

SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

July 21, 2015

Ālam-Tāj Qā'em-Maqāmi, *Mirror of Dew: The Poetry of Ālam-Tāj Zhāle Qā'em-Maqāmi*, translated (with introduction) by Asghar Seyed-Gohrab, Ilex Foundation, 2014, 224 pp., \$24.95 US (pbk), ISBN 9780674428249.

Those who are familiar with the Iranian poet Forugh Farrokhzad (1934-1966) through translations may have been wondering with a mixture of admiration and disbelief how it had been possible for such an outspoken emancipated voice to emerge in a Middle Eastern country like Iran, let alone the recognition she has received. Apart from being admired as a great modern poet, and loved by the Persian-speaking world to the extent that she is referred to by her first name only, Forugh's name is now synonymous with aspirations for women's emancipation in Iran.

But if you are one of those who had been wondering how a poet like Forugh could have emerged in Iran's poetry of 1950s-60s, be ready for a much bigger surprise: Ālam-Tāj Qā'em-Maqāmi (1884-1946), another poet with a strong feminist voice, was certainly older than Forugh's grandmother—she could easily have been her great grandmother.¹ If this comes as a shock to you, you can console yourself by the fact that it comes as a shock to Iranians themselves as well: Ālam-Tāj (or Zhāleh, to use her pen name) remained not only unknown as a poet (and almost unpublished) in her own lifetime, but is still unknown to the great majority of Iranians.

Does her near anonymity mean that she was not as great a poet as Forugh? Not at all. She was certainly not as modern—which is understandable, considering her times—and used traditional verse forms. But she was as competent a poet as any other in her time, male or female. Indeed, the poems that have remained show her to be more competent and deft than most.

Zhāleh, born in Farāhān (south-west of Tehran), was the great granddaughter of Mirzā Abol-Qāsem Qā'em-Maqām Farāhāni (1779-1835), chancellor of the third Qājār king Mohammad Shāh, and a very competent poet and writer. As a chancellor, he was a reformist who fought corruption in the court and administration; as a poet and writer, he was a forerunner in using simple, modern language. Eventually, though, he became the victim of a conspiracy, lost the shāh's trust and was executed.

His granddaughter, Zhāleh, was born to a well-to-do, well-educated provincial family. She received an exceptionally good education through different tutors, at a time when the

¹ Quite possible: Ālam-Tāj was born 50 years before Forugh, and 49 years after her own great grandfather.

literacy rate was very low in the country and girls' schools were non-existent. Judging from her own references in her poetry, her curriculum included not only the study of the Qur'an, Hadith (Islamic traditions) and Persian literature, but also rhetoric, logic, philosophy, even astrology and astronomy, to mention only some of the subjects she studied. Her happy childhood years, however, changed dramatically as she grew older. The family moved to the capital, Tehran, when she was fifteen; her father started to have financial problems, which played a role in the decision to give Zhāleh in marriage to a wealthy man of some military rank as his second wife.

Her husband, Ali-Morād Khān, from the influential Bakhtiyāri tribe, was not as well-educated as Zhāleh and, what is worse, was not the kind of man who knew how to experience or express romantic love and tender affections; he also showed little appreciation for his young wife's talents. Soon after her marriage, both of Zhāleh's parents died, and not long after her son Hoseyn was born (1900), she left her husband (and son) and moved to her parental house to live with her brother. She was not to see her son, who had been sent to live among the Bakhtiyāris, until 27 years later. In 1927 Hoseyn finally came to live with her—and by that time he was already a published and rather well-known poet who used the pen name Pezhmān (Hoseyn Pezhmān Bakhtiyāri).

Zhāleh must have started to write poems very early, certainly no later than her early teens. The earliest poems that can be dated with some certainty are from her first year of marriage, and they already show a degree of mastery that can only be achieved after long years of practice. But she never showed her poems to anyone, and if there were a few close friends who knew of her poems, it must be admitted that they kept her secret very well.

Pezhmān used to read his poems to Zhāleh and was surprised by her highly professional critiques; eventually he came to the conclusion that his mother was also a poet, and a very good one at that, although she never admitted this. When Pezhmān found a few poems and published them without telling her, Zhāleh became angry and reproached him severely, becoming even more secretive. At one point she finally had to admit that she had written poems, but she said that she had burned the whole *divān* of her *ghazals*, because “ghazal” (as a verse form) was about love, and she had known no love in her life.

Zhāleh died in 1946. After her death (her son does not specify how long after), Pezhmān found a sheet of paper inside one of the *divāns* of classical poets that she normally read; it was a poem by Zhāleh in her own handwriting. Pezhmān searched more carefully inside all of her books and found more poems, in the end totaling 52 poems (917 couplets). With some hesitation, years later, he started to publish a few of the poems, one at a time, in the literary periodical *Yaghmā*, a stronghold of conservative traditionalists which had a limited circulation among the traditionalist men—much less women!—of letters. (Pezhmān himself wrote predominantly traditionalist *ghazals*.)

Due to the praise he heard from those limited readers, he was encouraged to publish all of the poems he had found as a book or *divān*, which he finally did in 1966, twenty years after Zhāleh's death, and eight years before his own death at the age of 73.

The 1960s in Iran are regarded usually as the years of proliferation of modern literature and art, referred to especially as the golden age of modern Persian poetry, which finally established itself and found its supporters—at least among the intellectuals. This means that, although Zhāleh's poems were artistic masterpieces and thematically quite courageous and revolutionary even for those years (20 years after her death), she did not attract much attention because her work was introduced in the wrong venues. A young generation of poets dominated the literary stage with their “modern,” sometimes “avant-garde” poems. This generation did not bother to page through a conservative periodical like *Yaghmā*, or take

seriously the poems of the *mother* of a mediocre, conservative poet! And then very quickly we come to the years of political upheavals in Iran, armed struggle against the Shāh, the Revolution, and post-revolutionary years of suppression of all undesired voices and mass executions.

The 1966 edition of her *divān* had a circulation of only 1000 copies. Almost 30 years had to pass until a censored edition appeared in 1995, with a circulation of 2,500 copies. Four years later, in 1999, the exiled writer and publisher Nāser Zerā'ati published a new edition in Sweden, based on the first edition that had reached his hand in the form of photocopies—and probably quite unaware of the 1995 edition (which would have been less reliable anyway). It was this edition by Zerā'ati that finally brought Zhāleh some recognition. The reasons: firstly, Iranian feminists were very active in Sweden and often held major annual conferences there that attracted a wide audience; and, secondly, the age of widespread use of Internet and weblogs had begun.

Zhāleh still deserves a lot more recognition; some serious work is required to show that she was not only a radical vanguard of feminism, far ahead of her time, but also an incredibly talented poet, nothing short of the best of her time and even beyond.

Asghar Seyed-Gohrab (Institute for Area Studies, Leiden University) deserves all praise for introducing this great poet to an English-speaking readership at the same time that she is just starting to be more widely appreciated among Iranians. His translation relies solely upon Zerā'ati's 1999 edition—the only edition that I was not able to consult—while our Regenstein Library at the University of Chicago has the 1966 and 1995 editions.

Seyed-Gohrab's edition is not just a translation (with a rather lengthy and informative introduction); it is a bilingual edition which has all the Persian originals on pages facing the English translations and can, therefore, be seen as a fourth edition of Zhāleh's Persian *divān*. One problem, however, is that there are numerous typos—seldom a page without some errors—and a reader not perfectly familiar with classical Persian poetry will not reliably find them. A few of these errors may have appeared in Zerā'ati's edition as well (Seyed-Gohrab's source), but it is likely that most of these typos are the product of this new edition. One example of the former kind of typos, which must have migrated from Zerā'ati's edition to Seyed-Gohrab's, is the following:² Referring sarcastically to Alexander the Great (while in fact criticizing her husband's naïveté and ignorance), she writes,

Khāndand peyambar'sb-o in kam ast
K'u khod na peyambar, ke dāvari'st. (76)³

Seyed-Gohrab's translation reads:

Alexander is called a prophet and this is no small error,
for he is not a prophet himself, but a ruler. (77)

The correct translation should read:

He is called a prophet and this is too little for him,
for he is not just a prophet, but rather a god.

² I had mentioned earlier that I do not have Zerā'ati's 1999 edition, but I was allowed a sneak peek at a new edition (or reprint) Mr. Zerā'ati is planning to publish soon.

³ The book uses Persian script for the originals. All transliterations in this review are mine.

The typo, which is only partly responsible for this faulty translation, is the change from *K'u kbod na* at the beginning of the second line to *K'u na kbod* in Seyed-Gohrab's edition (as well as in Zerā'ati's), which shifts the emphasis of *kbod* (himself) to the person. Zerā'ati, however, is not responsible for some other changes (like god/ruler, etc.). It should be noted that this kind of typo can only escape your attention if you are not familiar enough with Persian meters.

Seyed-Gohrab is capable of rendering a good and faithful translation in good English when he reads and understands the poem correctly—which is what normally happens, but, unfortunately, not always. Maybe the fact that Zhāleh was writing on contemporary issues like women's rights and everyday objects like a sewing-machine, etc., has caused the translator to underestimate the difficulties? But Zhāleh's use of language is hardly different from *Khorāsāni* poets of a thousand years ago. The translator is lucky, though, that those reading the translations only, with little or no knowledge of the Persian language, cannot find the problems in translation and can, without distraction, enjoy and marvel at Zhāleh's strikingly fresh poetry with its particular sense of humor.

For a Persian review of this book, which I hope will follow soon, I will be able to mention many more examples of reading or understanding a line incorrectly, but here I will only mention a few more examples of obvious mistakes. The problems start with the very first poem in the book. The first two couplets have been translated as follows:

*Mard, agar zan rā biyāzārad be amdā, mard nist,
k'āgahi bi-dard rā aẓ āb-e sāheb-dard nist.
Dar pas-e har gard agar gu'i savāri jang-ju'st,
ghey-e tefli nay-savār andar pas-e in gard nist. (52)*

If a man intentionally hurts a woman he is not a man,
for he who has not felt pain is not aware of the sigh of one feeling pain.
You can say that every mote of dust indicates a horseman fighting,
but there is no one behind this mote [i.e. woman] but a child, not a rider. (53)

In the third line, *savāri jang-ju* is not “a horseman fighting,” but “a warlike horseman”—maybe not too big of a difference. In the fourth line, it is the translator who has inserted “[i.e. woman]” for more clarification here, whereas, as we shall see, it is not about a woman. The translator has read the word *nay* (reed) as *ni* (“no” or “not”)—vowels are usually not written in Persian script, allowing different readings. So here it is not *ni* negating the existence of a *savār* (horseman), but the compound noun *nay-savār* meaning “reed (or stick) riding”—i.e., riding a stick-horse and trotting around as children do. In the first couplet, the poet was talking about a man who is hurting a woman (and is therefore not a real man); in the second couplet she is saying (to put it in plain language): “If you assume there's a warlike horseman behind each dust [that rises], behind this dust [that rises when a man hurts a woman] there's nothing except a child riding a stick-horse.”

Furthermore, sometimes the relation between two lines or couplets and their interdependence has not been understood correctly. The following is one of several examples I came across (I choose this one because it is in need of other corrections as well):

*Dide bar nā-kāmi-ye sakhti-barān
bastan-o ān-gah tan-āsān zīstan*

*dar-kebor-e ensān-e ensān-kebuy nist,
gar bekbāhi ādami-sān zīstan. (66)*

Seyed-Gohrab's translation reads:

Your gaze fixed on hard workers who remain unsatisfied,
and then, you live easily?
The ways of mankind are not fit for a man,
if you wish to live like a man. (67)

In this translation, the relation between *dide* (eye) in the first line and *bastan* (to close, to shut) in the second line is lost, as well as the dependence of the first couplet on the second one. Thus, a more faithful translation would be:

To shut one's eyes to the misery of laborers
and live self-indulgently
Is unbecoming a human being with human character,
if you wish to live like a human.

Sometimes a degree of familiarity with Persian meters would have prevented a misreading of the verse, as it was the case with the first example (*na kebod* vs. *kebod na*), and the following is another such example, from the poem "Bandit," in which Zhāleh lashes out at abusive and misogynistic men:

*Lakke bar dāmān-e pāk-e zan maneh
gar jow'it az kebun-e mardān dar tan ast. (180)*

Seyed-Gohrab's translation:

Do no [sic.] besmear the pure skirt of woman
because if you search carefully, you can see man's blood running through her
body. (181)

The correct translation should read:

Do not besmear the pure skirt of a woman [i.e. her chastity]
if you have as much as a drop of a man's blood in your body [i.e. if you are a
man].

Here the translator has read *jow* ("barley," or "a grain or a very small amount of") in the second line as *ju* (assuming it to be from the verb *jostan*, "to search" or "seek"). You may ask here: Wouldn't Persian script, which does not write [short] vowels, allow this reading as well? Answer: Of course it does! According to my calculation (and I'm not very good at math), you can read the string of consonants and/or vowels *j-v-y-t* that, in my reading, form the word *jow'it* in 168 different ways (not forgetting the possibility of one or two *tashdids*—doubling of consonants). Not all of those readings would give meaningful words, of course. You may ask again: Why not *ju*, then? Answer: Because the meter would not allow you to do so: in this particular position in the line, you cannot change *o* (short vowel) to *u* (long vowel);

period! If you are familiar with Persian meters and know how to read traditional Persian poetry, *jow'it* is the only option here.

I hope I have not discouraged anyone from enjoying Zhāleh's poetry, even in the form of this first attempt at an English translation. For those who want to read and enjoy the Persian originals—Iranians as well as students of Persian programs—the numerous typos will be a nuisance, but these are easy to correct in a second edition. For the general, English-speaking readership, who does not need to care about incorrect translations here and there, this is a great and eye-opening read, especially for those interested in women's issues in the Middle East or in feminism in general. We should thank the translator for his effort and hope that a second edition will appear soon.

Saeed Yousef
Senior Lecturer of Persian
University of Chicago

© 2015: Saeed Yousef

Authors retain the rights to their review articles, which are published by SCTIW Review with their permission. Any use of these materials other than educational must provide proper citation to the author and SCTIW Review.

Citation Information

Yousef, Saeed, Review of *Mirror of Dew: The Poetry of Ālam-Tāj Zhāle Qā'em-Maqāmi*, *SCTIW Review*, July 21, 2015. <http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/647>.

ISSN: 2374-9288