

SENZIL NAWID*

The Feminine and Feminism in Tarzi's Work

Introduction

Among Afghan writers, Mahmud Tarzi, was the first to break the traditional silence about women. In the conservative society of early twentieth-century Afghanistan, when even the public mention of women's name was considered an ignominy, Tarzi took the initial step to address feminist issues and challenge traditional attitudes toward women in Afghan popular culture. His articles provided the rationale for the themes which developed more fully during the 1920s. Tarzi courageously defended women in a society that perceived women as *kam 'aql* (possessing limited human reasoning) and were referred to by epithet *za'ifa* (weak).

Tarzi was born in 1865 in a distinguished aristocratic Afghan family. In 1881 Tarzi's family was forced to leave Afghanistan as the result of an internal political strife between the two branches of the ruling class. Exiled at the age of sixteen, he spent most of his adolescence in Damascus and Istanbul, the hotbed of late nineteenth century Muslim reformist activities. Early contact with Young Turk writers shaped his social and political philosophy. At the age of forty, he returned to Afghanistan and in 1912 became the editor of *Seraj al-Akhbar*, a newly established bi-weekly newspaper. A prolific and visionary writer, Tarzi wrote voluminous articles advocating freedom from British control and great changes in the social and political conditions of the country. In 1919 he became the first foreign minister of the newly-independent Afghanistan and later Afghanistan's ambassador to Paris. In 1929, following King Amanullah's overthrow, Tarzi left Afghanistan once again to spend the rest of his life in Istanbul.

This paper addresses feminist themes in Tarzi's writings, an aspect of his literary activity which has not been addressed by scholars in or out of Afghanistan.

The Early Phase

With regard to women, Tarzi has expressed sentiments that can be divided loosely between two stages in his writing career. In his early works a romantic

* Assistant Professor University of Arizona.

young Tarzi, strongly attracted to the opposite sex, wrote hyperbolically about love and revery. His writings in this stage revealed typical masculine interests. He portrays women as idealized erotic objects, who find fulfillment and power over men in love.

Love, he wrote, is the concentration of man's visible and invisible senses in one particular object. For example when we say so and so fell in love with a heart-ravishing woman, we should ask ourselves that how did it happen? The answer is that first her beauty and charm attracted his eyes and since the center of vision is brain, it was stored in his brain. So far the lovely maiden has only attracted one of the lover's visible senses, the vision. Then he hears her soul-invigorating musical voice. Her voice, which has enticed the hearing sense, too becomes engraved in brain. Two of his senses having been captivated by her, the third sense, the taste, desires a sweet kiss. The three senses having thus merged together, effect the heart. And once the outer and the inner feelings of the helpless lover are entranced by the beloved, he will not listen to any other suggestions. Even if one of the senses will contradict the other senses, the mind will forcefully spurn. Thus the devoted lover sees magnificence even in the beloved's faults¹.

The poetic account of his travels, *Travel in Three Continents (Sayahat dar Se Qara-i-Zamin)*, which was written at an earlier age, contained a series of anecdotes about women. From care and feeling shown in the portraiture of women it is evident that the writer's heart had entered deeply into his work. He wrote with brilliance about his various encounters with beautiful, charming, witty and intelligent European women. His focus in this and other early works, including some of his translations, such as «Flora»², is modern Western women, oblique and intangible for the Afghan reader.

Second phase

In contrast to these early works, Tarzi's later writings reveal a drastic change in his attitude toward women. During his career as the editor of the *Seraj al-Akhbar*, he became immersed in social and political problems Afghanistan. He advocated freedom from British tutelage and move toward progress. In his larger frame-work for progress also fell the issue of women. Women's image changed in Tarzi's work from a beautiful idol to what he called the other half of man (*nim shaqa-i-digar-i-mard*), arguing that without the progress of this half of the society the other half could not fully develop³. As a pragmatic social and political

¹ Mahmud Tarzi, «Eshq» (Love) in *Az har Dahan Sokhani wa az her Chaman Samani*, 'Enayat Printing House, 1333/1914, pp. 209, Kabul. All translation of this and other works of Tarzi are mine.

² «Flora» (translated from Turkish), in *Az har Dahan Sokhani wa az har Chaman Samani*, pp. 182-205.

³ «Zarurat-i-Pishraft-i-Zanan» (The Necessity for the Advancement of Women), *Seraj al-Akhbar*, vol. 1, no. 7, Jaddy 15, 1290/ January 5, 1911.

essayist, Tarzi was no longer concerned about the refinement of style. He was mostly interested in issues which he expressed intrepidly through reasoning. He launched a literary feminine campaign by challenging traditional attitude and taboos about women, and by addressing women directly and making them aware of their social responsibilities and their potential for advancement both as an individual and as a group.

Tarzi began his formal defense of women in an article titled «The Necessity for the Advancement of Women» (*Zarurat-i-Pishraft-i-Zanan*), which became the prelude for a long series of biographical accounts on women. In this article Tarzi argued that man and woman together constitute a complete human being and that neither has great value without the other. Together they comprise humanity. The faculties of the two sexes combined can produce the greatest sum of valuable results. Man and women, he wrote, are a natural complement of one another. By preventing one from development we deprive the whole body of growth. He then addressed the neglected state of the female mind and the negative consequences on the general condition of women in Afghanistan. Finally he announced that in the next issue the *Seraj al-Akhbar* would open a new column under the heading «*Namwaran-i-Zanan-i-Jahan* (the World's Most Famous Women)» for the benefit of the esteemed ladies (*Bibi Sahebaha*)⁴. Conscious of his boldness in dealing with a sensitive social issue, he wrote, «Some may object and scoff at this endeavor. However, neither reproach nor protest can impede our effort to provide the necessary information for the benefit of [all men and women of this country]»⁵. The column on «The World's Most Famous Women,» which appeared in the next issue of the *Seraj al-Akhbar* furnished a wellresearched biographical dictionary of women who had achieved eminence in various fields. Tarzi's objectives in opening this column were to contradict the supposed incapacity of the female sex and alert women to their natural ability for any human endeavor. He hoped their setting in the ancient times and faraway lands would also initiate his readers into history, mythology and geography.

Articles in support of women continued to appear in the pages of *Seraj al-Akhbar*, concentrating mostly on the theme of women's intellectual capacity. In the article «Preacher Consultant and Guide» (*Wa'iz, Naseh, Morshed*), Tarzi criticized the Afghan clergy for their ignorance of conditions of the new age and particularly their biased views about women⁶. He disparaged the clergy for having neglected their duty as guides. Instead of guiding people to deal with the problems of the modern world, they inspired pessimism by preaching that life in this world is transient and has no lasting value. According to Tarzi, these teachings discouraged people from taking an active part in life. Words and ideas that were formulated more than five centuries ago, he wrote, were important then

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ «*Wa'ez, Naseh, Morshed*», *Seraj al-Akhbar*, vol. 2, no. 23, Asad 27, 1292/August 18, 1913.

but had little relevance to this day and age. It is time, he stressed, that persons in a position to guide people should talk on issues that are germane to the present situation⁷. He then turned to the issue of feminism by giving Khalida Adib, a woman, as an example of charismatic, inspiring speaker. At the end of the article he wrote, in this issue we have printed the translation of a speech delivered at the University of Istanbul by the distinguished Ottoman literary figure, Mrs. Khalida Adib. She addressed an audience of more than four thousand women and made them aware of the problems facing their country. Our purpose in printing the translation of this talk is to provide a model for our male preachers and to show them the progress of Muslim women in other countries. While here women are referred to by the epithet *za'ifa* (weak) and are regarded as a species one degree lower than men, in other countries they express opinion on public matters⁸.

These ideas were not commonplace in Tarzi's Afghanistan. His passionate support of women offended the conservative elements, as could be expected. Entries in the series «The World's Most Famous Women», came under particular attack. In the November 30th, 1913, issue *Seraj al-Akhbar* printed a letter from Mofiti Mohammad Rafiq, an ecclesiastic judge, who had questioned the seriousness of the paper because of its entries on woman. For quite some time, the judge wrote, I have tolerated, with great pain I should say, entries on women in the *Seraj al-Akhbar*. Having lost my patience, I have finally decided to open my mouth and ask, «are there no important men in this world? I wonder why the respected editor, instead of writing about famous men, should talk about famous women? Afghans are by nature brave and warlike. I should think that it would be more appropriate, instead of discussing women, for the column to be devoted to topics related to weaponry and machine guns»⁹.

The judges letter provided Tarzi an opportunity to strike again at the ulama and challenge further bias against women.

The letter of the highly esteemed judge, Mollah Mohammad Rafiq, which has been printed upon his request, calls for an answer. We are obliged to respond to his protest and give an explanation for the entries in «The World's Most Famous Women». There does not seem to be much need for explanation; as is obvious from the letter of the honorable judge the female component of our society is so inconsequential in the eyes of honored Afghans that even the mention of their name brings shame. God save us if we dare say something about their important place in society or try to defend them.... I wonder what would have happened if we had dared talk about their superior qualities and had reported women's fight for equality in other parts of the world. There is no newspaper or magazine these days that does not mention something about the activities of women. Apart from European papers, Turkish, Arabic and Indian journals have coverage on debates over women's rights. It is because of the kind of prejudice expressed by the honored religious scholar that we do not write about these important feminist issues¹⁰.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ «Maktub az Shahr» (Letter from the City), *Seraj al-Akhbar*, vol. 3, no. 6, Qaws 8, 1292/Nov. 30, 1913, pp. 11-12.

¹⁰ *Seraj al-Akhbar, Ibid.*

Tarzi stressed that Islam was based on equality for all, men and women. Quoting a saying of the Prophet Mohammad «women are the other half of men and are exactly like them» (*enna ma al-nesa-o shaqaeqo al-rejali*), he wrote that it is obvious that the original human being was composed of two halves, Adam and Eve. While excessive freedom has given way to promiscuity in Europe, primitive ideas and practices among some uncivilized people have deprived women of their human dignity and have reduced them to animals and objects. Islam, wrote Tarzi, is void of such extremes. It grants women ample room for advancement within Islamic moral teachings. In a sixteen page news paper, Tarzi pointed out that only a small segment is devoted to topics of interest to women and the rest concern men. What is wrong, he asked, if women who represent more than one hundred subscribers in the capital alone should also benefit from the newspaper and become aware of the accomplishments of their sisters elsewhere.

«I should mention», he continued, «that in order not to offend people like the respected judge we have not yet included the name of any Afghan women». Claiming that most of the entries on women were taken from the biographical accounts of some highly respected Muslim historians, writers of *hadith* and scholars, he asked. Would you accuse them also of violating the code of honor (*binamusi*) for exposing women. It is a pity that the word honor (*namus*) is used in our culture in reference to women only. The *'ulama* seem to have forgotten all the other important implications of this word»¹¹.

Tarzi ended the article with a pointed question. «Having said all this, I would like to put forward an important question to the honorable Judge. Is it necessary to teach woman or not? This was a skillful tactic on Tarzi's part to obtain the approval of a highly-placed ecclesiastic judge in favor of education for women. In the issue of January 28, 1913, *Seraj al-Akhbar* printed the response of Mufti Mohammad Rafiq, which was in accord with a saying of the prophet that the acquisition of knowledge is important for all Muslims, including women. Having secured a religious sanction for the education of women, Tarzi proudly professed: Our purpose in entering into an open debate with a prominent religious scholar was to obtain a religious declaration (*fatwa*) in writing in favor of education for women. The letter of protest from the honorable judge provided the opportunity we were waiting for. We are grateful that criticism resulted in approval (*enteqad mostawjeb-i-ershad gardid*)¹².

In his view on education and women's issues Tarzi was a reformer. As various poems and articles written by Tarzi show, education was the top priority in his agenda of social change. In most of these works he concerned himself with general education as well as education for women. The main rationale for advocating education for women, according to Tarzi was to prepare them to be better mothers. In a poem titled «Women's School» (*Maktab-i-Onas*), Tarzi identified the chief role and contribution of women as the training of children. He

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Seraj al-Akhbar*, vol. 3, no. 10, Dalw 8, 1292/January 28, 1913, p. 10.

elaborated on the great difference an educated, well-informed women could make in the upbringing of the future generation of Afghanistan. Given the important role a mother plays in the training of her children, he suggested that education was even more important for women than it was for men:

Because the first school of learning is the mother's loving arms
a learned informed mother imparts knowledge while nursing her child

The poem then ends with a satirical remark about the idea of male incomparability:

Mahmud how long will you occupy your mind with the question of men
and women what have you seen in men that you think you can expect the
same in women ¹³?

While defending women from male prejudice, Tarzi tried at the same time to inspire in women a sense of self-awareness, self-respect and confidence in their ability for selfimprovement and rational thinking. He urged women to better themselves individually and to desist from all that was superficial in order to earn the respect they deserved. Under the heading «Absurdities» (*Muzakhrifat*), he made frequent satiric remarks on what he considered to be wife's tales. Written in a dialogue form in the spoken vernacular, these short entries pointed to absurdity of perceived ideas and practices common among women. Similar brief accounts appeared occasionally in the *Seraj al-Akhbar*, alluding to important social issues concerning women. For example, a brief excerpt in one of the issues of the paper questioned the unnecessary bridal and wedding expenses which were especially high among the ruling class. The excerpt reads: Not long ago a close relative of mine told me that her daughter had '*arusi-i-paighambari* (a type of wedding preferred by the prophet), meaning that it was a simple marriage without the usual hustles associated with wedding ceremonies. I told myself if the ladies call a simple ceremony the type preferred by the prophet how would they term the customary type which usually has a devastating effect on the finances of the families involved ¹⁴.

Tarzi's translations of short stories from European sources carried similar messages. These translations, in his own words, were not only to amuse the readers but to convey an important message. One such translation was «Mathild,» the story of a beautiful young women who borrows a diamond necklace and loses it at a dance party. After selling everything to replace the necklace, she finds out that the necklace she had borrowed was made of fake diamond. The story was clearly intended for the upper-class Afghan women who sought prestige and security in

¹³ Tarzi, *Adab dar Fann* (Art in Literature, collection of poems), 'Enayat Printing House, 1333/1914, p. 120. Kabul.

¹⁴ «Khana Kharabiha» (Disasters), *Seraj al-Akhbar*, vol.3, no. 7, Qaws 22, 1292/December 14, 1913, pp. 7-8.

collecting jewelry. In the prologue Tarzi wrote «No matter how beautiful, charming and intelligent, women always desire accessories to enhance their beauty. They attach such great importance to adornments that they often base their own self-worth in the possession of gems with little functional value. While critical and often condescending, these short stories and dialogues were intended to raise women's thoughts above amusements and force them to rational thinking¹⁵.

In news reports Tarzi often made reference to the achievements of women and their involvement in political activities in other countries, particularly in Egypt and Turkey and to activists for women's rights in Europe. Passages on the treatment of women in different parts of the world were included to show how women had become victims of social norms and philosophies originated by men. In the issue of December 14, 1913, a commentary extracted from the Egyptian paper, *Al-Ahram*, commented on the position of women in the Hindu culture. «A Hindu woman's God in this world is her husband. She has to laugh when he laughs and to cry when he cries. If her husband is away on a journey, she has to fast and sleep on a hard uncovered floor until he comes back. If her husband reproaches or beats her out of anger, she should get down on her knees and apologize for making him angry. If a wife betrays her husband, the husband has the right to kill her. He will, however, give her the right to choose one of the following types of death, to be burned, strangled, or have her throat slit. You can see, Tarzi added in his usual sardonic tone, how fortunate Hindu women are¹⁶!

While Tarzi believed in the power of human reason to better all aspects of life, including the status of women, he could not separate himself from some traditional influences. His interest in feminism fell within the bounds of traditional culture. Rational and enlightened ideas of equality fit within conventional norms. Tarzi's ideal woman was strong, well-informed and rational, yet ardently bound to the moral values of the Afghan Muslim society. While he made the bold assertion that some women make better preachers than men, he advocated a dominant role for men in marital relations. A wife in Tarzi's view was the custodian of a man's good name and the party responsible for maintaining a happy marriage and a prosperous family. No matter how difficult the conditions, she had to endure hardship and maintain a pleasant disposition in order to ensure her husband's success in dealing with bigger problems outside the home. Taking care of a family was, in Tarzi's view, a woman's natural and preferred role. The pattern of life most conducive to a woman's self-development was that of a wife and mother. The husband was to operate in the public sphere, where there was greater potential for the exercise of power, and the wife was to be restricted to the private sphere. In the article «Women in the Family» (*Zan dar 'Ayila*) he describes woman as the pillar of the household and compared her to a seed sown in the ground. Just as a kernel of wheat will produce wheat and that

¹⁵ «Mathild», *Az har Dahan Sokhani wa az har Chaman Samani*, pp. 230–250.

¹⁶ «Zan dar Hind» (women in India), *Seraj al-Akhbar*, vol. 3, no. 7, Qaws 22, 1292/September 14, 1913, p. 12.

of a wild gourd will provide its own kind, a good wife will make a happy, healthy home while a bad wife will ruin an entire family. The prosperity and happiness of a family depend on the good management, good nature, wisdom, patience and pleasant disposition of the wife and the mother. She should remain patient, content and cheerful in the time of crisis. It is the cheerfulness and the sweetness of the wife that gives the husband the strength he needs to cope with greater problems outside the home. She has exclusive power in the home as its manager. As she respects her husbands total control over affairs outside the home, then he too should respect her domain of power. The prosperity and happiness of a family depend on the love and understanding that exist between the husband and wife. A good and wise woman will try to sustain this love and will not do anything to jeopardize her marital happiness. She should never try to undermine her husband's authority or act in defiance¹⁷.

Chastity, in Tarzi's view was the all-important factor in determining how a woman was valued. In a poem entitled «Honor» ('Arz), Tarzi equated chastity with virtue or honor and considered it a woman's priceless adornment and a commodity that, once lost, it would be irrecoverable.

Woman adorned with chastity
 is the world's most highly esteemed
 The soul of the household is honor
 the very essence of a man's life, fortune, and pride
 Honor belongs to man but woman is its protector
 she is the guardian of her husband's pride
 Chastity, grace and piety
 are the only real adornments to enjoy
 Beauty, wealth, good bread and every other value
 become null in the absence of chastity
 The women adorned with modesty and grace
 is luminous as a hur above the human race
 The worth of a woman in the eyes of Mahmud is greater than the world
 but only the woman embellished with honor and grace¹⁸

Conclusion

While Tarzi's views of women, as could be expected from a male defender in the conservative society of the early twentieth century Afghanistan, were well within the more of tradition, he showed considerable courage not only in breaking the traditional silence about women but also in openly defending women. Tarzi's

¹⁷ *Seraj al-Akhbar*, vol. 1, no. 23, Sonbola 5, 1291/August 28, 1912, pp. 14–15.

¹⁸ Tarzi, *Adab dar Fann*, p. 130; *Seraj al-Akhbar*, vol. 3, no. 10, pp. 9–10.

greatest concern was education for women, which went hand and hand with his idea of progress and self-development and stemmed from a deeper conviction that women should be useful and valued for usefulness. He tried to change the prevalent view of women as inferior beings and to encourage and help them see that they had natural capacities equal to men. Although the question of female education and related issues were soon overshadowed in the *Seraj al-Akhbar* by political issues arising from the outbreak of the great war in Europe, Tarzi's articles during the initial years of his career as a journalist provided the rationale for the education of women in Afghanistan. His work conveyed themes which later developed more fully: equal opportunities for education, the citizenship and suffrage for all. Tarzi's appeal to the women of royal court to remove themselves from the restricted sphere of harem and help reform social and political conditions was important in later years. From among the royal women most affected by Tarzi's work was his daughter Soraya, who became queen and took a leading role in improving the status of women in Afghanistan during the 1920s.