

Between Law and Tradition: Women and Womanhood in Iran's Nasim-e Shomal

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Kanunla Gelenek Arasında: İran'da Yayınlanan Nesim-i Şomal'de Kadınlar ve Kadınlık

Öz

İran'da kadınlarla alakalı meseleler özellikle 1906 Anayasal Devrim'in ardından hararetli tartışmaların konusu olmuştur. Kadınların eğitimi, çalışma koşulları ve medeni ve siyasi hakları, daha sonrakilerde olduğu gibi erken yirminci yüzyılda neşredilen süreli yayınlarında da etraflı şekilde tartışılmıştır. Bu makale, Nesim-i Şomal'i yayımlayan ve zamanla adı bu gazeteyle özdeşleşen Seyyid Eşrefü'd-Din Hüseyini Gilani'nin kadınlarla ilgili şiirlerinden bazılarını ele almaktadır. Gilani'nin sade bir anlatıma sahip olması ve şiirlerinde gündelik dile yoğun olarak yer vermesi Nesim-i Şomal'i İran'da döneminin en popüler süreli yayınlarından biri haline getirmiştir. Her ne kadar bu gazete, yayımlandığı dönemde gündeme gelen her konuyu ele almışsa da kadınların, özellikle de "sıradan" kadınların sorunları gazetenin üzerinden en çok durduğu konular arasında yer almıştır. Ayrıca, Gilani'nin kadın haklarını savunurken ihtiyatlı bir tarzda da olsa sıklıkla İslami öğretilere baş vurması onun şiirinin ayırt edici özelliklerinden bir diğeridir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Nesim-i Şomal, Seyyid Eşrefü'd-Din Hüseyini Gilani, İran Anayasal Devrimi, İranlı kadınlar, Anayasal Dönem İran şiiri.

Abstract

Issues related to women constituted some of the most significant debates in modern Iran especially following the Constitutional Revolution of 1906. Women's education, working conditions, as well as their civil and political rights were also among the widely discussed subjects in the periodicals published in Iran in early-twentieth century as later. This article explores some of Sayyid Ashrafu'd-Din Hosayni Gilani's women-related poems which he published in his one-man Nasim-e Shomal newspaper which would later become the name he is publicly known. Gilani's simple

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expression and extensive use of colloquial language in form of poetry made Nasim-e Shomal one of the most popular periodicals of the period. Although the newspaper covered almost every issue of its time, the problems of women, particularly those of “ordinary” women, were among its most common concerns. Besides, Gilani’s frequent use of Islamic teachings to defend women’s rights, albeit in a notably cautious manner, was another distinctive feature of his poetry.

Keywords: Nasim-e Shomal, Sayyid Ashrafu’d-Din Hosayni Gilani, Iranian Constitutional Revolution, Iranian women, poetry in the Constitutional Period in Iran.

Introduction

We invite women who are so observant to look with us at the East. They will see a gathering with Lady Japan, Lady India, Lady Ethiopia, Lady Ottoman and Lady Egypt. Lady Japan is wearing a dress called Education and her shoes are named Industry. Lady India is wearing a dress called the Movement. Lady China just awoke, washed her face and dressed hastily... Lady Ottoman, in addition to her exalted dress named Literature, has adorned herself with a tiara of Ministership, a bracelet of Parliamentarianism and a necklace of Patriotism. Lady Egypt is wearing a dress called Social Reform. Lady Ethiopia is wearing a dress called Humanity and is present at the gathering, proud with a dark and luminous face. Each lady is wearing a headscarf called Awakening. But Lady Iranian is wearing a worn-out dress and has fallen asleep in the corner and is totally oblivious to the world... She is snoring! (Kolayi, 2002: 185).

This is how *Alem-e Neswan* (Women's World), the longest-running Iranian women's journal of the early-twentieth century, complained about the plight of the Iranian women in May 1922. The message was simple: Iranian women did not enjoy similar rights with the Western and Eastern women alike. Although such a critical discourse was widely used in Iran at that time by those who sought to push the political elites for reforms in a variety of fields, it was particularly common in women's rights literature. During the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, there was almost a universal consensus that Middle Eastern women, suffered unfavorable and subordinate social positions compared to men. Although different explanations were put forward to catch the core of this situation, a certain type of masculinity, patriarchal traditions and religious teachings were often cited as potential reasons in the writings of European observers who commented unfavorably on the matter (Eskandari, 1997: 20). During the nineteenth century, as Iranian intellectuals became increasingly familiar with the European civilization and everyday life practices in different European countries, they also started to question women's position in their society. This critical attitude became very popular by the end of the nineteenth century, so much so that such issues as girls' education and elevating the status of women turned out to constitute some of the hottest debates among different groups such as Westernized intellectuals, the mullahs, or the Shiite clergy, and the religious dissidents to wit Bahais² as the most notable example.

Although women-related reforms were in the agenda of the reformist Qajar political elites especially from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, little success had been achieved in this regard until well into the twentieth century. This largely resulted from the priority which they gave to more structural and "urgent" reforms such as centralization, industrialization and the creation of a

²Bahais are the members of a messianic religious movement emerged within Twelver Shiism in mid-19th century Iran. It all started when Sayyid Mohammad Ali, a young merchant from Shiraz, reinterpreted the Traditions concerning the Hidden Imam, the twelfth of the Shiite Imams, foretold the coming of a new age and proclaimed himself as the Bab (Gate) to him. He was executed in 1850. Also, when a few of his followers were accused of an assassination plot against Naser al-Din Shah in 1852 many Babis, including the famous female poet-leader Qorrat al-Ayn, were persecuted and executed. Bahullah, the founder of Bahatism, preached his teaching in 1860s and claimed to be 'He whom God shall make manifest' as promised by the Bab.

modern army, particularly following the two bitter military defeats at the hands of the Russians in 1813 and 1828. To this, the influence of some segments of the traditional groups should also be added. However, the ever-increasing contact with Europe, the growing population and its slow but steady flow into the urban centers continued to push for reforms. We have no definitive demographic statistics of the nineteenth century-Iran but an estimated 5 to 6 million people lived in the country in the beginning of the nineteenth century which by the early-twentieth rose up to some 10 million (Issawi, 1971: 20; Lambton, 1987: 44). The greater part of the population lived in rural areas of which nomads constituted a significant part. Nevertheless, urbanization was on a steady rise by the end of the nineteenth century which urged the state to take necessary measures to meet the demands of the growing population. A certain awareness about women's rights emerged in such an atmosphere albeit in different forms and contents which have been examined in the rich scholarship on the history of Iranian women.

According to Afary, three "broad and overlapping political discourses" regarding gender and modernity emerged in elite urban circles in early-twentieth century Iran (Afary, 2009: 111-12).³ The first one was "a new nationalist discourse" which advocated "scientific domesticity" by embracing modernity in the diverse areas of health, hygiene, and education. Here the emphasis was on modernizing Iran by taking the necessary steps which would improve the standards of living and give women greater authority within the home. Industrialization, education and adopting new health measures were some of the proposed steps. Yet as Afary notes, most of the proponents of this discourse did not seek to radically alter existing gender or sexual patterns in the Iranian society nor did they question the shari'a's authority in family and personal law. The second discourse was "social democratic" which, while supporting all the above, defended civil liberties and called for social reforms to alleviate the lives of the urban and rural poor. Although both of the two discourses seem to reflect some of the common aspirations of the time, the second one differed from the first in its more radical objectives which included such reforms as redefining the public and private arenas and changing many gender norms regardless of their compatibility or lack thereof with the shari'a. The third discourse, "conservative religious", emerged as a hostile reaction to Western modernity. This discourse opposed any reform which potentially threatened the established social order and the prerogatives of men. Afary's three categories are illuminating in many respects, but one should still bear in mind that they are "broad and overlapping" nevertheless.

Furthermore, women's issues constituted in Iran as elsewhere in the world, only one dimension of a broad spectrum of social, political and economic matters. Different discourses and groups often held varying opinions on various

³ The following information of Afary's arguments is taken from the pages 111 and 112 of the same book.

aspects of reforms pertaining to those matters. Therefore, it is more insightful to examine women-related issues within the broader context of debates about social reform, political change and economic development. The poems of Sayyid Ashrafu'd-Din Hosayni Gilani (henceforth Gilani) which he published in *Nasim-e Shomal* cover all of these issues. Besides, his overall approach to those issues crisscrossed the diverse ideological lines. The popularity of his newspaper also makes his poems a significant case study.

Although prose writing became increasingly popular in Iran especially from the nineteenth century onwards, it hardly matched the popularity of poetry at least in the period under investigation. This article investigates some of Gilani's poems about women which blur the boundaries between the above-mentioned three discourses. Namely, his "The Advice of a Woman to her Daughter", "The Complaint of a New Ignorant Bride to an Her Grandmother About Her Knowledgeable Husband", "Women and Teeth" and "The Situation of the Arab Women" will be discussed. To this aim, I will first provide a brief background information about Gilani and then will continue with a discussion of the relationship between constitutionalism and women's issues. Following these, I will present the translations of each poem along with a brief content analysis. Finally, in the concluding section, I will evaluate some of the themes discussed in the article in a broader historical context.

Sayyid Ashrafu'd-Din Hosayni Gilani

Gilani was one of the most admired and well-known poets of the Constitutional Period (Aryanpour, 1960: 62; Saed, 1977: 225-230). He was born into a religious family in Qazvin in 1871 (Soroudi, 1979: 31). Having lost his father when he was only six months old, his childhood passed in poverty and hardship. The memory of the hunger-stricken days left such a huge impact in his mind that he used many food-related expressions and images as a distinctive feature of his poetry (Soroudi, 1979: 31). In his youth he spent five years in the Iraqi cities of Najaf and Karbala, the two of the leading learning centers for the Shiite world, where he received Islamic education after which he settled back in Rasht, one of Iran's northern cities in the province of Gilan which gave him the name Gilani (Soroudi, 1979: 32). His poems attest to his wide Islamic knowledge as well as his awareness of the power of religious teachings in conveying his messages to the masses. Although in his later years, Gilani became more of an anticlerical intellectual, he remained a devout Muslim throughout his life unlike some of his contemporaries who adopted a rather atheistic position towards religion (Soroudi, 1979: 19). Some even went as far as to say that "among the poets of the Constitutional Period one can name *Nasim-e Shomal* as the spokesman of the Islamist constitutionalists" (Zahiri Nav, 2013: 3). Indeed, Gilani maintained an Islamic discourse in his argumentations regarding women and other issues at a

time when generally a “secular trend unleashed by the Constitutional Revolution (1905-11) continued under the Pahlavis (1924-79)” (Talattof, 1997: 533).

Gilani's life changed with the Constitutional Revolution and the opening of the First Majles (the parliament) in October 1906. He started the publication of *Nasim-e Shomal* in Rasht in September 1907, nine months before the Majles was put into bombardment by the anti-constitutionalist Muhammad Ali Shah in June 1908. He believed that a regular newspaper as a media format was falling short in serving to his ideal of fighting against despotism as well as the malign foreign influences in Iran. Therefore, he explicitly expressed his wish to publish a periodical which would address people in simple and pleasing poetry, and which would be affordable by everyone for he believed that “simple poetry, be it cheerful or sad, is the only way into the hearts of ordinary people especially if such poems are recited by them” (Aryanpour, 1960: 62). For many of the “rebel” poets of that age, “political activity supplemented their poetry and literary endeavors (Arasteh, 1962: 102). Thus:

The poets of this era (during the Revolution and into the 1920's) introduced a simplicity of expression and voiced their thoughts on such current themes as: nationalism, improvement of the nation, world peace, women's rights, industrial workers and peasants. Their writings were a vital force in communicating new ideas to the common people and effecting social change (Arasteh, 1962: 102).

Persian language was then, as it has been throughout centuries, famous for its poetic masterpieces and the rich elaborate style of the traditional poets which made the adoption of such a simple expression very difficult. This colloquialization of poetic form led to a resistance among some of the literary elite as the “violation of traditional poetic taboos” which was a by-product of the new order of priorities (Soroudi, 1979: 10). Consequently, poets started to use colloquial language so much that “the gap between poetic and colloquial language diminished to the degree that entire poems were written in the latter” (Soroudi, 1979: 10). Gilani has undoubtedly mastered “a simplicity of expression” without which he would not have reached to the masses the way he has done. E. G. Browne, a prominent literary historian of modern Iran, describes *Nasim-e Shomal* as “one of the best literary papers, and in particular contained many notable poems, both serious and satirical” (Browne, 1914: 148). As it turned out, *Nasim-e Shomal* became extremely popular first in Rasht and then in Tehran to the extent that “when the errand newsboys shouted ‘*Nasim-e Shomal*’; people would rush to get a copy.... Then in the tea-houses and at the corner of the streets the paper would pass from hand to hand... and the literate would read it to the swarming illiterate.” (Abbasi, 1956: 122).

Gilani published *Nasim-e Shomal* for about twenty-six years between 1907 and 1933 with occasional and long intervals (Parvin, 2003: 379). During the first four years, he published it in Rasht after which Gilani moved to Tehran in 1912 when his printing-press was destroyed by the Russians (Browne, 1914: xviii). Gilani's opposition against the Russian imperialism led to this assault. Upset by

some of Iran's policies, the Russians had occupied Rasht along with Anzali, an important port city in Gilan, in November 1911 and delivered an ultimatum to the Second Majles, which had commenced two years ago in November 1909, that brought its end (Abrahamian, 1982: 109). After settling in Tehran, Gilani failed to publish *Nasim-e Shomal* on a regular weekly basis and during the Reza Shah period (1925-1941) he could only publish it when and as much as he could (Parvin, 2003: 379). Overall, his poetic style was much in line with his way of living and character. Sa'ïd Nafisi (1895-1966), a prominent and prolific Iranian fiction writer and poet, describes him as a man who "rose up among ordinary people, lived with them and passed away as he was among them. In no period of his life did he hold any official position, nor he made a wealth for himself." (Saed, 1977: 226).

Although Gilani's poems in *Nasim-e Shomal* dealt extensively with almost every political, economic and social issue of its age, his poems are full of references to the problems of ordinary people in general and the situation of women in particular so much so that "no one among the poets of the constitutional period has so plainly voiced the aspirations and discussed the daily problems of the deprived masses" (Soroudi, 1979: 19). The priority which Gilani gives to ordinary women has more than one reason, but that the women of the province of Gilan were widely engaged in labor-intensive sectors must have played a key role in this. For example, rice was largely produced by women in Gilan, while they also cultivated silk- worms and spun silk (Moghadam, 2000: 381). More generally, from the turn of the twentieth century onwards, quite a significant number of Iranian women, along with underage children, were employed in diverse industries, especially in carpet weaving, as a cheaper workforce compared to men (Floor, 2009: 115-6). The situation of working people including women is a recurring theme in Gilani's poems. His life ended the way it started, in utter poverty, deprivation and loneliness. Towards the end of his life, he was taken to a psychiatric hospital where he died in silence on March 20, 1934 (Parvin, 2003: 384).

Constitutional Revolution and Women

The Constitutional Revolution came as a true turning point in modern Iranian history in general and Iranian women's movement in particular. In an historical context when arbitrary rule was seen as the source of evils by increasing number of Iranians, constitutionalism offered an opportunity to solve some, if not all, of Iran's dire problems which ranged from poverty to lack of education and from injustice to lack of access to essentials such as housing, food and health services. Gilani also shared this optimistic view of constitutionalism. For him, constitutionalism was a tree whose fruits were justice and equality of the rich, the shah and the beggar before the law (Sahrai & Nazari, 2007: 129).

Thus, he celebrated the opening of the Majles in the following lines (Sahrai & Nazari, 2007: 132):

O, the people of Iran blessed is your Majles

Blessed is the Majles in Tehran

For its sake we have run here and there

Until finally we survived to reach this day

Women played an important role in the making of the revolution by organizing separate women's societies and participating in demonstrations, street riots, boycotts, and even armed clashes (Sedghi, 2007: 44). Moreover, women's mobilization not only did not end with the success of the constitutional cause but, quite to the contrary, gained a renewed momentum with the proclamation of the constitution in 1906. The question of enfranchisement was, especially for the urbanite women, of particular importance but the constitution failed to provide it by enfranchising men but not women despite the fact that Article 5 of it stated that Iranians were to enjoy "equal rights before the law" (Sedghi, 2007: 47).

With the establishment of various political parties and organizations, and the explosion of publications, the period witnessed a flood of new ideas in this and other issues and thus a lively political atmosphere unfolded. The fact that over two hundred periodicals began publication between 1905 and 1911 gives a clear idea about the extent of this explosion (Afary, 1996: 116). Individuals or groups from different ideologies made publications, formed organizations or else communicated their views through the more popular channels of petitions and shabnamehs or night letters.⁴ Subject matters in these public debates ranged from reforming the state structure, to ending the domination of foreign powers and from adopting Western type of education to the role of religion in state affairs. Women-related issues were also widely discussed.

For the upper-class women, such issues as education, civil and political rights were more important. Although issues related to women's status in the society were intensely and extensively debated in much of the nineteenth century in Iran as in many countries, the revolution brought topics about women's political and civil rights to the fore, albeit within the context of household management. Unsurprisingly therefore, the rejection of a petition sent by women to the Majles, created a frustration among them. The petition demanded the newly established constitutional government to take responsibility in establishing schools for girls, as it had done for boys. However,

⁴ A shabnameh was a usually one-paged open letter hanged on the walls of buildings in city centers which was generally written in an aggressive tone. Shabnamehs were almost unexceptionally unsigned which enabled the writer to escape official censorship. (Norouz Moradi, 2009: 370). Petitions, as supplications by which people expressed their demands and grievances to the authorities, became particularly popular in Iran following the Constitutional Revolution (Afacan, 2011: 12).

the Majles responded the petition by saying that education for girls could only be demanded to prepare them for raising children and fulfilling their domestic tasks. In the response, women were also urged to stay out of politics on the basis that politics were men's sphere (Afary, 1989: 70).

In 1907, this time *The Secret Union of Women* published an open letter to the deputies of the Majles in *Neda-ye Vatan* newspaper where they expressed their determination not to retreat from their demands:

We shall organize laws, coordinate the police, appoint governors, send regulations for the provinces, uproot cruelty and autocracy and destroy the unmerciful. We shall break into the wheat and the barley silos of the rich and set up an organization for distribution of bread; [we shall] forcibly enter into vaults and instead set up the National Bank. We shall push back the Ottoman forces, return the enslaved [peasant women] of Quchan to their homes, arrange the affairs of the city, give clean water to people, clean up streets and alleys and after all this tender our registration and let others carry the remaining reforms (Afary, 1989: 72).

All the while, subaltern women had to deal with such problems as violence, poverty and bad working conditions. Women's issues were handled by men and women alike during the period under inquiry. Such prominent figures as Ali Akbar Dekhoda, Saber, Gilani, Abolqasem Lahouti, Iraj Mirza, Mirzadeh Ishghi, Parvin Etesami and Malek al-Shaara Bahar, to name but a few, showed concerns on the matter. The significant achievements of feminist movements not only in Europe but also in the Ottoman Empire, Japan, China and India further inspired Iranian feminists to pursue their demands. In order to achieve their goals, they started to establish their own schools and organizations such as *Anjuman-i Azadi-ye Zanan* (Society for the Freedom of Women). *Danish* (Knowledge) started to appear in 1910 as the first Iranian journal which specifically addressed women (Shahidi, 2002: 213-14). It was followed by many other publications such as *Zaban-e Zanan* (Women's Language) which was founded by Banu Siddigha Dolatabadi in 1920 and *Alem-e Niswan* (Women's World) which was published by the students at the American Schools for Girls in Tehran in 1921. Also, *Nameh-e Banuvan* (Ladies' Magazine) was published by Shahnaz Azad in Tehran in 1920, while *Jahan-e Zanan* (Women's Universe) was published in Mashhad in 1922 by Fakhr-e Afak Parsa (Aryanpour, 1960: 9). Among the prominent feminists of the period, Dr. Kahhal, *Danish's* publisher, princess Taj al-Saltanah, daughter of the absolutist Nasir al-Din Shah, Mahrukh Gawharshinas, Sadiqa Dawlatabadi and Shams al-Moluk Javahir Kalam are worth mentioning (Afary, 1989: 68-71). The seclusion of women and their isolation from the society, the absence of the institutions to provide education for girls and polygamy were some of the issues that stirred up the most heated debates in these publications.

Nevertheless, *Nasim-e Shomal* differed from these publications both in its form and content. Its emphasis was mostly on the issues of ordinary women. Besides, the newspaper reinterpreted some of the Quranic verses and the

Prophetic traditions to criticize the predominantly male-centered approach to women's issues and to draw attention to the societal roots of the problems concerning women's situation (Mohseni, Ruhani & Hasanpour, 2014: 88). Among the poets of the Constitutional Period, he paid the most attention to women and womanhood along with women's rights (Abadi, Norouz & Fakhr-e Islam, 2015: 128). Besides the four poems which will be analyzed below, his following poems are examples of his poetic concerns regarding women: "The Death of a Girl Because of Extreme Cold" (Samanipour, 2007: 14-15), "About Urging the Moon-Faced Girls for Being Chaste and Virtuous" (Samanipour, 2007: 61-2), "Not More than One Woman Should a Man Marry" (Samanipour, 2007: 213-4), "Mother and Daughter" (Samanipour, 2007: 268-70), "A Man with Two Wives" (Samanipour, 2007: 271-73), and "Veiling" (Samanipour, 2007: 477).

Women in Nasim-e Shomal

The Advice of a Woman to Her Daughter (Samanipour, 2007: 59).

Today is the day of cheerfulness of the world / o my little girl wake up!

It is the time of mankind's maturity / o my little girl wake up!

Happy news has arrived from the spheres / angels are jealous of the girls

These heartless people are indifferent / o my little girl wake up!

In the whole of Europe / women are outstripping [men] in learning, acquiring knowledge and in arts / O my little girl wake up!

Muhammad who is the glory of the existence said / knowledge for female believers

Is a friend, a companion and an intimate / o my little girl wake up!

Whenever the purpose became manifest / whenever the decision became clear

It is the day of great manifestation / o my little girl wake up!

The last of the prophets said / acquiring knowledge, learning to write and religion

Is most necessary for women / o my little girl wake up!

The city and the country became constitutional / blossoms have appeared in the meadow

There is dew on the leaf of every rose / o my little girl wake up!

Death and the eternal life / which are from the wrath and the grace of God

They are side by side in this resurrection / o my little girl wake up!

Apart from the moon, the sun and the stars / during the girls' lessons

The bird of the air is a stranger / o my little girl wake up!

Our ruins have thrived / our Iran has become enlightened

The horizon is cheerful and pleasant / o my little girl wake up!
 O monk! Toll the gong / beat the drum strongly
 The situation of the world is intricate / o my little girl wake up!
 Does it not suffice if you are at school after the math and
 geometry/
 Read this poem a hundred times? / o my little girl wake up!

This poem is a typical example of Gilani's approach to women. Here, as girls are invited to wake up, the invitation is neither purely religious nor purely materialistic. He considers girls' education and enlightenment as an Islamic duty, but also characteristically refers to the developments in Europe with the aim of setting an example. Also, he stresses the significance of education for girls but does not invite them to mix with men. For him, educated wives and mothers were ideal types of women. Somewhere else he says (Abadi, Norouz & Fakhr-e Islam, 2015: 135):

First, a girl must acquire a craft / second, she must go to her husband's house and be comfortable / third she must delve into life with chastity

As a matter of fact, during the Qajar period while poor women and men mingled in the cities in search of a livelihood, gender segregation was an indicator of wealth which was affordable only by the well-off sections of society (Shahrokni, 2020: 6). It was with the propagation of a certain discourse of modernity that men and women were eventually desegregated which led to the integration of women into the "already established, male-dominated public sphere" (Shahrokni, 2020: 7). Gilani tries to find a balance between women's segregation and desegregation and refutes the idea that Islam preaches strict occultation of women from the public eye. Here, too, he holds a rather conservative attitude compared, for instance, to Bahar, Ishghi or Dekhoda. For example, Dekhoda called Iranians not to be blinded "by kings and akhunds [the Shiite clergy]" as well as not to "expect the angel Gabriel to descend from heaven once more or wait for the mojtahed [an authorized Shiite scholar] to grant permission, or the shah to sign a decree, in order to obtain their rights" (Bayat, 1991: 170). But Gilani still advocated separate schools for girls and insists, in his various poems, that girls veil their heads and bodies in public places. The following poem is a good example of the type of segregation with Gilani criticizes.

The Complaint of a New Ignorant Bride to Her Grandmother About Her Knowledgeable Husband (Samanipour, 2007: 123-25).

I wish I served like a maid / in my dear maternal
 uncle's house
 I had a nice appearance, and I was tall / a fine-looking
 girl

My face was of vermilion color because of chastity / I
had not stepped out of the house
I had never seen a stranger's face / I had never heard
the word of husband
I was searching louses in my mother's hair / washing
the cloths of the children
I was an appreciated and precious girl / clever, wise,
knowledgeable and beautiful
It was not only that no future husband had seen my
face / but it is even that neither a jinn nor a fairy had
seen it
My mother was a gossiper / my father was a grocer
My aunt by thousands of devices / had captured the
king of fairies
My maternal uncle was in the villages of Qazvin /
could tell people's fortune through a grain of pea
Butter, cheese and cream / there was also furniture in
the rooms of our house
No scholar was raised in our household / neither from
among males nor females
Our house being full of niches / was free from books
and notebooks
Our ears had never heard a teacher's name / our eyes
had never seen a paper or an example how to write
Woe to be that I've got married / away from my
mother and sister
I thought my husband is a human being / a man of
pleasure, a gentleman and a khan
He eats chicken with fesenjan⁵ and kebab / drinking
wine day and night
But now I've seen what kind of a living being he is? /
he is even worse than the demon in the desert
He is not a husband, but a foolish boy / he is not a
husband, but he is altogether trial and affliction
His complexion has turned to pale from studying
madly / he is not a husband but a cause of pain in my
stomach
He is saturated in books day and night / this
impoverished man is like a poet
I've married a stubborn poet / dear mother! I've
become black-starred so early

⁵ It is a kind of food made by meat or chicken with walnuts, kernel and sometimes with sugar or other additions.

He does not speak a word to me / my husband is like
a tyrant day and night
He is sometimes preoccupied with calligraphy /
sometimes with the exegesis of the Quran
He sometimes gets tired and entirely exhausted
because of thinking / sometimes he swoons away
upon the book
He spends the whole night until dawn in working /
everyone is sleeping but he is awake
If sleep affects his eyes, falling in slumber / he jumps
from sleep like an arrow
He runs quickly to the lamp / putting his face before
the lamp
Engaging himself with writing once again / his
writings even became like those of the noble men
O grandmother! My husband is not a husband / he
never thinks of his wife and the bride
He always thinks of books and writing / from dawn to
night he holds a pen in his hand
He makes ten blank pages black every day and night,
colored like a hat
If you pass from our house / and if you look at the
doors and the walls
Instead of lamps and accessories / there are white
and black papers and books
There are on the shelves / countless numbers of new
books and notebooks
The writings on geometry and geography / there are
always books of philosophy and mysticism
As the fire of longing increases / my heart burns for
my husband
Sometimes I say to my husband / show mercy and
come to my embrace
Sit down, have dinner, and talk to me / my soul! You
are exhausted, calm down
You are a bridegroom, are you not? / your soul will be
given to the wind

In this satirical piece, Gilani expresses many of the traditional roles attributed to men and women by using the metaphor of a new bride and a husband. The bride is depicted as an unintellectual person who spent her life in utter seclusion, received no education, interacted with no man, has done many idle things but finally and ironically married a knowledgeable man. Here, it is important to see that Gilani criticizes many of the traditional duties expected

from a woman and presents them as useless. Most notably, he criticizes the restricted lives of women in the confinement of the house. Accordingly, he identifies a two-faced problem. On the one hand, the new bride does not see any problem in the way she spent her life while still longing for the days she spent before marriage. On the other hand, men as represented by the husband, are not interested in educating and training women no matter how educated they themselves are. Thus, there is, according to Gilani, a cultural gap between the wife and the husband which can only be filled by providing education to girls.

Nevertheless, there is still a third dimension of the problem as he says in the poem that women's confinement to the traditional roles is not only absorbed by the wife, but also by her parents who seem to appreciate the role she plays. Thus, they train their daughter accordingly, rather than sending her to school for education. The crucial point here is that the traditional roles are reproduced by the society both by ordinary people like the uneducated family or the educated people like the husband who does not pay attention to sharing his knowledge with his wife. Overall, for him the bottom line of the problem is society's view of women which is frequently, but not radically, criticized by Gilani in many of his poems. A careful analysis of his poetry reveals that his perspective of women's position in society is highly traditional though his understanding of ideal women is different. The following poem is an illustration of this.

Women and Teeth (Samanipour, 2007: 207-8).

The pleasures of the world are women and teeth /
without them the world is a prison
Women are required for life / the houses of the world
are enlightened by women
God established the fundament of life through them /
and teeth are the mill of life
The pleasures of the world are women and teeth
A man's companion in this world is a woman / on the
basis of life a woman is a confident
The outcome of Adam's decedent is a woman / the
bed-fellow and companion is a woman
The pleasures of the world are women and teeth
When God established this world / he made Adam
and Eve manifest
He made people frenzied because of women /
everyone found their mates
The pleasures of the world are women and teeth
A woman is the cause of the elongation of life /
women are sweeter than sugar and sugar-candy
In the Quran, God tells of the miracles, telling us
about the pious women

The pleasures of the world are women and teeth
Get a woman so that your wealth may increase / get a
woman so that may your fortune be prosperous
Every notion goes out of your mind / a hundred Laily
became like Majnun from the pain of your love
The pleasures of the world are women and teeth
Erect the stand of a feast / make yourself happy by
marriage
Flourish your home by a woman / blind the eye of the
damned Satan
The pleasures of the world are women and teeth
A woman accompanies you at home / a woman
makes housekeeping for you
If you do not come home, she becomes restless / and
if you pass away, she sighs and laments
The pleasures of the world are women and teeth
When you go home your place is ready / your bed and
couch are prepared
Your meal is ready at the table / your clothes are
ready in the bundle
The pleasures of the world are women and teeth
A woman endures suffering for you / working hard
day and night for you
She constantly carries the burden of hardship / she
stands this burden out of mercy
The pleasures of the world are women and teeth
You are mad if you do not take a wife / if you do not
take a wife, you are a foreigner to the religion
Woman is a calamity (*balâ*) in every palace / may a
house be not without a calamity
The pleasures of the world are women and teeth
Find yourself a dwelling at the head of the quarter of
idols / find yourself an appreciated woman who is
knowledgeable
Put my word well in your heart / take a wife, take a
wife, take a wife
The pleasures of the world are women and teeth
There are thirty-two pearls in the mouth / each of
them is better cutting than fresh pearl
Their price is higher than gems / the name of tooth is
red alchemy
The pleasures of the world are women and teeth
I saw an old man from Iraq / saying: "My tooth was
broken in Iraq

I came to Tehran with fear / going to the dentist like
the *buraq*⁶
The pleasures of the world are woman and tooth
When mister dentist saw me / he took some money
from me and extracted the tooth
He then put there a new tooth / and thus I became
young with this white beard of me
The pleasures of the world are women and teeth
After some time, with dozens of troubles / the tooth
became firm in my mouth
With the artificial tooth like a snake / I chose myself a
nine-year girl
The pleasures of the world are women and teeth
Now by the grace of God I eat bread / I also eat rice
with roasted rice
I can now easily eat sweet pastry / I eat *fasenjan* with
my wife every night
The pleasures of the world are women and teeth /
without women and teeth the world is a prison.

In this poem, Gilani compares women with teeth on the grounds that both of them facilitate pleasure to men. A woman, as depicted in the poem, is responsible for making the life of a man easier and for bringing more pleasure to him. In his poetry, Gilani defends women's dignity, and promotes their rights as he also believes that education is essential for obtaining both of them. In much the same way, however, he sees them as wives and mothers before anything else which reminds us Afary's "new nationalist discourse" that does not radically challenge the existing sexual patterns of the society as a whole. Also, for Gilani this is not a subordination since men and women have their own role in for the neat working of the social order.

Additionally, in order to highlight the essentiality of the male and female companionship to life, he emphasizes that God created Adam and Eve together and made them a couple. By doing this, he points to the spiritual depth of this companionship. In that respect, the poem should better be read in connection with the first. The new bride's description of marriage as a relationship in which women are exclusively expected to fulfill the predefined traditional duties at home in the first poem is congruent with second poem's depiction of the men's perception of women solely as agents of physical pleasure. Yet, an "appreciated" and "knowledgeable" woman brings forth the non-physical dimension of marriage.

⁶ Buraq is a creature in Islamic tradition famous for its speed. It is especially famous for taking the Prophet Muhammad during the night of Miraj from Mecca to Jerusalem.

There is another significant point highlighted in Gilani's poetry. On many of his poems, he challenges the stereotypical idea that the unfavorable position of women in Muslim societies and their deprivation from education are rooted in the Islamic teachings. In many instances, he is more of a Muslim apologetic who defends Islamic teachings against the interpretations imposed on them throughout the nineteenth century. For instance, he does not regard veiling as an obstacle in front of progress and women's achievement of an identity in the society (Abadi, Norouz & Fakhr-e Islam, 2015: 135). In this sense, he is in favor of a selective adoption of Europe's modernity by keeping the Islamic nature of the society intact. He stresses the positive transformative power of Islam in terms of women's rights, which is clearly articulated in the poem that I will be exploring next.

The Situation of the Arab Women (Samanipour, 2007: 222-3).

Listen to me my daughter with joy / here is a
description of the Arab women
Among Arabs before the coming of Muhammad /
there was much tyranny and oppression on women
Before the last and the noble Prophet / the souls of
the Arab women were suffering
The Arabs would behead women / tearing openly the
belly of a rose-cheeked woman
They used to bury moon-faced girls with cruelty /
while they were still alive
Women for that ignorant people / was nothing but a
servant like a maid
Life of a women was subject to plagues / a woman
was even no more than an animal
At least from among girls like the moon / three
hundred individuals were murdered weekly
Girls were taken with a ring on the ear / to the market
to be sold
If a girl was born to a person / he would beat himself
on the head because of the tragic event:
"O God why did you give me a daughter? / you gave
me a star instead of the sun or the moon."
For forty days this Arab would stay in the inner parts
of the house / and would not show his face out of
shame
"Why a girl is born? / and why my horse in the stable
has become a donkey"
Finally, he used to kill that innocent girl / or he would
throw that innocent baby into a well

This lasted until with the grace of God / the aura of
the last Prophet appeared
He fully enlightened Mecca by the light of his face /
distancing Arabs from such traditions
He said: "This is the order of God, o noble ones! / you
should show respect to women
These women are smelling nice like a sweet basil /
these women are the candle and the lamp of homes
All men and women who are pious believers / coming
from the Light of the Essence
Men and women in the court of the glorious God / are
both like slaves and maids
If women did not exist in the world / no single human
being would exist now
Love girls with fidelity / and do not hurt them with
cruelty
Whoever makes a girl happy / he has thrived his
house in Paradise
Each woman has a claim for her rights / girls also have
rights
I like three things in the world / perfume, to praise
God and women with intellect
Paradise is beneath the feet of mothers / may the
souls of children be scarified to their mothers
He who behaves his wife nicely / God will secure him
his legitimate daily sustenance"
O women and girl cheer up! / be free like the cypress
tree and the lily
The prophet is at your side / Fatemeh⁷ will be your
friend in the Day of Retribution
Mohammad set girls free / making all Arab woman
happy
Men and women say until the last day: / "May
greeting be to the Hashemite Prophet."

Here, by emphasizing the inhumane attitudes which the Arab women suffered before the coming of the Prophet Muhammad, Gilani rebuffs the allegations made against Islam for being the cause of women's unfavorable situation in Muslim societies. Although he does not mention the source of such allegations, it is a clear response to the widespread conviction among some of the orientalist and the westernized intellectuals. According to Gilani, if the

⁷ Daughter of the Prophet Muhammad and the wife of Ali b. Ebu Taleb who was the fourth of the Rightly Guided Caliphs.

emergence of Islam improved women's conditions, then there is no reason for the same Islamic teachings not to serve for the elimination of their sufferings. By reminding that, generally speaking pre-Islamic women in the Arabian Peninsula did not enjoy a respected position in their society (Cehlhod, 1960: 466-489), he stresses out that the Prophet Muhammad changed this unfair attitude by telling men to be respectful to women. His effort to combine modernity with Islam is one of the prominent characteristics of his poetry. While doing that, he was rather careful, at least when Islam was concerned, in the wording of his messages. Although Islamic themes were extensively used by the poets and the writers of the Constitutional Period, he did not see Islam as a mere instrument to reach to the masses. In his poems he emphasizes that Muslims, not Islam, are responsible for the inflictions that befall them. At the core of his message, he enthusiastically emphasizes the compatibility of Islam with anything that is good for the society.

Conclusion

Women-related issues have, throughout the modern Iranian history particularly from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, been a significant matter of debate intellectually as well as politically. Unexceptionally, whenever the "woman question" (*mas'ale-ye zan*) (Najmabadi, 1991: 48) was raised, it almost immediately turned into an intricate discussion in which tradition, religion and politics mixed together. The terms of this question have been shaped in Iran as "a central part of an emerging climate of political ideas and social concerns" first in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth and then from the mid-1960 onwards (Najmabadi, 1991: 48). Under the Islamic Republic of Iran, too, debates around women's issues have never lost their significance.

After the Constitutional Revolution, as every political party touched upon those issues in their programs, the utmost attention was paid to them in the newspapers and the journals of the period. With the Pahlavi modernization from 1920s on, the debates about women gained completely new dimensions. Not only the achievements of the previous era were deemed insufficient by feminist women and the Pahlavi modernists but also a new thinking and perception emerged regarding the ideal and beautiful womanhood (Najmabadi, 2005: 233). Further, by that time, the issue has gone beyond womanhood to include the transforming roles of men and women. One can see, during this period, critiques of "two figures of excess" who were "women and men who flaunted the rules of decent behavior in public; they were excesses of urban transformations" (Najmabadi, 2005: 238). These two figures were mocked as "Westoxicated" which was a common pejorative term used in Iran to denounce excessive Westernization. Moreover, Reza Shah's modernization policies and the "sartorial Westernization" (Chehabi, 1993: 212) of the Pahlavi state created a new tension between the "conservative" and "modernist" groups. First by the Uniform Dress

Law of 1928 and by the decree regarding the unveiling of women or *Kashf-e Hejab*, of 1936, he introduced European-type dress codes for both men and women. This latter policy is still debated in modern Iranian historiography. As Chehabi notes "The idea that women's participation in social activities could be broadened while allowing them freedom of choice in matters of dress occurred neither to the state, nor to the ulama, nor even to women themselves" (Chehabi, 1993: 228-29).

In 1963, Muhammad Reza Shah announced the White Revolution, a reform-package which consisted of six points. Although the reforms addressed such issues as land distribution to peasants, nationalization of forests, sale of state factories to private entrepreneurs, profit sharing for industrial workers, extension of the vote to women and establishment of a rural literacy corps (Abrahamian, 1982: 424), Ayatollah Khomeini, then a sixty-four-year-old mujtahid, denounced the Shah for "undermining the country's Islamic beliefs" and "encouraging *gharbzadagi* [Westoxication]" (Abrahamian, 1982: 425). Consequently, Khomeini was first arrested and then about a year later he was sent to exile. By the late 1970s, this time, pro-Khomeini women, including some of the otherwise-unveiled ones, appeared in a *chador*, a loose, enveloping, sleeveless piece of cloth that covered the whole body which the decree of 1936 intended to remove, in anti-Shah demonstrations in a clear protest against his father's top-down policy.

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 opened a new phase in the debates. The Islamic Republic has hardly undone any of the women-related reforms of the previous era such as enfranchisement of women or their participation in social life, with the notable exception of imposing forced veil on them. With this background in mind, it comes as no surprise that forced veiling is often criticized in today's Iran. For instance, in 2017 some Iranian women posted, by using the hashtag #whitewednesdays, pictures and videos of themselves wearing white headscarves or pieces of white clothing as symbols of protest against forced veiling. During the last decades, the number of Iranian women with university education has increased impressively to the degree that in recent years girls outnumber boys in university entrance exam. Nevertheless, despite these achievements, there is still a long way to go for Iran, as for many other countries, towards achieving opportunity equality for women. Besides, Iranian women are still politically underrepresented. However, compared to the previous decades their voices are more loudly heard as agents of their destiny. It is true that many of the women-related issues which were hotly debated at the turn of the twentieth century have been resolved during the following decades. Nonetheless, in the same period new challenges have appeared and the core of these challenges, if not their shape, resembles those which appeared in early-twentieth century. Gilani's poems which he published in *Nasim-e Shomal* are important for a better analysis of the women-related debates which were held during the constitutional and post-constitutional periods. For that, he must be

examined in the context of his age and his contemporaries. The conclusions of such an examination can also shed a light on today's discussions.

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