Seeing the invisible: the representation of women both in fiction and reality

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“It was Mirza Fatali (Akhundov) who brought the woman on stage, made her talk, laugh, cry, and for the first time, made her existence visible among men.”[1]

Jalil Memmedquluzade

In the nineteenth century, even among the most optimistic members of the intelligentsia, perhaps no one would have believed that in 1918, Azerbaijan would be the first Muslim-majority country to grant women the right to vote, earlier than even many Western countries. Although not full political rights, the intelligentsia’s ultimate goal was to provide both men and women with equal treatment and social rights, even when the question of an independent state was not on the horizon. At the very time that the intelligentsia introduced new literary styles, they also raised questions concerning the unequal status of women that would later become major topics of debates. These debates involved not only men but also a limited number of women who were brave enough to challenge traditional gender roles.

Initially, in their works, the intelligentsia focused on the “unbearable circumstances” of daily life that women had to endure: domestic violence, forced and arranged marriages, child brides, unjust hierarchy in the household and the difficulties of raising children.[2] These debates around daily problems eventually expanded to a broader socio-political spectrum as the intelligentsia took advantage of the newly

available printed media to reach more people. Increasing numbers of newspapers and journals provided new platforms to raise awareness not only of the problems affecting women but also varying social issues such as disturbingly low literacy levels, poverty in the countryside, and the poor working conditions urban workers encountered in factories.

In this paper, by looking at these two different fields – literature and charity activities – I aim to demonstrate how women first gained their voice in fictional characters and how later their presence in literature evolved into active civic participation and involvement in philanthropic activities organized with the support of oil barons and the intelligentsia. It is one of the main arguments of this paper that the intellectual movement led by the secular intelligentsia which is also known as the *Azerbaijani Enlightenment Movement (Azərbaycan maarifçilik hərəkatı),* laid the intellectual foundations of the public consciousness which later gained momentum and turned into a wide-scale political activities.[3] To put it differently, the widespread movement focusing on various issues of public concern that was more evident in the first decades of the twentieth century originated from the late nineteenth century intellectual circles.[4] In other words, raising questions about the status of women created such a vibrant atmosphere and generated so much enthusiasm among the intellectual elite that in a few decades, it was not unimaginable anymore to ensure that women would benefit from equal rights.[5]

Representation of real women in fictional works

Mirza Fatali Akhundov is arguably one of the first authors among the intellectuals of the entire Muslim world who critically discussed women's place in society.[6] Although he is well known as the founder of literary criticism on the territory of modern-day Azerbaijan, this aspect of his works has been disregarded by the historians. Both in his comedies

and articles, he touched upon issues such as domestic violence, forced marriages and child abuse which women had to face. By portraying a realistic image of ordinary women, the target of Akhundov's criticism was religious superstition and the domination of the clergy in social and public life. He advocated equal opportunities for both men and women to have access to education and to choose their partners without being under the pressure of their families. Within the context of a "civilized society," Akhundov successfully created strong women characters who, accompanied by their well-educated male counterparts, fought to change their miserable situation for the better. Applying the methods of critical skepticism that he acquired through his readings of European thinkers enabled Akhundov to bring women's issues into literature. For Akhundov, literature was the best possible tool to spread his progressive ideas, which were unacceptable at the time. In a letter to a contemporary thinker from Iran, Mirza Aga Tabrizi, Akhundov reflected on modern literature as follows: "The time of *Golestan* has passed.[7] Today, such compositions do not have any use. Today, the only genre of writing that guarantees people's prosperity and is desired by readers is drama and the novel."[8]

Akhundov's ideas on women and their role in society were unique and unprecedented. In his comedies, he created the first Muslim women characters who not only had a strong presence in their families but also challenged the domination of men. Perhaps it was for this reason that, when a group of young intellectuals decided to stage Akhundov's plays, the clergy was outraged, and a group of religious fanatics even gathered in front of the theatre to protest intellectuals whom they accused of destroying traditional values. However, Akhundov and his fellow intellectuals, particularly Zardabi, managed to start the process that led to the creation of the first national theatre. Akhundov faced the same attacks and hatred from the clergymen when he was promoting education for women. In his writings, he argued that the only reason for

women's desperate situation was backward traditions and religion. Unfortunately, Akhundov's radical criticism of religion could not find strong support among people who were predominantly Muslim.

One of Akhundov's most popular comedies *Serguzesti- Veziri-xani- Lenkeran* (*The Adventures of the Vizier of the Khan of Lenkeran*) is particularly insightful in its presentation of the desperate situation of women who suffered from various abuses such as forced marriage.[9] Written in 1850, according to the plot of the comedy, the Vizier of Lankaran, who has two wives, plans to marry off one of his wives' sisters Nisa Khanɯm, to the Khan of Lankaran, who is almost three times older than her. The rivalry between the Vizier's wives escalates as the story develops, and at the end of the comedy, the Vizier has to abandon his plan as true love wins over the arranged marriage. Akhundov's message in this comedy was to expose flaws and deficiencies of conservative societies that usually target women and make them fall victim to backwardness and superstition.

From Fiction to Reality

In the nineteenth century, the number of female intellectuals was greater than before. At that time, there were women poets and artists such as Heyran khanim, Khurshid Banu Natavan, Fatma khanim Kemine, Ashiq Peri, and Ashiq Sona. These women mostly came from relatively economically advantaged backgrounds, which allowed them to be active in public life by expressing their concerns in literature. In their works, these women addressed social issues such as early marriages and abusive husbands, which was a challenging task considering the reality of that time. The real situation of women was not so different from the one depicted in fictional works. The issues such as polygamy, ill-treatment against women, forced marriages, physical punishment, and child abuse that Akhundov and other intellectuals touched upon were indeed present. However, the existence of these problems did not preclude

strong women from fighting for equal rights and more participation in public life despite their limited numbers. Although there are only very few available documents on the activities of women intellectuals and activists, I believe that the educational, and particularly charity activities of a small group of women intellectuals in a highly conservative Muslim-majority society, were a significant accomplishment. Obviously, due to the realities of a strongly traditional society, these women could not act independently, but using the reputation and power of their male family members, they created opportunities for themselves to have an impact on their community. One and perhaps the most significant example to these women is Xurshud Banu Natavan. Using her advantageous position as the daughter of the Khan of the Karabakh khanate for charity activities has earned her a well-deserved reputation and admiration among the people.[10] Natavan was probably the most influential woman intellectual of her time, and also a talented painter and embroiderer.[11] Apart from her charity activities, what makes her case worthy of study is that she established one of the first literary societies and sponsored many poets. Her literary society known as *Majlisi-Uns* (*Society of Friends*) is considered the first and the most influential intellectual circle attracting a number of thinkers and writers from the Karabakh region and surrounding areas.

It is worth remarking that the history of women's participation at that time is, to a large extent, connected to the history of charity organizations. As we have already seen in the case of Natavan, tracing the history of charity societies would be useful to learn more about the role of women. Starting from the mid-nineteenth century, on the territory of modern-day Azerbaijan, new charity organizations and societies were established, which played a crucial role in community life by providing free education and social support. At that time, one after the other new charity organizations were established such as *Nəşri – Maarif*, *Nicat*, *Şəfa*, *Qafqaz*

Müsəlman Qadınları Xeyriyyə Cəmiyyəti, *Müqəddəs Nina* and *Müqəddəs Ripsimi* which were instrumental in the cultural and educational progress of women and society in general.[12]

In 1850, a new committee dealing with women's education was opened in Baku. This committee originated from the *Saint Nina* women's society in Tiflis. In accordance with the diversity of the population of Baku, the committee included women from different ethnic backgrounds. This event was particularly important since it gave impetus to the women's movement in the cities. In 1850, at the house of a wealthy aristocrat in Shamakhi, a new school for girls was opened. This school was one of the earliest examples of the extensive campaign for women's education. In the following years, more schools of that kind were opened in Irevan, Derbent, Zagatala, and Shusha. At these schools, besides learning to read the Quran, girls also studied languages and art. The first known gymnasium for girls in Baku was opened in 1874 and followed by the opening of another girls' gymnasium in Yelizavetpol (Ganja). In 1872, the first charity society was established by Hasan bay Zardabi and his wife Hanifa khanim who later became the director of the first secular boarding school (Taghiyev's Girls School) for girls. The first line of the Charter of the organization read, "taking into account the needs of the growing Muslim population in the Caucasus and their poverty, we are creating a society to help those who do not have funds for education."[13] In addition to charity activities, few other cultural and educational societies were also engaged in public education. To this end, they provided schools and students with textbooks and helped the poor students in admission to the school and in their successful graduation. One of the most prominent of these charity organizations, *Nicat*, had a separate branch dealing with women issues, and the female members of the organization were actively involved in almost all the initiatives for women's education. Soon after, new women societies began to be formed in several other cities as well. The first secular school for girls on the territory of

modern-day Azerbaijan, which is also considered the first in the Muslim-majority world, was opened in Baku in 1901 with the support of philanthropist oil baron Haji Zeynalabdin Taghiyev. Graduates of this school later constituted a new generation of women intellectuals and activists among whom there were prominent writers, scholars and publicists.

While charity organizations and schools were busy with providing education to women, debates around women rights divided intellectuals and political activists into two main groups: on the one hand, there were secular nationalists who were against the domination of religion and regarded Islam as the main obstacle to women's rights; on the other hand, there were moderate Islamists who claimed that women rights were included in Islamic law (*fiqh*) and for a fully developed Muslim society women's participation was essential. Although both groups were aware of women's unequal status, they followed different strategies to address this issue. In making this comparison, however, it should be stressed that it was liberal democrats and nationalists rather than the Islamists who contributed the most to improve the situation of women. As a result of their activities, the first schools for women were opened; women were given opportunities to express their concerns on different platforms, and most importantly, women gained the right to vote in 1918 under the first democratic government.

Among the most urgent needs that made educating women a necessity, there was a social concern that was regularly addressed by the intelligentsia. Starting from the mid-nineteenth century, young Muslim men went to the biggest cities of the Empire or even to Europe in order to get a decent education. After acquiring western education and culture, these young people had difficulties in finding compatible partners to marry back in their home country. They either married abroad and stayed there, which was not always a preferable choice, or had troubled marriages in their hometowns. The issue became so serious that the

intelligentsia, under the leadership of Zardabi, proposed to educate young women to eliminate the vast intellectual gap between them and their male counterparts.[14] This fact provides another explanation to understand the motivation behind the local intelligentsia's activities to promote education for women.

Oil Industry and Women's Activism

It would not be an exaggeration to say that, in almost all fields, the development of the Baku oil industry played a crucial role in the advancement of women as well. As ethnographer Farida Hayat mentions in her book *Azeri Women in Transition,* "the oil boom of Baku, its cosmopolitan population, and oil-related industrialization had already led to significant changes in important areas of material culture, consumption, dress code, and the education of women."[15] Although the role of the oil industry, and particularly of the female family members of the oil barons, in changing the public perception of women in the society deserves an entire research in its own right, one should at least mention Liza Mukhtarova, wife a wealthy oil baron Murtuza Mukhtarov. Apart from her lavish lifestyle, Liza Mukhtarova, was known for her role as the first woman to organize charity events in her mansion that was home to a number of young girls from poor social backgrounds. Unfortunately, as Mukhtarovs family fell victim to the terror during the early years of Sovietization, a majority of the documents depicting the activities of the charity society were destroyed. However, the remaining memoirs and a limited number of personal letters allow the reconstruction of the untold stories of the young girls who were sheltered by the charity organization of Liza Mukhtarova.

To better measure the scale of philanthropic activities by the oil barons, a thorough study of the charity organizations would be useful. In this regard, studies on charity organizations, such as *Nesri-Maarif*, *Nicat* and few others,

which mostly dealt with raising awareness about the importance of public education, can provide a valuable account of the cooperation between the intelligentsia and oil magnates.[16] This fact probably also explains the fast-growing numbers of the charity organizations after the oil boom. If in the past there were only a few organizations that were mainly involved in charity activities (such as building and repairing water channels, sheltering orphans), after the oil boom, the main focus of charity organizations became education. Moreover, starting from the beginning of the twentieth century, these organizations became actively involved in political life and even had a considerable impact on major political movements.

A close reading of the activities of the charity organizations allows us to say that before the oil boom, the cooperation between the industrialists and intellectuals was not significant, if not non-existent. This interesting case of cooperation between intellectuals and industrialists is explained differently by various Azerbaijani historians and philosophers. According to philosopher Rahman Badalov, it needs to be explained within the context of enlightenment. He argues that "since the Enlightenment Movement [on the territory of modern-day Azerbaijan] coincided with the romantism era of the Enlightenment, in a way it was natural that industrialists were interested in collaboration with intellectuals."[17] In the national historiography, there is an obvious ideological divergence in explanations of the real motivations behind the collaboration between the intelligentsia and oil barons. This difference can be summed up in two main approaches: according to a broad group of historians, "all cultural projects were genuinely financed and supported by the national entrepreneurs and intelligentsia who sacrificed a lot for the future of the whole nation."[18] On the other hand, according to the second group of historians, the abovementioned cultural revival was possible because of the financial interests of the entrepreneurs and national

sentiments did not play a role.[19] While the first claim is obviously populist and over-romanticizes the role of emotions, it also disregards the fact that the debates on nationhood and nation-building became prominent only in the early twentieth century. The second approach is also not immune from failure as it ignores the hybrid ideological background of the intelligentsia and personal and family relations that in some instances were crucial in deciding the fate of cultural-educational projects. One should also consider that at that time, religious sentiments were relatively stronger among the Turkic-speaking population, whereas among other nationalities in Baku political activeness was more evident. The political situation in Baku, mostly due to the oil workers, became increasingly vibrant by the time of hectic events of 1905. Considering the complexity of the time which saw the emergence of nationalism and the peculiarities of the Baku oil industry, a possible solution to this dilemma requires thorough research on individual case studies involving both intelligentsia and oil industrialists.

Conclusion

Starting from the second half of the nineteenth century, the secular intelligentsia, influenced by the Tiflis intellectual environment, started to be actively involved in spreading advanced Western ideologies in their homelands of Turkic-speaking Muslim populations.[20] Among those progressive ideas, perhaps the most consequential and equally controversial one was recognizing the status of women and expressing dissatisfaction with the traditional domination of the clergy. Despite the strong opposition of the clerics, the intelligentsia eventually managed to ensure the opening of schools for girls, theaters and consequently equal rights for all.

For all that, women of the intellectual movement were truly determined and selfless to challenge the backward traditions

and the norms of a highly conservative society, sometimes risking their own lives. Taken together, the scale of the cooperation between the intelligentsia and the oil barons was so impressively large that there was nearly no charity work or cultural-educational projects without their involvement. Of all the features of this cooperation, the most notable was the active involvement of women in pioneering ventures with their male counterparts. Nevertheless, unlike their counterparts in St Petersburg, women in the South Caucasus, despite their relatively active public presence, did not have a chance to act independently on their behalf. Properly studied, the possible link between the intellectual and cultural revival in the late nineteenth century, the history of this unlikely alliance would open new perspectives for researchers to find out more unknown history of the women of the late nineteenth century that deservedly waits to be explored.

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[1] Cəlil Məmmədquluzadə. əsərləri dörd cilddə. IV cild, 270. [Jalil Mammadguluzade, Works in four volumes. IV volume]

[2] Heydar Huseynov. *Azərbaycanda XIX əsr ictimai və fəlsəfı fikir tarixindən.* [On the History of Azerbaijani Political Thought]. Baku, Şərq-Qərb, 2007, 269

[3] *Maarifçi* originates from an Arabic word which can be translated as an educator, enlightener or intellectual. The group of people which is called the intelligentsia in foreign historiography, in the local literature is usually called *maarifçilər*. The intellectual movement that they led, *Maarifçilik hərəkatı* as it is called in Azerbaijani historiography, is often translated as Enlightenment Movement.

[4] Some historians even consider the activities by influential young intellectuals of the early twentieth century, such as A. Aghayev, J. Jabbarli, M. Hadi and others, the first signs of the Azerbaijani feminism movement. Although I agree that their activities had a significant impact in terms of raising awareness on women's rights, still it is too early to call it feminism movement.

[5] This intellectual elite later constituted a significant part of the political elite who formed the government that granted

women with the right to vote in 1918.

[6] Several historians, such as Janet Afary, have argued that Akhundov was the first Muslim intellectual who painted real images of Muslim women in his plays. For more information on this subject see Afary's *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

[7] *Golestan* (*The Rose Garden*) is a collection of poems and stories by the Persian poet Sa'di who is considered one of the greatest medieval poets in the Middle East.

[8] Akhundov's letter to his contemporary, Mirza Aqa Tabrizi. Akhundov letters, F., 2, p.u.150, ANAS, IM.

[9] The original name of the comedy was Serguzesti-Veziri-xani-Serab (The Adventures of the Vizier of the Khan of Serab) when it was first published. However, Akhundov later decided to change its name as the events in the comedy took place in Lankaran.

[10] Farideh Heyat, Azeri Women in Transition: Women in Soviet and Post-Soviet Azerbaijan, 66

[11] She is usually mentioned in the literature for her famous meeting with the French writer Alexandre Dumas in Baku in 1858. During her meeting with Dumas, she played chess with the French novelist and, as a winner gave him one of her handmade purses, which is now displayed in the Alexander Dumas museum in Paris.

[12] For non-Azerbaijani speakers the translated version of the names of these charity organizations are respectively: *Publication education*, *Salvation*, *Cure*, *Charity Society of the Caucasus Muslim Women*, *Saint Nina*, and *Saint Ripsimi*.

[13] Nasiman Yagublu, *Azərbaycanın ilk qeyri hökümət*

təşkilatları (First Non-Governmental Organizations in Azerbaijan), 15

[14] Zardabi touched upon this issue in his articles on Akinchi. For more see Cabbarov F. *Haci Zeynalabdin Tağıyevin qız məktəbinin tarixindən* [On the History of Taghiyev's Girls School], Baku, 2011.

[15] Farideh Hayat, *Azeri Women in Transition: Women in Soviet and Post-Soviet Azerbaijan.* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 58

[16] Ibid, 6

[17]My interview with professor Rahman Badalov, Baku, April 2007.

[18] This exact line can be found in almost all popular history books and schoolbooks as well.

[19] The abovementioned claims can be found in the works of historians such as Manaf Suleymanov, Qilman Ilkin, and Aydin Balayev.

[20] The city was called Tiflis at that time and only after the decree by the Central Executive Committee of the Soviet Union on August 17, 1936 it was renamed Tbilisi.

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