed in their dealings Hormoz is unable to exert any control over Fetneh and is incapable of influencing her decision-making. He believes Fetneh to be caught between

¹⁷ Amin in his book discusses the representation of women as “the dangerous woman” in the press during the early decades of the twentieth-century. See the chapter “Limits of Emancipation” in *The Making of the Modern Iranian Woman*.

love and duty (*'eshq o vazifeh*). The incident that had pushed Fetneh into making her decision comes in the form of her husband's infidelity and not Hormoz's insistence or her love for him. As the text reveals, Fetneh receives an anonymous letter that exposes her husband's unfaithfulness. It is after she finds out that she agrees to sleep with Hormoz. Once again, Hormoz is critical of her jealousy and does not seem to understand her distress. Her jealousy seems petty to him and beneath an educated woman who claims to be sophisticated. He says:

She had turned into one of those low class women who lose control due to jealousy and envy and annoy everyone with their wailing and babble. She resembled those women who would resort to all kinds of magic tricks and charm would go to their rival's home accompanied by their sister to raise havoc and tear the new woman apart with a fork. Fetneh's beautiful eyes were filled with wrath, hatred, and fire. Those soft and velvety looks of hers that could caress one's nerves and put it to rest had turned cold, cruel, and hard like a knife's blade. (66)

The frustrated narrator mourns Fetneh's transformation and adds:

Was this the same dignified and honorable woman who used to consider herself above such talk and used to talk with such poise about issues regarding men and women? Never. This was a helpless, needy, and pitiful creature who like ordinary women was upset because the man who according to social regulations owns her and is in control of her decided that he needed something else to own. She wants this man to solely belong to her and not to own another property. She wants herself to be the one who overstep bounds, commit deception, and transgression and not her husband. (66-67)

The narrator's description of Fetneh's uncouth behavior is a reminder of the feud between the wives of the vizier in Akhundzadeh's play "Lankaran's Vizier" in chapter one. Critical of the practice of polygamy, Akhundzadeh painted a chaotic picture of a crowded household with one wife too many. Vizier's wives in the story of *Lankaran's*

Vizier are constantly plotting to remove the rival and bicker incessantly. References to resorting to magic tricks (*jaduha*) and charm (*sahhari*) is another reminder of what the reformists deemed backward with respect to women's societies. Although *Fetneh* is written almost a century after Akhundzadeh's *Comedies* and while Iranian society had come a long way it was not until 1967 that the enactment of Family Protection Act (*qanun-e hemayat-e khanevadeh*) that abolished the husband's right to extra-judicial divorce and unconditional polygamy.¹⁸ While polygamy is not the narrator's target, women's bickering is. Taking a lover is not exactly polygamy, but men and their moral slipup is not the focus of the narrative in this story, whereas a century ago—at least in the case of Akhundzadeh's play—men's moral flaw and commitment are as important as that of women's if not more. In the statements above, the narrator chooses to completely ignore the infidelity of Fetneh's husband and instead has focused on her behavior. She is denied the right to be upset to the extent that her degree of distress has caused her ideal image to shatter in the eyes of Hormoz. Her wrath and hatred towards her husband are characteristics that Hormoz's ideal woman should not possess rendering her a woman who is at least incapable of expressing the full range of human emotions.

¹⁸ Irine Schneider. "Polygamy and Legislation in Contemporary Iran: An Analysis of the Public Legal Discourse." *Iranian Studies*. 2015: 1-20, 1.

“Fetneh” and The Issue of Male Redundancy

For the most part “Fetneh” is a story that aims to present the predicaments of a society that is coming to terms with different aspects of modernity, such as newly defined gender relations. The story does not have a happy ending. The characters are mostly disappointing. None of them are presented with a redeeming quality. The main female character is the villain in the story if we can call her and depicts the caprices of certain promiscuous women. However, the story does not look favorably on men either. Men in this story are described in negative terms and some of them are portrayed as debauched, and fake just as the women are. Men in this story are pleasure-seeking bachelors, authoritarian husbands, nouveau riche party-men, and cheats.

Hormoz, the main narrator, is a *bon vivant* and a ladies man at best. Yet, he is the only man in the story that might demand readers’ empathy. He is representative of the type of man who appeared at the *beau monde*, as Hassan Kamshad explains in *Modern Persian Prose Literature*. He writes:

The man—always a bachelor, smart, and handsome, sociable, genteel, and well-mannered—is seen at every important function of the *beau monde*. He is fond of poker and dancing, throws frequent parties, and is obviously well-read and familiar with Western culture. His main interest in life, however, is the fair sex. He is the subject of rivalry among the drawing room ladies of modern Tehran society and invariably displays for possessing what does not belong to him. (72)

Hormoz is not exactly a hero in this story as he lacks some of the conventional traits of typical literary heroes as they exemplify qualities such as bravery, strength, charm, ingenuity, etc. In fact he is closer to a anti-hero as he exhibits lack of the said qualities. His charm, as the text suggests, is limited to his success in attracting ladies: a Casanova. His disappointment with Tehran’s society women, their ignorance, and superficial nature

indicate his desire for forging more profound human relationships. He is defeated in his quest.

Hormoz can also be considered as a prototype of the kind of young, accomplished, and educated Iranian men who were disappointed with the way Iran was changing. They were enchanted and familiar with the European ways of life and when they saw that Iranian society, despite the appearances, was nothing like Europe they became disillusioned and in Hormoz's case heartbroken. The disenchanting character of Hormoz might symbolize the disenchantment of a generation of thinkers and writers such as Dashti himself. Nevertheless, despite his refinement Hormoz is also a deeply flawed character. His views regarding women are at best contradictory with one leg still rooted in patriarchal values of gender relations.

He has the appearance of refinement, but similar to most of the characters in this story has a core that is troubled and confused. The first descriptions of Hormoz are of a man who is impeccably dressed. Readers first meet him walking aimlessly (*bi maqsud*) through the streets of Tehran.¹⁹ However, his perfect image lacks presence as Faramarz describes:

He looked very well-groomed like always: well-dressed, tasteful. Yet, it was as if something was missing in him: an invisible flaw, an unknown defect. It [flaw] was like a dust that had sat on a china jug or a crystal dish and does not let it shine. His forehead looked dull and airless like dust in rainy autumn days. His shoulders were bent and droopy. Had I not called him by his name, he certainly would have passed and never seen me. He was so absent-minded and downhearted. (23-24)

¹⁹ Dashti, *Fetneh*, 23.

The invisible flaw that the narrator speaks of, one can argue, is the disappointment that Hormoz felt after he realized that his ideal woman was a fraud. In a way, Fetneh who at the beginning of the story had exemplified the perfect combination of traditional and modern values regarding women turned out to be an empty promise. Fetneh is wearing a mask of refinement that can also be taken for the façade of sophistication within the Iranian society.

Another area that the men in this story show weakness is in sexual relations. Hormoz, for example, despite his reputation as a ladies-man, who does not easily commit to a woman, is completely helpless in his dealings with Fetneh. The intense desire that he feels for her through most of the narrative causes him a great degree of pain, and undermines his ability to think rationally. At one point in the narrative, Hormoz is distressed by feeling an intense desire for Fetneh and says: “Unruly desires and the explosion of yearning feelings had not left me with a sound mind” (68). One man, Fetneh’s husband, at least in this story is even unable to perform sexually. The text does not offer much information on Fetneh’s husband, except that he is well-off and that he is a doctor. He is the only character in the story who is introduced by his last name: Fa‘eq. Despite his successful appearance, he is not what Fetneh wants. We hear from one of the early scenes at the movie theater that he is quite dismissive of Fetneh. Their marriage seems to have been stimulated by other reasons than a romantic union: perhaps a marriage of convenience. Although Fetneh in her confessions to Farsud, her lover, at the end of the story touches on her desire for more financial gain and autonomy, it does bring up the idea of her husband’s inability to satisfy her sexually.

As discussed earlier, Fetneh's insatiable sexual appetite for a 'bigger phallus,' to use Najmabadi's analogy, from the standpoint of the male narrator can be read "as the fear of male redundancy, rather than a realistic hypothesis about female sexuality."²⁰ Afsaneh Najmabadi talks about the idea of male redundancy in the context of men's fear of women's indifference towards them. Male redundancy in the case of Fetneh goes beyond the realm of sexual desire and is presented as something more calculated. Men in "Fetneh" are disposable. As soon as they perform their function they are being put aside.

Fetneh's husband, for example, is the perfect example of male redundancy. He is portrayed as a person, who is physically weak, is financially incompetent, and sexually impotent. Fetneh explains in detail her husband's deficiencies and enumerates them as reasons behind her unorthodox behavior. In the scene where Hormoz had overheard Fetneh's conversation with her unattractive lover Farsud, and in an effort to soften her lover's jealous temper regarding her relationship with Hormoz, Fetneh "like a mother who was consoling her child," had told Farsud:

I don't deny that I have become friendly with Hormoz, but this is for an end goal that you might also be a part of. You know that from the first week of my marriage I felt rejected by my husband, since he could never satisfy my innermost sexual wishes! In my dreams I fancy a man who is strong, charismatic, and who loves women. My husband turned out to be languid and indolent. He is so incredibly unfeeling, cold, and soft that in the name of trusting me, has never shown any jealousy over other men's direct and daring behavior towards me. He only possesses obstinacy and despotism from male traits. In addition, he is so incredibly stingy and miserly that I hate him for it and whether I want it or not we are forced to separate." (71)

²⁰Najmabadi, "Reading 'Wiles of Women' Stories as Fictions of Masculinity," 147.

Lack of financial stability, absence of sexual satisfaction, and what sounds like a husband's indifference towards his wife, has rendered the doctor in the eyes of Fetneh no longer effective. Hence her search for a more suitable mate and her efforts in securing Hormoz's commitment to marry her had prompted her to focus on Hormoz.

Fetneh's overweight and sweaty lover, as Hormoz describes him to be, is also not a viable possibility since he is already married with children. So he does not occupy a firm place on Fetneh's agenda either. He is another ostensible character who is presented as a profoundly foolish man; a simple man who had fallen in the hands of a calculating harlot. This is how Hormoz described Farsud:

Farsud's intellect and knowledge were like his awkward figure, oily face, and thick and dirty neck, were devoid of any sophistication and distinction. It is true that he had an important position and drove a government car. But, in order to perform well at the office and excel is not necessarily dependent upon one's sociability or belonging to the exquisite club. It is neither necessary to be liked by salon women and society men.
(69)

Farsud, in essence is representative of the type of men who are not cultured or sophisticated. Yet, due to their position and material possessions—such as the model of the car that they drive—they demand respect from others and become attractive to women. The description of Farsud's character is perhaps an indication of nepotism in government and a broken system that allowed for unskilled and uneducated people like Farsud to excel or even hold official posts, which the narrator seems to be highly critical of.

Authorial Note on Women and “Fetneh”

In an introduction to the second edition of *Fetneh*, ‘Ali Dashti comments on some of the criticism that the first edition of the book had generated when it was published by the end of 1944. Dashti has methodically responded to the questions that his critics had raised. For example, he defends his frequent use of foreign words by saying that Persian did not have words that could impart the same concepts that the foreign words conveyed.

But, much of his response is devoted to elaborating his stance on the issues of morality and its relation to women. Some of Dashti’s female readership was offended by the portrayal of women as unfaithful and untrue (11). Explaining that it was never his intention to portray all women as such, Dashti defends his position and explains that his writing is not reflective of prejudiced views on women. He reasons with his readers and writes:

I do not understand why many women are of the thinking that the pen that has written *Fetneh* did so with prejudice and misogynistic sentiments. This false idea could be coming from a public opinion that is used to flattery and is unable to tolerate any criticism. No malice is directed at the fair sex in *Fetneh*. On the contrary, the criticism is directed at men’s instability and hypocrisy of his feelings. If women are described as calculating it is not because somebody has wished to fault them. But, they thought that this trait is part of women’s nature and constitution and the only way that they can protect themselves. If women should resort to deception and lies and are calculating in sexual matters it is because social systems and their position in society have made them to be this way. This is their weapon and their solution to survival. Just like, deer run, snakes have poisonous fangs, and wild bulls have horns to defend themselves. Should women be free and equal to men (especially with respect to finance and social and moral regards) she might not lie or deceive more than men do. Even if women lie or deceive others and are calculating they should be within the same realm and occasions that men commit the same acts. In other words, women should do these things in professions and business, trade campaigns, class struggle, and in satisfying their love of luxury, ambition. (10-11)

Dashti's explanation regarding why women need to resort to lies and deception echoes Fetneh's justification for her actions. Despite his efforts to remove himself from traditional views of women's nature as deceitful, his remarks still connect women with deception. He compares women's struggle to protect their interests in society to animals and in doing so he is inadvertently returns to the idea that women's actions are derived from natural tendencies. Dashti does recognize social organizations and women's inferior position in society as the force behind women's dishonesty.

Conclusion

“Fetneh” is a story in which the figure of the woman is the incarnation of evil and embodies all that is immoral. She is described as an ‘*efrit*, or the devil: a creature that in Islamic mythology is a supernatural being that is defiant, disobedient, and is an outlaw.²¹ Dashti’s character corresponds to the definition of ‘*efrit*. At first she appears as the figure of the ideal woman, but her true nature is exposed at the end of the story. Fetneh represents the established dichotomized figure of the woman as angel or whore. In a way “Fetneh” is a morality tale, a *dastan-e ‘ebrat*. It condemns deceit and hypocrisy as it is represented by a woman’s moral depravity and double standards. Fetneh is a character that represents a new generation of Iranian middle-class women, who is educate and is somewhat aware of the injustices done to women. Fetneh is representative of a type of woman who is facing a rapidly modernizing society that is still entrenched with traditional expectations of women on the one hand and is redefining gender roles on the other. Despite her many achievements she is portrayed as the source of male anxiety. She has the appearance of a modern and refined woman, yet she disappoints and is morally corrupt. She cannot be trusted. Her fall marks the failure of a vision that men like Hormoz had with respect to women and their development. With her failure Fetneh brings about the destruction of the ideal image of a type of womanhood that is liberated, educated, and morally prudent. The story of Fetneh is about the loss of an ideal image more than it is about the emerging figure of a new type of woman in Iranian society at the time.

²¹ See entries for ‘*efrit* in *Loghatmaneh Dehkhoda* and *Mo ‘in* dictionaries.

Urban centers, as reflected in “Fetneh,” are booming and cities are getting a face lift. In this new climate socialization between unrelated men and women is also taking shape. While “Fetneh” is a story that takes place in the milieu of Tehran’s high society and the image it offers of women cannot be generalized to the entire Iranian society, it does highlight shortcomings of this rapid development and rapid urbanization with respect to enlarging the space for women and allowing them to carve it for themselves. In many ways, “Fetneh” is also a critique of a society that has developed superficially. Dashti’s frustration with the superficial and skin-deep changes of Iranian society is revealed through Hormoz’s many comments throughout the narrative.

The narrator’s critique of his society—which we can assume reverberates the author’s concerns—is reflected by his reference to Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The indecent act committed by Fetneh becomes an example of a society that is grappling with remaining decent in the face of radical changes that are reshaping and redefining that society’s sense of right and wrong. The narrator philosophically confides in his friend and readers:

Truly, if everyone’s truth could be reflected in their faces and human beings could be seen as they are just like in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, our civilized world would look more horrific than a pack of hungry wolves and would look more disgusting and grotesque than a large number of scorpions and snakes. Had God not shown us mercy and had not created lies and deceit life would become burning hell and life would be unbearable. (68-69)

The apocalyptic imagery of a world that is corrupt at heart is quite grim. The reference to God’s creation of lies and deceit is a reminder of Fetneh, or more precisely of God’s creation of the Eve: the first woman. It was Eve whose deceit cost the man’s Fall. In “Fetneh,” Dashti’s the figure of the woman is responsible for the failure of the entire

society. It is the woman's moral depravity that has caused excessive "sedition" and "chaos." The failure of Fetneh is the failure of the new womanhood that solicited various discourses of women and gender roles.

Epilogue

Anxiety and Male Discourse

In a letter to his contemporary, Mirza Aqa Tabrizi,²² Akhundzadeh stresses the need for innovation in literature by discussing new concepts and adopting new forms of literary genres and styles. Deprecating the study of famous classical works of Persian literature famous for their rhymed prose (*nasr-e mosajja*'), Akhundzadeh writes to his follower:

“The era of *Golestan* and *Zinat Al-Majales* has passed. Today, such compositions do not have any use. Today, a composition that guarantees the nation’s welfares and is desirable by readers is the art of drama and novel.”²³

The desire for articulating new concepts within new literary genres such as drama and novel went hand in hand with the desire for social reform. Many intellectuals viewed women and their issues, or The Woman Question, as the unalienable factor in the discourse of reform. So, from the mid-nineteenth century until the mid-twentieth century in Iran the discourse on women became the focal point of reform-minded male authors. It began by some of them simply reporting and recording what they witnessed in their societies and what they imagined women in their societies needed in order to move forward. These men’s perception of what women needed throughout the course of a century in order to improve their situation was for the most part consistent, albeit they

²² The details of Mirza Aqa Tabrizi’s life are unknown. Scholars know of four plays that he wrote imitating his dramaturgical mentor, Akhundzadeh. The duo exchanged letters, in which Akhundzadeh comments on Tabrizi’s work. See Iraj Parsinejad’s *A History of Literary Criticism in Iran (1866-1951)*. Maryland: Ibex Publishers (2003).

²³ Qtd. in Mirabedini’s *Sad Sal Dastan Nevisi dar Iran*, 17.

articulated it differently. Their advocacy for improvement in women's lives and their position in society began by critiquing time-honored traditions of arranged-marriage, gender segregation, polygamy, and veiling. They then moved into advocating for the necessity of education for women and condemned the damaging effects of gender-segregation and veiling practices that hindered women from progress. By the mid-twentieth century a popular genre of fiction appeared that Hassan Mirabedini calls *roman-e ejtema'i* (social novel). Mostly written by men, these works were populated by seemingly educated and liberated female characters of the upper classes who lack moral righteousness. These women had the veneer of being modern, yet they lacked the refinement that former generation of male authors had predicted women would achieve through education, the lifting of the veil, and their presence in society alongside men. These women were depicted in these works as shallow. Some still craved to be considered male property and some considered a woman's main responsibility to be a homemaker. Akhundzadeh, for example, as one of the first male authors who discussed issues of women, focused his advocacy on the idea that marriage should be based on love and proposed the idea of a companionate marriage in which men and women are romantically linked rather than coming together for procreation purposes only. In one of his works, *Comedies*, that is a collection of plays written in the style of European plays, the Azeri speaking playwright talks about the degrading practice of polygamy and arranged-marriage. He paints a vivid picture of the struggles between wives and its damaging impact on the harmony of domestic life. He focuses on the secret plots and hurtful intentions of the women (including maids). In Akhundzadeh's play the polygamous household is in disarray, but women in his play are triumphant and romantic

unions are successful while arranged-marriages fail.

‘Eshqi and Iraj stimulated by the fervors of nationalism also wrote on women and connected their predicaments to different aspects of the national debate. Determined to blame the invading *Other* for the predicaments of Iranian society in general and Iranian women’s backwardness in particular, ‘Eshqi blamed the Arab invasion of Persia as the originating point of Iranian women’s oppression. The young and passionate poet saw veiling as a practice that was not in nature indigenous to Iranian society, which the Arabs had imposed on Iranian women. Not only these men had violated Iran, as the motherland, but they had violated Iranian women. The dark and morbid imagery of ‘Eshqi’s composition in “The Black Shroud” is testimony to his pessimistic view on the subject of the veil. He does at the end of his poem call on people to broach the issue of the veil’s destructive qualities and promises that if people begin the conversation on the vices of veiling women might gradually unveil. The idea that the veiling is a practice of the Arabs and not Iranians was neither new nor exclusive to ‘Eshqi. Anti-Arab and anti-Islam sentiments became part of the discourse on modernity and fostered by many intellectuals including Akhundzadeh. The mode and the tone of this *othering* however, differed from one author to the other.

In the case of Iraj, for example, the *othering* manifests itself in the form of rejecting pederasty and promoting heterosexual liaisons. Through employing explicit language Iraj denounces the veil and accuses the practice of fomenting the desire for same-sex sexual practices. Iraj advocated education for women as the element that can truly protect women from disgrace. In his poetry, he exposed the hypocritical nature of a veiled woman as licentious, despite her virtuous appearance notwithstanding. The fiery

and passionate rhetoric of authors like ‘Eshqi and Iraj changed by the time Reza Khan, a Cossack commander, brought about the fall of the Qajar dynasty in 1925. During the years of Reza Shah’s reign Iranian writers and the publication industry in general experienced oppression and censorship.²⁴ The pressure of censorship stunted the growth of story writing (*dastan-nevisi*) in Iran (Mirabedini 124). The excitement of the writers of the Constitutional era was replaced by romantic and depressing introversion, as Hassan Mirabedini observes.²⁵ He maintains:

The works that were produced during this time have a sad tone and a dark and stifled atmosphere. People are lonely to the extent that even love and kindness cannot save them from strain. Pessimism towards life is so pronounced that it is manifested as excessive desire for death. The writer of the Constitutional era could see that their work had practical impacts on society’s movements. But, the intellectuals of the twenty-year period of dark dictatorship saw that their hands were cut from any kind of advancement and social presence. So, they turned inward and while simultaneously distanced themselves from the existing reality, they questioned and doubted it. (*Sad Sal Dastan Nevisi* 124-125)

Mirabedini’s description of the depressing mood of the authors who wrote during the reign of the first king of the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1978) fits the atmosphere of ‘Ali Dashti’s short stories.

Dashti is one of the many authors who tested their talent at penning what Mirabedini has dubbed *roman-e ejtema’i* or “social novels.” This type of fiction dealt with the problems of an emerging middle class in Iran’s sprouting urban centers mainly the capital, Tehran. The common themes of these stories were illicit love and sexual

²⁴ In a program on the BBC Persian about the coup d’état of 1953 in Iran and literature, Karimi-Hakkak talks about censorship during Reza Shah’s reign specifically. See the program at http://www.bbc.com/persian/tvandradio/2013/08/130815_tamasha_literature_coup. Hassan Mirabedini also mentions Reza Shah’s reign as the “period of dark dictatorship” (*doreh-ye diktatori-ye siah*) in *Sad Sal Dastan Nevisi dar Iran*, 125.

²⁵ Mirabedini, *Sad Sal Dastan Nevisi dar Iran*, 124-125.

relationships that placed at their heart the figure of a fallen woman. Devious plots with traces of sexual transgression threaten the society. Authors of the “social novel” genre make an attempt to highlight society’s shortcomings, be it caused by government’s oversight or cultural inadequacies. Yet, they are unable to raise these flaws methodically and instead their frustration finds its articulation around illicit sexual relation involving immoral women. They connect this immorality to the society’s inchoate understanding of modern values. In other words, lack of balanced female characters that are both honest and modern is in fact the representation of a society that is stuck between its traditional past and modern future. On the one hand these authors reject the deeply traditional and religious cultural values and on the other hand strive to adopt modern ways of life.

I have ended this study by exposing the confusion that a new generation of male authors felt at an important juncture in Iran’s modern history. During this volatile time, Iranians, men and women, seem to be suspended between abandoning their long-held traditional understanding of social relations and adopting new ones. They seem to be responding with hesitation to the freedom to express differences, which is essential for the success of modernity.²⁶ The literature of authors like Dashti reflects exactly that. It is filled with intrigue and corruption. It is intent on exposing a decadent society. It mainly revolves around the tension between modernity and sexuality. Dashti belongs to a generation of writers such as Moshfeq Kazemi (1904-1978) and Mohammad Hejazi (1901-1974) all of whom wrote about the newly developed urban centers as the loci of vice and employed a wide range of immoral female characters. Moshfeq Kazemi’s *Tehran-e Makhuf* (Horrible Tehran) appeared in two volumes in 1922 is an example of a

²⁶ Talattof, *Modernity, Sexuality, and Ideology in Iran*, 231.

“sin city.” Hejazi’s *Homa* (1928), *Parichehr* (1929), and *Ziba* (1930) all named after their eponymous heroines depict female characters who either exhibit absolute virtue or total vice. What connects Kazemi, Hejazi, and Dashti amongst others is the strong sense of angst that they exhibit in their works regarding the perils of a modern society. In a way, one can argue that the works of these authors during this volatile period of Iranian modernity are about disillusionment that is manifested mainly through the figure of the “vamp.”

As in many developing societies, in Iran too there is still a tension between an ideological notion of sexuality and the drive for modernity. This study is an attempt at uncovering the mechanisms in place in the male discourse on sexuality and gender relations and follows how a few male authors stated their position on women and gender relations according to their time and vision. While this study might end where male authors seem to be disillusioned by modernization processes, this in no way is the end of the discourse.

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