

The Revolution and the Defloration

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Three Portraits of Maryam or The Old Peasant's Ideal by Mirzadeye Eshghi is one of the forerunning poetic and dramatic texts written in the years following the constitutional revolution, and the closest experiment to Nima Yushij's Afsaneh in its date of composition as well as its literary style. Inspired by the form of drama, this ballad is composed of "three portraits" and tells the story of a country maiden who is seduced by a young Teheraner and having slept with him and eventually faced disgrace, commits suicide at the end. Throughout the narrative, the seduced maiden develops into a precise allegory picturing the people who have been seduced by false promises made by the leaders of the revolution.

This paper investigates how and why the poet has used sexual satisfaction and repression for depicting political defiance and oppression. Studying the elements and implications of the text, the author explains the implicit link emerging between the joy of political triumph and sexual satisfaction on one hand, and between the association of the overthrow of political supremacy and defloration on the other. Subsequently it describes some of the historical backgrounds and references in the context. It refers to the renowned research done by Afsaneh Najmabadi, "The Story of the daughters of Quchan", and to the governor of Kerman, Asefoddoleh, who was the main figure in the big scandal - the abduction of the Quchani girls as tax dodge and selling them to the Turkmens and the Armenians of Ashgabat; the event which in spite of its media coverage at that point in time, has been overlooked prior to recent years by Iranian patriarchal historiography, one way or another.

The paper while examining the, underlying binary concepts such as oppressor/oppressed, governor/governed, within the discourse of the constitutional revolution, and their deep roots in certain intellectual attitudes toward women, questions the fundamental contradiction between these underlying structures and the democratic and liberal surface of this discourse, and makes attempt to provide a different and comprehensive understanding of some challenges and crises arisen from politics and the intelligentsia in contemporary Iran.

Keywords:

Mirzadeye Eshghi, Three Portraits of Maryam, the Constitutional Revolution, gender-related structures, The Story of the Daughters of Quchan, defloration

Mainly titled as The Old Peasant's Ideal, Three Portraits of Maryam is composed in response to an appeal by "Faraj'ollah Bahrami, the head of the war ministry cabinet, inviting the Iranian intelligentsia to

set forth their ideal of a powerful centralist sovereignty to be established by the iron hands of Sardar Sepah (literally lord of the army) and send it to the Shafagh'eh Sorkh (The Rouge Twilight) daily" (The Pictorial Collected Works of Eshghi, p. 172).

But not only Three Portraits of Maryam wasn't a manifesto of the ideals and hopes of Eshghi as a political thinker, furthermore it depicted the political disillusionment of a vulnerable poet who had washed his hands off any ideal whatsoever. Indeed, a year earlier, in May 1922, he had portrayed his ideal in a manifesto called "The Festival of Blood" where he pled "people from all around the world" to annually dedicate five days to a weird ritual of dismembering tyrant governors and thus "re-regulate their legal machinery!" But for Eshghi who believed that any code of law is doomed to fall in the hands of "traitorous trustees", what could be the meaning of putting forward a proposal for a powerful central sovereignty - and above all under the Sardar Sepah who made his mind to assassinate Eshghi in the following year?

He, then, writes the title of An Old Peasant's Ideal to outline, from the very beginning, his own concerns in accordance with those of the masses' and in a unique way, he begins the story of the Constitutional Revolution with a lovemaking scene as the first portrait. The moment of pleasure which leads to an "illegitimate" intercourse, happening between Maryam, a girl from the rural Shemran and a lad from central Tehran, is described in such a way that the deep impact of the subsequent catastrophe can be felt with more sense of loss and distress. The story of the girl being deceived and disgraced and her subsequent suicide in the second portrait, is combined with a mournful portrayal of an autumnal sunset, and the third portrait which recites the sufferings of her father and the sacrifices he made for the founding of the Constitution, discloses the allegorical association established by the poet between the deceived girl and the people misled by the untruthful promises of the leaders of the movement.

Thus, in the course of its ongoing development, the narrative calls into mind an implicit relation between sexual pleasure and the bliss of victory and, on the one hand, and between defloration and the dethronement of the institution of power, on the other; historically speaking, revolutions were quite rare in Iran and the Shah enjoyed an unconditional absolute reign over all subjects and his divine charisma would prevent the public from revolting against him:

In his book, *Ain'ol Hayat*, Muhammad Bagher Majlisi writes that "if a king digresses from the path of expediency and justice, it is required that one pray for his expedience or that one bring expedience into his own self so that, in return, God bestows the expedience back upon the king. (Quoted from Tabatabayi, 2001)

The Constitutional Revolution eradicates the taboo of this historical virginity, and unveils its face. In the third portrait, we realize that Maryam was born on the same day that the king authorized the constitutional mandate, i.e., August 6th, 1906. She is the offspring of the revolution, more rather the revolution itself, the "born out of the anguish of the world," entwined with duality, suspension and vagueness. Inside her, the town and the city, reason and love, tradition and modernity, liberty and oppression, joy and sorrow, all appear simultaneously:

Veiled her body was in a blue Hijab
But a rosy face, in the midst, out of Niqab

On that face once joyful and once sad
For hundred a reason, traces of love with a lad

On those sweetened lips, the trace of amorous pain
Dressed as they dress, the virgins of the suburbs

Neither urban nor suburban, between chastity and blurbs
Of beauty all that one has had she,

More like an angel pure, proud, and free;
As if t'was no woman, but a nymph in grace and glee.

She has covered herself in the Chador, the Islamic dress-code, which is not the typical black, but blue; and she isn't self-reserved in chastity, but seems rather careless and gullible. So she doesn't follow the formal dress code of the urban woman, elsewhere referred to as "the black shred" by Eshghi himself: an all-black dress which, in the eyes of the intellectuals of the time, revealed the link between the tyranny of the Shah and the tyranny of the father (man). The Hijab of women thus symbolizes the closure of vision. Now Maryam, a young girl intoxicated with love, has surrendered herself to drunkenness and having rejected the virginity taboo, is impregnated by the deceitful young man and has gained dishonor and disappointment in return for all she has lost. Her suicide is precisely the point where Eshghi as the idealist offspring of the revolution seems to have arrived and even seems to have surpassed in his "The Festival of Blood". In fact the festive murder of the tyrant designed in the form of a bloody ritual is nothing else than the transfigured suicide of Maryam. The Festival of blood is the suicidal uprising of a misled community in the public sphere while Three Portraits of Maryam is the forlorn suicide of a deceived woman in the private one.

Although in prose and verse, Mirzadeh Eshghi has appeared as an advocate of women's rights along with other prominent literary figures of the time, including Iraj Mirza, Dekhoda, and Lahouti, his approach to womanhood suffers from the same paradoxes dominating the intelligentsia of his time. This is not, however, the first time that Eshghi applies a sexual allegory for criticizing his surrounding social and political conditions. It is through these allegories that his paradoxical approach as a libertarian intellectual to ideas such as chastity and atrocity, remaining in cover and opening up, are brought into light by the debate over the distinction between "hijab" and "hojb" (the former signifies "veil" while the latter indicates "shyness".)

In the early days of March 1923 when the cabinet of Hassan Mowstufi (Mostowfi'ol Mamalek) had lost its firm ground, he firmly stood against three groups of dissidents who referred to his cabinet as 'soft-boiled' and the cabinet in question was approved finally with the majority of 64 votes by the Parliament

of National Council on March 9th the same year. The day after, in defense of this cabinet, Eshghi wrote the editorial of 20th Century Newspaper, titled as "The Myriad Allow," where he stated that the cabinet of the time was "molded into hard alloy" despite all the attempts of the opposition against it. After that, a Newspaper called Qanun (Canon), which was among the supporters of Ghavam'ol Saltaneh, wrote an article in reply to that of Eshghi's with the title of "The Soft-Boiled Cabinet." In response, however, Eshghi wrote the following poem which was published in 20th Century (20 of February, 1923):'

A chaste and perfection-bereft woman
Is better than a coquettish all-knowing feminine.

The odorless fruit, giving off no fragrance
Better than corroded one disgusting from distance.

A cabinet spoiled softly, though fragile as strand
Better than one who has in foe's hand placed his hand.

In reply, one of Eshghi's opponents published the following piece of verse in Qanon anonymously:

A chaste and coy woman
Better off remaining within walls.

To herself the gates of solitude, wide open;
And to the others the way to meet, wide shut.

And if her torment is not yet loosed
Its altogether rupture may be at hand.

Eshghi replied:

Thou said the woman chaste must be
At house fixed, from worries free.

She who's tied out of oath to a man
Would any laxity to herself ban

Yet, she who's coquettish, on the other hand,
Will head not your words however grand.

Lo! She would submit her chastity to foe,
And all your trust and image, too, so

May the coquettish woman of the house
Sit within the house and be a tormented spouse.

Notwithstanding, the role Eshghi assigns to his female characters in his so-called "Festival of blood" witnesses a domesticated political participation of women in society: "People should be made aware of the benefits of blood-shed...It should be promoted in a way that women ask their husbands for shedding the blood of a corrupted person instead of dowry."(Moshir Salimi, p. 127)

He wrote the "Festival of Blood" only 16 years after the time when women, from various social classes - rich and poor- sold out their possessions in an unprecedented determination to fund the first national bank of Iran and realized the Constitutional Revolution by boycotting imported goods, distributing underground manifestos, holding secret societies and even participating in one-to-one battles, shoulder to shoulder with their men. Yet, "the election law explicitly excluded women from any political attempt and the parliament did not heed much to their request for being officially supported." (Afari, p.14)

The main conflict of the libertarian women of the constitution era with the dominant patriarchy was over letting women out of the suffocating domestic sphere into the realm of sociopolitical activism. While benefitting from the political presence of women, the male constitutionalists were frightened of the implications of this presence for their own private lives.

Sham'ol Molouk Javaher'Kalam opened Tehran's first school for female students in 1907 and named it "Nomos." The main goal of such a naming was to gain the trust of the conservative society which used to regard women's entering the social sphere as identical to prostitution and fall from chastity. The names of a number of such schools in the capital city in 1913 reveal the society of the time being afraid of any harm done to the domestic space of women:

Chastity, Islamic Slaves, Fatemiyyah (after a Shiite's feminine holy figure), The Virtues, Hijab, The Virgins' Glorium, The Respectorium of the Women, The Chastity Elementary, The Might of Nomos, The Chastitorium, The Veiled, The Veils of the Nation, The Holies, The Women of Nomos, The Holly Descents, The Honor of Maids, and the Islamic Resort of the Virgins...(ibid., pp. 17-20)

The Constitutional Movement provided women with a chance of showing their high potentials in civil and political acts and asking, in return, for basic rights which had been historically denied to them and kept out of their reach. But a limited presence in the public sphere was the only benefit women came to enjoy from this so-called constitutionality: a term whose sense is still debateful in the Iranian political

sphere: "Some regard it as being rooted in the Arabic word Shart (meaning 'condition') and others take it to be derived from the French expression la charte, i.e., constitution".

Ali'Akbar Dehkhoda himself was one of the prominent figures of constitutionalism and once claimed that this word, as applied in Iran's political discourse, is a modified version of the French word charte or its English equivalent, the charter, which has appeared in Farsi from Ottoman Turkish. Taghizadeh, too, points at a suggestion made by one of the mullahs of Tabriz, Agha'Mirza Sadigh'Agha, who held that it was better to adopt this word in its French sense, i.e. constitution, and not in the Arabic context since it was likely that mullahs would interpret or appropriate the term in a way that its political signification in the new government would be a restricted or conditioned liberty subjected to the rules and regulations suggested by the mullahs themselves. (Ali Gheisari, p. 24)

The fact that Eshghi saw the betrayal of the primary ideals of the revolution identical to an explicit moral misconduct to which the common sense was sensitive and alert, indeed, does represent the poet's intelligence and his capability of applying allegories familiar for the masses, yet, it also carries the implication of a determining event at the time of Constitutional Revolution which has been, until very recently, treated by the commonly male historians of the era with negligence and quietism: a dishonoring incident which shook the foundations of the legitimacy of the sovereignty of the time and inflicted the most profound wounds onto the public conscience beyond any compare, and thus accelerated the process of constitution. One can trace Eshghi's allusion back to the "story of the selling of the Qouchanian girls" to the Armenians and Turkmans of Eshgh'Abad in the spring of 1904 and assume that the governor of Kerman (who asked his chancellor – Maryam's father – to provide him with handpicked "members of the fair sex" and finally dismissed him from all services due to his disobedience) was Asif'ol Dowleh who was appointed to the governance of Kerman and Baluchistan for the second time in the October 1897. Coincident with drought and austerity and imposing heavy tax collection, his governance had brought such an injustice to the people of Kerman that they came to sell their own daughters to him as a compensation for the taxes with only one or two dimes in value. In the last months of 1899, the state called him from services and assigned him first as the minister of state's properties and as the governor of the capital city, and then, as the governor of Fars, and finally, for the second time, in 1904, as the governor of Sistan and Khorasan. At the time of his governance in Khorasan, the incident of selling Qouchani girls in compensation for the unpaid taxes "turned into a national story...and in the political discourse of the time "betrayal of one's own nation" was equated with the "sellout of the nomos". (Najm'abadi, pp. 21-57)

"After the uproars of the selling of Qouchani girls to Turkmans and Armenians of Eshgh'Abad, the Association of Social Democrats published a critical announcement questioning the honor of the Iranian men from which it is implied that "the honor of an Iranian man and his dignity within his own country and renown and respectability was measured by the chastity and the preservability of his woman in the domestic space...For this reason, it was upon the Iranian man to rise against this insult to his national honor." (Afari, p.14)

The year in which Asif'ol Dowlah was appointed to the governance of Kerman was 1904, but in the story told by Maryam's father, the date of this event is 1907. Obviously, the significance of Three Portraits is not hinged upon its correspondence or lack of correspondence with the real incidents and characters but upon its explicit reference to one of the most important themes of public discontent during the

Constitutional Revolution in a society whose measure of masculine authority over the family was discredited and which saw itself on the threshold of losing its spiritual and material possessions. If so, why being afraid of losing life after wasting all possessions and honor?

Three Portraits is indeed a narrative of the Constitutional Revolution, the story of passing satisfactions and profound despairs. A Tehraner lad deceives a girl with the promise of marriage similar to the revolutionaries' promises of justice and freedom. The question is what is to be done now with the blood spilled and the virginity deflowered? Upon the ruins of the ideals and hopes of an entire generation, how can be a palace built more glorious than an eternal elegy? The girl dies prematurely, as does the dream of change.

The force of collective mourning which emerges from Shiite's culture and the mourning rituals pertaining to it, in the eyes of a libertarian lad, is the last thing that can revitalize the dying corpse of the revolution. And indeed what could be more herat-rending than the innocent death of a young woman who has been subjected to a historical violation? Mirzadeh Eshghi was so deeply satisfied by this masochistic image of the idealist that eventually embodied it with his own premature death.

He ends his versified play with these lines addressing Farj'ollah Bahrami:

Let's assume that I live no longer
This idea of mine remains, why, then, for life hunger?

Since my idea is contagiously infected

And if contagious, the entire history is raided,
Will this all end with time having this idea aided.

...

In this place flourished with vicious undertakers,
Flourished indeed with many a corrupted fakers,

No wonder if a poet sounds mad,
And desires a Festival of blood, so glad,

How any better can I account my ideal?

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