Veils and Words

The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers

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For Faridoun

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Revealing and Concealing

Parvin E'tessami

In the summer of 1908, an American, Charles Mason Remey, accompanied by a friend, visited Iran. In his travelogue, he recounts a meeting he had with some Iranian women. The gathering was arranged by a friend who "had for some time past discarded her veil and with her husband received men in her house and garden, yet she was obliged, as she explained to us, to veil in the streets on account of attracting too much attention."[1] The hostess had a very specific aim in mind for that afternoon party. She wanted to encourage other women to "follow her example and unveil."

At the beginning, according to custom, two receptions were held simultaneously. "Twenty or more of us men," writes Remey, "were in one room, while in an adjoining room, separated from us by a curtain, was a party of twelve or fifteen ladies, our hostess slipping quietly from one room to the other, serving and entertaining her guests." Soon, the American guest was asked to talk a little about Western women, which he did "through the curtain to the listeners on the other side." As he spoke, the hostess

> became more and more enthusiastic, until, finally, she went toward the doorway and, drawing the curtain, began speaking very earnestly to the people in the next room. I could not understand her words, but so stirring was the tone of her voice, that I caught the spirit of what she was saying. She was calling to her sisters to come forth and lift their veils, saying that it was a rare opportunity to do so then, for we from the West were there, who were accustomed to seeing women's faces. At the expiration of several minutes her words had the desired effect, for the women arose and drawing aside their veils with one accord entered the room. The men made place for the ladies by retreating to the other side of the room, while the newcomers found seats. When the women had arisen to the situation, they were quite equal to it. Then it was the men who were ill at ease. In fact, their embarrassment was contagious, for even I began to be uneasy and scarcely dared to take a good look at the faces opposite. Sherberts and other refreshments were served. . . .
>
> Bit by bit the men gained their ease, but, as their embarrassment passed, the women seemed to lose courage. Little by little the veils were drawn over their faces, until all were practically veiled. Then one who was seated near the door moved as if to leave, whereupon all arose and like a flock of affrighted birds fluttered from the room.[2]

Why the fear and the flight? Why the discomfort, the shame, the uneasiness, the embarrassment? What caused these "affrighted birds" to take refuge behind their veils and ultimately to flee from the mixed gathering? I suppose it must have been too great a change to make quickly and decisively. Or perhaps it was a reaction to men's ambivalence. The women must have felt helpless at suddenly being exposed to prying eyes, anguish at being abruptly revealed, even if they had wished for and expected it. It is exactly to overcome this serious problem of hesitation and ambivalence that the Women's Freedom Society was founded at the turn of the century "to accustom women to the appropriate deportment at mixed gatherings . . . and to help women to overcome shyness and embarrassment."[3]

Remey's eyewitness account of women's timidity and discomfort parallels the gestures of unveiled women in pictures taken immediately after the compulsory unveiling act of 1936. With their ankle-length skirts, full sleeves, loose dresses, these women seem to have lost the security of their portable walls. Placid and stiff-necked, they look embarrassed and shy. It is as if the difficulty of disclosing their previously covered and publicly invisible bodies translated into embarrassment and unease. Heads lowered, eyes cast down, scrunched up as if to claim as little space as possible, these women attempted to blur the outlines of their bodies. Uncomfortable with exposure, it is as if they preferred absence to presence, maybe because it was what they were used to.

I sense this same tension in the poetry of those women who first at-

tempted to insert a woman's voice and vision into Persian literature. And indeed what is the difference between the woman who tries to conceal her newly exposed body from men's gaze and the pioneering poet who needs to hide her authorial identity from what she perceives as prying eyes and ears? For both, there has been a breach of propriety, an enormous change from the way things had been. The otherwise invisible has gained a body or the otherwise mute a public voice. The poetry of Parvin E'tessami expresses perhaps most eloquently the push and pull between self-assertion and self-denial, between self-revelation and self-concealment, that many women must have felt who wanted to unveil but could not do so easily or at once.

I do not intend to imply that there is a perfect solution somewhere out there, like perfect teeth, to which all women, especially the veiled ones, should aspire. Neither do I mean to imply that the contradictory mixtures of shame and boldness, revelation and concealment in the perceptions and attitudes of the women struggling with the question of the veil is something to be overcome, like a speech impediment or a psychological hang-up. We are all creatures of the half-light. We reject and cling to the veil simultaneously. We cast aside one veil only to weave it anew in a different and more complex form. We unveil only by spinning another veil. There is indeed always another veil to rend. The fact of the matter, however, is that the semiconcealed expressions of these unveiled women in photographs or in print should make us more aware of ambiguities. By interpreting a woman's relationship to the veil in a simplistic manner, we may miss the incredible richness and subtlety of meanings and functions of the veil, our own enigmatic natures, and Parvin E'tessami's shadowy world behind the veil and before it, in which a woman, and a poet in particular, finds herself "unhouseled," like the ghost in *Hamlet.*

It was a happy coincidence that Parvin E'tessami was born on March 16, 1907, into an affluent and cultured family. Her father, Yussef E'tessami, better known as E'tessam-ol Molk, was a man of letters. He wrote and translated several books and was interested in the plight of Iranian women. He not only included several articles on the women's issue in the journal he founded, *Bahar,* but also translated Qasem Amin's book *The Emancipation of Woman,* in 1900, one year after it was published in Egypt.[4] In this translation, entitled *Women's Education,* the author argues that

women should be educated and given a greater role in the public arena.

Women's Education is the earliest book I have been able to locate in Iran, written or translated, entirely dedicated to issues or questions regarding women's status. According to Fatemeh Ostad Malek, it is only after the publication of this book that "a sector of the higher echelon of the society considered unveiling—beginning with the veil becoming less all encompassing and thick—as an important step towards women's emancipation. Under these circumstances, the first *Fatva* [a ruling on a point of religious law] by the constitutionalist *'Olama* [religious scholars] was issued in 1911 against unveiling."[5]

The prominent humorist-satirist Dehkhoda calls the publication of *Women's Education* "an example of an exceptional courageous literary act. . . . History testifies that Yussef E'tessami is the first person who raised the banner of [women's] liberation in Iran and planted the seed of this fruitful tree."[6]

It is not surprising then that E'tessami, with her remarkable education and with, more importantly perhaps, the unfailing support of her father, broke free from social confinement. As one of her brothers said, "Parvin lacked for nothing. In our quiet, unpretentious, and withdrawn family the parents and brothers turned around Parvin as moths do around a shining candle, full-heartedly trying to fulfill her wishes, even the unspoken ones. Perhaps hardly a girl may have enjoyed as much love, adoration, and respect from her own family members as did Parvin."[7]

First educated at home, E'tessami was later sent to the American Girls School, which, as mentioned earlier, was founded in 1874 by a group of American Christian missionaries. Only foreign and Christian girls attended the school until 1891, when two Muslim girls entered and completed their studies later. E'tessami graduated three years later from this school, in 1924, and taught there for a while after graduation.

The tender care and appreciation her father bestowed upon E'tessami helped her develop and nourish her poetic talent. Like Tahereh Qorratol'Ayn, she was allowed to participate—in person and not from behind a curtain—in her father's weekly literary gatherings. According to Nasrollah Taqavi, a family friend, "From her early childhood, Parvin joined us and with a diligence uncharacteristic of a child, she listened to our conversation. She composed her first poem when she was eight. At this age, she could already read and write Persian."[8] The poet Shahriyar also recalls E'tessami regular attendance at her father's literary meetings: "She

would come from school, drop her veil, and then greet and join the gathering."[9] Perhaps there was a connection between E'tessami's artistic development and her not having been secluded and segregated as a child. She accompanied her father "on all his trips in Iran and abroad," and by force of circumstances, she was surrounded throughout most of her life by some of the foremost literary figures of her time.[10]

As a young girl, E'tessami had no problem publishing her poems. She was only fourteen when her first poems appeared in 1921 in her father's literary journal, *Bahar.* This easy access to publishing, however, was not to be enjoyed for long. As E'tessami approached a marriageable age, her father would not allow publication of her poems for fear that people would consider it an advertisement or a promotion in the marriage market. Women's marriage through the publication of their poems was not such an unheard of phenomenon. Badr ol-Moluk Bamdad describes the experience of Fakhr-e Ozma Arghun, the mother of the prominent poet Simin Behbahani, as a result of publishing a poem: "Fakhr-e Ozma Arghun was once moved to write a fiery patriotic poem with a verse saying that 'the blood of traitors must be shed, and stain Iran's soil tulip-red.' It was published in a newspaper named *Eqdam* [Action], which came out in 1923–1924. The poem shaped her destiny because it led to her acquaintance and marriage with the newspaper's editor, the journalist and novelist Abbas Khalili."[11]

Almost half a century later, Hadi Hoquqi, the editor of the Los Angeles-based Persian newspaper *Khandaniha,* still equates women's writing with only one objective: finding a husband. "Hengameh Afshar, like most Iranian girls, believes that at sixteen the mother and the sister of a suitor must ring the bell to their house. But when they lose hope, they resort to such professions as teaching, nursing, and office work to earn a living and to poetry, literature, journalism, and so forth for fame. All this is for one objective: to quickly get married."[12]

Unlike most of her female contemporaries, E'tessami was not married off at an early age. Actually, she was twenty-seven when she married, by arrangement, her father's cousin in 1934. Whatever the reason, and she never shed any light on it, the marriage lasted only two and one-half months, and E'tessami divorced her husband. However unsuccessful the marriage might have been, it was soon after, in 1935, that she published her first collected poems, *Divan.* The volume included

150 poems, of which only 12 had hitherto appeared in print. This was E'tessami's last and only attempt to gain wider recognition. Anguished and seemingly disappointed by the reception she received, she did not allow a reprint of her poetry collection in her lifetime, in spite of repeated demands. According to Dehkhoda, she also burned some of the poems she liked least a few years before her death.[13]

> O rose, what did you receive from the inhabitants of
> the garden, save the reproach and malevolence of thorns?
>
> O lovely diamond, despite your radiance what did you
> experience in the marketplace, save base customers?
>
> Into the garden you strayed; Fate caught and caged you.
> O captive bird, what have you ever known save a cage?[14]

Although disillusioned with her "base customers," E'tessami has always been popular with the reading audience in Iran. The first posthumous collection of her poems was a great success. It was published a few months after her early death in April 1941 of typhoid fever.[15] Expanded by fifty-three poems, it has gone through more than a dozen editions in the last fifty years. Indeed, E'tessami is not the kind of poet who needs to be unearthed or revived. Consistently, and for over five decades, she has had a powerful hold on the imagination of her amazingly large readership. Her poetry has survived the many ups and downs and literary fashions of contemporary history in Iran. Her reputation is as secure now, after the Islamic revolution, as it was previously. Neither has she been subjected to critical neglect. As a matter of fact, she has been and continues to be the center of literary and, at times, political debate. Her poetry receives an abundance of commentary and criticism in newspapers, literary journals, and books.

When E'tessami's poems first appeared in *Bahar,* they were considered a curiosity that could only be accounted for as some kind of aberration. Scholars debated back and forth on their authorship. Could a child —a girl no less—have written these remarkable poems? E'tessami herself tried to convince people that she was the author. In the following poem, she raises her voice in protest and denies the status of honorary manhood conferred upon her:

From the dust of false thoughts, the heart better be cleansed
So that the demon knows this mirror is not for dust.

Some literary persons believe Parvin to be a man
She is not a man, this riddle better be solved.[16]

The riddle was not to be easily solved. Suspicions and accusations persisted; denials continued. The author of E'tessami's *Divan,* many were convinced, was a man posing as a woman. Simin Daneshvar's account of the first memorial convention held for E'tessami at the University of Tehran is interesting: "While studying at Tehran University, I was appointed secretary of a literary club, with a male mathematics student as its president. We faced the death of Parvin E'tessami, a very prominent woman poet, and I suggested that we hold a memorial for her. I expected that since I was a woman I would be selected to talk about her or at least read several poems written by her. A poet-professor was invited to criticize her *Divan,* which he did, but in a very clever way he aroused suspicion in the audience's mind that most of Parvin's poems had been written by her father."[17]

Years later, 'Abdul-Hossein Ayati claimed to have discovered that three-quarters of E'tessami's poems actually belong to the male poet Rownaq 'Ali Shah.[18] And Garakani, the author of the first critical book wholly dedicated to E'tessami and written as late as 1977, is convinced that Dehkhoda is the real E'tessami.[19] He argues in some 140 pages that no woman, let alone Parvin E'tessami, who in his view was "kind of ugly, timid, and cross-eyed," could have written such good poems. The book is replete with arguments such as the following: "In principle, the usage of Arabic words and complex Persian vocabulary by a 'woman' or a 'youngster' is shocking. . . . That is why in a poetry collection attributed to a woman (and lacking as it does any poems other than maybe one or two that revolve around women's themes), citations from the Qor'an and the usage of so many difficult and uncommon words—and that at such a skilled and expert level—seem strange and indigestible."[20]

Parvin's vast vocabulary, both Persian and Arabic, is only one of the many points Garakani presents to support his contention that indeed she is not the author of poems ascribed to her and hence the title of his book, *Tohmat-e Sha'eri* [Accused of Being a Poet]. Other points are

raised on an even more elemental level. With dazzling conviction, the author notes that E'tessami lacked the physical and emotional qualifications but above all the masculinity necessary for writing good poetry. Besides, "a woman's art is making an artist out of a man," he contends.[21]

Garakani's stance can perhaps be dismissed as too shrill, too extreme. But his views are not isolated. Even E'tessami's admirers, those who do not question the authenticity of her poems, cannot come to terms with her being a woman. To them, she is more like a man. In other words, even when men have celebrated her achievements, most have done so through a prism that either restricts creativity to men or acknowledges the value of E'tessami's creativity but unsexes and resexualizes her. Granted literary value, she is denied her womanness; allowed her gender, she is refused her talent.

For an explicit expression of the assumption that a good woman poet is some kind of a man we don't have to look farther than the introduction to E'tessami's own *Divan.* Malek-ol Sho'ara-ye Bahar, one of E'tessami's first staunch supporters, writes: "Like a man, she composes the poem called 'God's Grace,' and introduces the reader to loftier thoughts and truth."[22] The prominent literary critic, 'Abdol Hossein-e Zarrinkub, titles his article: "Parvin: A manly woman in the arena of poetry and sufism."[23] The poet Shahriyar describes her in a poem as manly because of her "big body."[24] And Manuchehr Nazer explains in his recent book, *Negareshi bar Ash'ar-e Parvin E'tessami* [Some Observations on the Poetry of Parvin E'tessami], why critics regard her "poetry as manly": "One of the reasons [for such a consideration] is the power and eloquence of her words. But this itself is the consequence of two other causes. First, it is because Parvin was a pious woman with a solid faith in God and creation. . . . As for the second and main reason, she paid attention to eternal and universal truth which does not discriminate between men and women and addresses the whole humanity."[25]

These remarks, far from being intended as a slight, are meant to compliment E'tessami. She is assumed to be more than just a woman, but a "manly" woman, a woman elevated to the level of a man. And yet E'tessami had a voice and a point of view of her own. She neither sounded like a man, nor looked like one, nor imitated male thought, tone, or ideology. Unlike George Sand, she never donned male clothing. Unlike George Eliot, she never chose a male pseudonym. Unlike classical male

poets to whom she is compared all too often, she never wrote lyrical or panegyric poems. How then, we might ask ourselves, is she transformed into a "manly" woman?

Perhaps it is implicit in such a metamorphosis that only men reveal themselves in print. If it is a woman who reveals herself, ergo, she must be a man. The act of publishing is construed as a masculine act. If it doesn't turn a woman into a whore, then it must turn her into a man. One could also argue that the reality of a talented, prolific woman poet is shocking, too disorienting to a society without any such previous experience. Like the men in Remey's account, confused when confronted with this new sight of unveiled women, even those critics with the best of intentions became "uneasy and scarcely dared to take a good look at the faces opposite."[26] They could not find the right words to describe her. With no previous model, they had no mold to fit her in. She had no lineage. No past. No tradition. She was an anomaly and cause for deep confusion.

The literary scholar, Qazvini, who never wrote to E'tessami directly, expresses this astonishment in a letter to her father: "The more I read the poems, the more my admiration turned to astonishment as to how in the midst of such an acute shortage of [implied masculine] scholars and literati such a queen of a poetess could appear in the heart of Iran."[27] Bahar, known for his progressive views, is no less shocked than Qazvini. "It is no big surprise," he writes, "that in a country like Iran, a mine of culture and literature, a prodigious store of poetry written by men has developed. A woman poet, however, privileged with verve and talent, capable of writing excellent and pleasant poems, especially with such a mastery based on research and inquiry, ought to be considered exceptional and surprising."[28]

Perhaps the reality of a woman writer must be experienced for several generations before it escapes the brand of abnormality, transgression, transvestism of some kind or other. And I emphasize "generations" because, if we only look for isolated incidents, we find a number of women writers denied the support of a tradition and consequently metamorphosed into men. Here's Farid-ed Din 'Attar, the Sufi poet of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, who needs to justify himself for having included Rabe'e ("the one set apart in the seclusion of holiness, that woman veiled with the veil of sincerity. . . . Lost in union with God; that one accepted by men as a second spotless Mary")[29] in his book, *Memoirs of the Saints:* "If anyone should ask me why I note her amongst the ranks of men, I reply that the master of all prophets has said, 'God looks not to your outward appearance. Attainment of the divine lies not in appearance but in sincerity of purpose. . . .' Since a woman on the path of God becomes a man, she cannot be called a woman."[30]

Several centuries later, the prominent fiction writer Mohammad 'Ali Jamalzadeh believed Daneshvar, the first woman novelist, to be a man. "Some twenty years ago," he writes,

> I started to communicate with the journal *Honar va Mardom* [Art and People] which was published in Tehran through the ministry of Art and Culture, and was indeed a valuable publication. Dr. Daneshvar edited this journal and I had thought that this distinguished person belongs to the masculine gender and is a man rather than a woman. All my letters and correspondences were addressed accordingly. Suddenly, I received a letter in Geneva from the late Jalal Al-e Ahmad which informed me that Dr. Daneshvar belongs to the fair sex, is a woman, and apparently his wife. I whispered so much the better to myself and from then on our relationship became friendly.[31]

E'tessami's literary excellence, like that of Rabe'e before her and Daneshvar after her, is not interpreted as evidence of women's potential, should they be given a chance to develop it. Instead, her poetry is considered as manly with the implicit assumption that men alone can write good poetry. If a woman accidentally or, to use Bahar's word, "miraculously" writes good poetry, she must be some kind of a deviation from the norm, a deviation that is quickly resolved by regarding it as unwomanly. It is difficult, it seems, if not impossible, to be considered different from men without automatically becoming "nonexistent." After all, the scale of measurement, the standard, and the norms are exclusively of man's making and interpretation.

As a "manly" woman, E'tessami is included, then immediately excluded; accepted, she is quickly branded as an anomaly of a sort. She cannot be accepted as a possibility actualized rather than as a miraculous phenomenon. Ultimately and at best, she is reluctantly or patronizingly included as a token woman in an all-male pantheon. If the cost she has to pay to enter this exclusive club is rather high (i.e., her becoming a man), the price other women have to pay for this tokenism is no less

exorbitant. As Carolyn Heilbrun puts it: "Exceptional women are the chief imprisoners of nonexceptional women, simultaneously proving that any woman could do it and assuring, in their uniqueness among men, that no other woman will."[32]

The contention that E'tessami writes in a manly fashion appears not only in the works of her male traditionalist contemporaries. It also reappears in the younger avant-garde critics—male or female. Ironically, the attitudes of young and old, modernist and traditionalist, religious and secularist, male and female, while sharply different on many grounds, are curiously similar in their assessment of this aspect of E'tessami's poetry. Now seen as compromising her femininity, now viewed as exceptional, she gets branded by both groups as masculine. Reza Barahani, despite his evident distress about women's silence and invisibility in Iranian history, overlooks E'tessami's major contribution to Persian literature in general and women's literature in particular. In *Tarikh-e Mozakar* [Masculine History], with an amazing certainty that takes the form of a self-evident truth, he writes: "Parvin's poetry is manly. It relies on age-old patriarchal morality. Surprisingly enough, it leaves championing women's rights to men. A certain Iraj Mirza should pop out of somewhere and talk for the first time about women's unveiling in Iran. As for E'tessami herself, she has not so much as a passing reference to woman's cultural oppression. If she does mention it at all, it is to accept it as fate, eternal and perpetual."[33]

Barahani is ignoring many facts even documented by the same history he criticizes as too overtly patriarchal. To cite just a few, Iraj Mirza is not the first one to talk about women's unveiling. Earlier, Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani, Malcom Khan, Akhundzadeh, and Lahuti, among others, repeatedly had condemned the veil on aesthetic, functional, and social grounds. Furthermore, we know of a woman, Tahereh Qorratol'Ayn, who as early as 1848, struggled for the option to unveil herself. She was followed by many other women. As for E'tessami, she did not rely on age-old patriarchal morality, as evidenced by the kind of poet she was and the kind of poetry she wrote. Besides, she made repeated explicit pleas for women's emancipation in her work. One has only to listen to them. In 1924, during her graduation ceremony, she said: "Women's lives in the Middle-East for long have been gloomy and afflicted, drenched in hardship and suffering, crammed with servitude and abjection. . . . It is our hope that through the effort of scholars and ideologues a spirit of perfection is created in the nation, and through education, important social reforms are brought about."[34]

More than a decade later, her attitudes toward women's issues remained basically unaltered and uncompromising.

> Formerly a woman in Iran was almost non-Iranian.
> All she did was struggle through dark and distressing days.
>
> Her life she spent in isolation; she died in isolation.
> What was she then if not a prisoner?
>
> None ever lived centuries in darkness like her.
> None was sacrificed on the altar of hypocrisy like her.
>
> In the courts of justice no witnesses defended her.
> To the schools of learning she was not admitted.
>
> All her life her cries for justice remained unheeded.
> This oppression occurred publicly; it was no secret.
>
> Many men appeared disguised as her shepherd.
> Within each a wolf was hiding instead.
>
> In life's vast arena such was woman's destiny:
> to be pushed and shoved into a corner.
>
> The light of knowledge was kept from her eyes.
> Her ignorance could not be laid to inferiority or sluggishness.
>
> Could a woman weave with no spindle or thread?
> Can anyone be a farmer with nothing to sow or to reap?
>
> The field of knowledge yielded abundant fruit,
> but women never had any share in this abundance.[35]

It is ironic that Barahani, who takes note of the silence of women and is apparently immensely disturbed by it, seems to have difficulty in hearing them when they finally speak in public. Unwittingly, perhaps, he imposes yet another form of silence on them. Although he may affirm woman's right to self-expression, her exercise of such a choice should con-

form to what he considers real femininity. Once again, a woman is sentenced to passive dependence on arbitrary androcentric definitions. She should say what she is expected to say; or, rather, she should have said what her critics, several decades later, wished her to have said. No wonder, the hen, "a captive in man's trap" in one of E'tessami's poems entitled "The Reproach of the Uncouth," bemoans: "Why tell our story? Nobody will listen / Why recount our life? Nobody will read it anyhow."[36]

It has been argued time and again that E'tessami carefully avoided any feminist stance. M. Ishaque claims that "it is rather strange that she has not wielded her pen in the cause of amelioration or uplift of her own sex. It was only when the abolition of the veil was enforced by an imperial Edict in 1936, that she gave full vent to her pent-up feelings in her *Ganj-i-Iffat* (Hidden Treasure of Chastity)."[37]

E'tessami regarded education for a woman far more important than forcibly removing her veil. Aware of gender inequities and concerned with discrimination, she never subordinated a woman's welfare to the symbolic significance of unveiling as a token of the modernity of the state. As a matter of fact, even in the "Hidden Treasure of Chastity" poem, she takes no clear position; a position that is either quite pro-unveiling or utterly pro-veiling. The complexity of the issue at hand did not allow her a quick and easy validation of either position. She did, however, refuse to consider the veil a sign of feminine modesty. As if predicting with remarkable astuteness the accusation soon to be brought against unveiling, mainly its equation with corruption and immodesty—cardinal sins for a Muslim woman—she argued in the last line of the poem that "a worn out *Chador* is not the basis of faith in Islam."

E'tessami has also been repeatedly stereotyped as a traditional recluse in the shadow of an overprotective, equally traditional father. This position is at times taken to the extreme of portraying her as a sensitive medium who merely and passively reflected the ideas and ideals of her father. "Didn't Parvin turn her father's ideas into poetry at the age of fourteen just as she had transformed into poetry his translations at the age of eight?" asks Fereshteh Davaran. "Parvin never disconnected her connecting cords to her father. She not only remained obediently loyal to E'tessam-ol Molk but also to the patriarchal tradition of Persian poetry."[38]

But the patriarchal tradition of Persian poetry demanded a woman's silence, her submissive domesticity as wife and mother, her authorial absence from the printed text, to none of which E'tessami, or for that matter, her father, complied. In the words of the literary critic Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, "change is a process rather than an exertion of individual will, the result of constant cultural interactions between the poet and the culture that surrounds him or her. In the works of the poets of Parvin E'tessami's generation, the current running against the tradition of Persian poetry still runs below the surface, and thus remains invisible to the casual onlooker."[39]

These evaluations, divergent as they are, are similar in their inability or unwillingness to view woman as an autonomous individual, capable of choice, and credited for her achievements. Denied the privilege of a space in which she can be the actor rather than the grateful beneficiary, her uniqueness is neglected. She is forced to conform to a model conception of womanhood whether she is veiled or forcibly unveiled, whether she is living by the ethos of a traditional patriarchal culture or of a modern version of it. In the critical discourse, too, the age-old subject/object, active/passive dichotomies continue: critic the subject, woman the object; critic the arbiter, the judge, the actor, woman the judged, the recipient, the acted upon. One defines, chooses, categorizes; the other gets defined, chosen, categorized. And this either/or formulation leaves little room for appreciation of woman's limitations as well as her potentialities, even when actualized.

None of the many critics who have theorized about E'tessami, however, explain exactly what or how a woman of her generation and with her background should have written. They seem to approach women's writing exactly as legislators treat women's bodies. Both neglect the many invisible traces of centuries of institutionalized veiling. Both disregard the many implications and multilayered complexities of veiling and unveiling.

It did not occur to the legislators of either the unveiling act of 1936 or of the veiling law of 1983 that while the veil might be proclaimed illegal or obligatory by force, the gestures, behavior, and worldview attached to it cannot be transformed overnight. Likewise, literary critics, for the most part, seem to impose their own version of forced literary veiling or unveiling on women's writing. For centuries femininity as expressed, defined, and perceived by the male value structure was divorced from the realities of womanhood. Similarly, women's writing is made to fit the mold of theories about phantom femininity. If female

stereotypes divested women of their particularity and of the specificities of their individual lives, this kind of criticism denies what a woman is in favor of what she ought to be. Wittingly or not, these critics grant their version of modernity and femininity a totalitarian role in structuring experience or in reflecting it in literature. Then or now, the attitude toward woman's rights and capacities for self-assertion or expression seems not to have changed much.

Paradoxically, what is called a "manly" body of poems constitutes in fact the burgeoning of a tradition of women's poetry, a tradition that strives to integrate a woman's self in its various aspects, including the public, with poetry. Parvin E'tessami is undoubtedly one of the pioneers of this tradition. She is a woman who refused anonymity, namelessness, and the masculine definition of reality and art. She used the mundane, the insignificant everyday details of domestic life as metaphors and allegories in her poems, deliberately breaking down the rigid separation of important and unimportant as defined by literary tradition.

E'tessami extended the field of rationalism far beyond the master discourse and used feminine experiences and images to enlarge the field of knowledge and rationality. In the poem "God's Weaver," the poet not only gives voice to one who has been traditionally suppressed but also questions the very validity of the value system that has so suppressed her.[40] The poem starts with the observations made about a spider.

Stretched on the floor lay a lazy laggard.
In good health, yet tired was he, lethargic, unwell.

He spied a spider near the door, busily working,
oblivious to everything round about it, good or bad.

It toiled ambitiously as with a spindle,
its mind bent solely on its work.

Hidden behind the door, it constantly
kept lookout, waiting in ambush for prey.

It wove webs thinner and finer than gossamer—
below, above, near, far, and everywhere.

It hung both visible and invisible curtains.
It spun ropes out of its own spittle.

Without the use of words it taught lessons.
It fashioned sensible plans out of raw threads.

It's the same with all work:
Don't quit the polo game while the ball can be hit.

The spider tore down its net,
only to build it up again.

Now dropping down, now climbing up,
down and up it went.[41]

Weaving and unweaving, laboring ceaselessly, speaking through her silent art, the spider is secluded in a corner. Master of fine designs, architect of masterpieces, the spider, this emblem for the woman artist, is vulnerable to the insensitivity and attack of the heavy-handed observer.

The work was well done without any tools.
Many circles were drawn without a compass.

Countless angles and triangles were executed.
Who taught the spider to make such designs?

It had toiled supremely and now owned a work.
It was the architect of that construction.

Such a profession no doubt brings great reward.
Each of its webs contains many warps and woofs.

Dancing upwards, dancing downwards,
now busily weaving, now skipping rope,

it was humble and unimportant, yet proud;
simple and uncomplicated, though a master.

A perfectionist at counting and drawing lines,
a deviser of flawless patterns and plans.

The observer, vain and arrogant, reminds the spider of the triviality of its work. He emphasizes in no uncertain terms the insignificance, worthlessness, and above all the unmarketability of the spider's art.

> The lazy fellow said: "What a superficial job!
> Heaven is in no need of such operations.
>
> There are mountains to climb in this world's workshop.
> Who'll ever exalt you, you wisp of straw?
>
> You spin threads for others to sweep away.
> You design plans for others to spoil.
>
> No one who is wise ever builds a house
> that can be blown to bits by a sneeze.
>
> You lay foundations on shifting sands.
> You draw nice patterns, but as if on water.
>
> Improve yourself; see if you're worth your salt.
> Weave brocade, if you have the skill.
>
> No one's ever made a shirt from your rotten fabric;
> nor did anyone ever thread your flimsy yarn.
>
> Who'll ever notice you there behind the door?
> You'll never be called an artist.
>
> A puff of smoke or wind, and you are homeless.
> A breath or bit of moisture, and you are engulfed.
>
> Who'd ever deliver you wool or yarn?
> Who'd ever ask you to make a cashmere?

The spider, assured its art would eventually triumph in mysterious ways, insists that one worldview—that of the man—is not enough to provide full understanding of the world. It is too narrow, too limited, too one-sided. It leaves out the perspectives of those behind walls and curtains who do not exercise institutional power; those immured in silence and allegedly unworthy of attention and recognition. The spider

insists that her perspective is valuable, that, in fact, it can be appreciated in another setting. Backing its argument with indisputable logic—the logic of the marketplace—it contends that its work is precious and brings a good price in another realm where values are different.

> There exists another market, my dear Sir,
> where my fabric is well appreciated.
>
> No matter how great the customer, the gold treasure—
> neither can compare with the eye of an expert.
>
> You are blind to the curtains of my walls.
> How do you expect to see the veil of secrets?
>
> You keep cavilling me, the spider,
> when you've nothing to your name but arrogance.
>
> I've been a weaver from the beginning,
> and this I'll be as long as I live.
>
> I've taken every opportunity, used every chance,
> to weave, to weave, and to weave.
>
> This is my calling, important or not.
> I am the apprentice, time is the master.

Spinning, like weaving, has long been a symbol of woman's sanctified role and function. Spindle or needle in hand, a woman is within her assigned arena of domesticity. Like Penelope (whose name also means a Veiled One), Philomela (whose tongue was cut out), Mary, Queen of Scots, and their many nameless Eastern sister weavers, women have used their looms, thread, and needles silently to express the unexpressed. In "God's Weaver," the feminine metaphor of spinning is elevated from the level of mere duty and drudgery to the status of an accomplishment. Here, in this poem, art is not defined as an attribute of only the officially recognized artists. The spider, secluded and concealed behind curtains, establishes the worth and value of her neglected, unpretentious artistry.[42]

Identifying with the spider, the poet dreams of a magic place where

she need not conceal herself and her art in obscurity; where, unlike Penelope, she need not undo at night all that she has achieved in the day because completion would spell disaster; where, unlike Philomela, she need not lose her tongue to be able to sing like a nightingale. Parvin E'tessami, like Emily Dickinson before her, who was not appreciated in her lifetime, identifies with and celebrates "the spider as an artist."

> The spider as an artist
> Has never been employed,
> Though his surpassing merit
> Is freely certified
>
> By every broom and Bridget
> Throughout a Christian land—
> Neglected son of genius,
> I take thee by the hand.[43]

E'tessami captured the spoken voice in the written word. She articulated the previously unarticulated. She commanded attention and achieved recognition. She appropriated a voice of her own, a voice normally muffled by inner or outer forces. Thus, the publication of her *Divan* may be acknowledged not only as the first major poetry collection ever published by a woman in Iran but also as a major act of unveiling.

The voice of Parvin E'tessami recounting, moralizing, and advising in public is the most original feature of her work. This voice is striking not only because of its continual confrontational tone. E'tessami asserts, though with awe and confusion, her voice in the public arena. Repeatedly, she includes her name in the poems by taking advantage of a well-established masculine tradition—*Takhallos.* In fact, the more people doubted her authorship, the more she seems to have felt compelled to thus sign her poems. If only one of the twelve poems published in *Bahar* bore her name, five of these original poems have her name attached to them in the *Divan.* Her proper name is no longer improper in public. She refuses to be a nameless presence, whether as a "mystery" or on the margins of masculine tradition.

In her personal life, too, E'tessami rejected marginality and invisibility. Unlike her mother, of whom we know nothing save her being a "selfless woman devoted to the happiness of her family" and surviving

"her daughter by 32 years,"[44] E'tessami earned herself a more detailed public biography. Even in her youth, she expressed frustration at the limitations placed on women's lives. She refused to be kept in the women's quarter, in the kitchen, in the bedroom. Tying women's self-development to education, she not only repeatedly pleaded for its advancement but also became one of the founding members of *Kanun-e Banovan,* the Women's Center, whose primary objective was to promote unveiling and education among women. She moved beyond the acceptable categories of feminine status for her generation. In a culture where a woman's identity is defined relationally, solely with reference to the men in her life, where the word *Zan,* meaning woman, is synonymous with wife, E'tessami resisted such definitions. She escaped the prisonhouse of a bad marriage in spite of the social stigma attached to divorce. She left her husband, never to marry again. Neither a wife nor a mother, neither a lover nor the beloved, she established her identity as a poet.

If we approach E'tessami's poetry on its own terms, its salient features are different from those that critics have traditionally found in her work. In reappraisal, her poetics seem to arise from a mode of expression that is concrete and narrative rather than abstract and formal. There is a genuine appreciation for the complexity of people and situations. All presentations are contextual, based on the particulars of the situation. Like the break of dawn when light and darkness coexist, E'tessami's writing deals with mixtures and paradoxes. Free will and predestination, good and bad, power and powerlessness, freedom and necessity are held in a state of dynamic tension. Parvin manages to attend to voices other than her own and to include in her poems different and often divergent points of views engaging and disengaging moral and social issues.

Unlike many of her contemporaries, E'tessami was not committed to any particular dogma or political party. Her stands, as I see them, resist any categorical formulation. She avoided a hegemonic authorial voice and opted instead for multivocality.

Creating poems out of a polyphony of voices is one of the features of her poetry. Human beings, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, a leading Russian thinker of the twentieth century, are constructed out of a polyphony of voices that represent different discourses, from the political to the literary to the religious.[45] E'tessami refused to limit herself to a single narrative voice. Unburdened of any deep-seated need for a monolithic

vision of the world and a mythical wholeness, free from dogmas that are believed to explain, order, and solve the complex and at times contradictory phenomenon of social existence, she presented opposing views, articulated paradoxes, faced reality in its multiplicity.

E'tessami portrays life from the vantage point of a woman. She creates a new literary language to express women's insights and experiences. Her repeated use of domestic images, her frequent references to pots and pans, beans and peas, thread and needle, and her sensitivity to and superb description of female bonds are clear indications of her attempt to integrate a woman's point of view into poetry. She uses new metaphors, considers new themes, identifies with the victims. Although she avoids involvement in conventional politics, she shows relentless sensitivity to, and rejection of, any form of violence. On the whole, her perspective is private and familial, her allegiance to the domestic sphere, her reasoning consistently based on interdependence.

In poem after poem, E'tessami ties the experience of self to activities that center or should center on care and connection. Her repeated explorations of emotional commitments are not adjuncts to the more universal issues of life and death but central to her worldview. Even though a preoccupation with male/female relations and romantic love is absent from her work, there is in it no general flattening of emotion. In fact, her poetry thrives on the portrayal of attachments to others, such as relationships between kin, between friends, between rulers and ruled, and especially between mothers and children.

Furthermore, E'tessami elevates women's vernacular storytelling to the status of a literary discourse. She uses anecdotes, allegorical tales, fables, strife poems *[Monazereh],* and parables to tell stories. She reproduces the voice of women storytellers in her written work, thus reversing an established order. Although storytelling has been traditionally within a woman's accepted discourse and well integrated into her life, she has only told stories. Men have written and composed them. E'tessami emerges from an oral tradition; but unlike her muted, anonymous mothers and sisters, she inscribes her signature on what she creates. She becomes a public storyteller.

Singing birds, as portrayed in Persian literature, have been traditionally male. For centuries, the courting bird has celebrated the beauty of his beloved—the Rose—and lamented her reticence, her silence. E'tessami

reverses this tradition by making her bird female. In her poetry, the "caged bird" ventures into the traditionally forbidden garden. It is symbolically significant that the male nightingale—this age-old metaphor for the poet and the loyal lover of the Rose—after well over a thousand years of segregation in Persian poetry, is finally reunited with his female counterpart in her poetry. Aware of and disturbed by the fact that no mention was made of this female bird in the garden, E'tessami becomes one:

> A woman lived in a cage and died in a cage
> The name of this bird in the rose garden was never mentioned.[46]

The singing bird becomes a metaphor of poetic possibility for women, too.[47] Like her nightingale, Simin Daneshvar sees E'tessami as a poet "who proved to women that a woman can become a poet, and for that matter, a good poet."[48]

E'tessami simultaneously conformed to and subverted patriarchal literary standards. Not writing in a cultural vacuum, she had a tradition of almost a thousand years of male poets and masculine poetry to inspire her and was personally instructed and surrounded by male contemporaries. Although she transcended, in more ways than one, the social and literary conventions of her time, she also drew heavily from and depended on them. Writing in classical style, she showed little direct interest in modernistic experiments in form. Perhaps more than any other woman writer of contemporary Iran, her general outlook on life was stoic. Her belief that love, wealth, and fame are illusory, at best transitory, her perception of the ever-turning wheel of fortune, her detachment from many earthly desires, place her in a long and established tradition. She also never breaks through the barrier of impersonality— another literary convention. In fact, throughout the *Divan,* the narrator deliberately erases her personality. Because the inner landscape of the poet remains an absolutely private matter, there is little in her book that intentionally and directly addresses her life. She does not voluntarily commit much self-revelation to paper and keeps the reader at a strictly measured distance. She camouflages just as she expresses. She hides behind her art as she asserts herself through it.

In her nonliterary life, too, E'tessami was a private woman. Temperamentally, she is known to have been timid and withdrawn. She had few

friends, and rarely did she confide in them. The details of her life remain a mystery to this day. She seemed to have been willing to pay with loneliness for her penchant for solitude.

Garakani repeatedly tried to establish some kind of dialogue with the poet while E'tessami worked as a librarian in Daneshsara-ye 'Ali, the University of Tehran, in 1939, but all his efforts proved unsuccessful. The Indian scholar Mohammad Ishaque was also denied an audience. "I twice visited Iran," he writes, "once in 1930, and for the second time in 1934. . . . On both occasions I failed to get into direct touch with the poetess, but I had the pleasure of meeting her father. . . . He received me with cordiality but felt different about introducing me to the poetess, perhaps owing to the system of the veil then in vogue."[49]

Although Vincent Sheean met E'tessami, he did not fare any better than the other two. "Parvin Khanum," he says, "exhibited an extraordinary timidity during the very lengthy conversation which I had with her. She sat in the darkest corner of the room, held her veil protectively across her face throughout the hour and a half when I was present, and nearly perished of the shock when I shook hands with her on departing."[50]

Residing in the darkest corner of her poems, holding her veil protectively over her private life, E'tessami hides herself from her reader as she hid herself from all those who wanted an audience with her. E'tessami risked exposure but was also disturbed by it. She unveiled and reveiled. She basked in her newfound voice but was also threatened by it. She presented herself as a woman-in-public but relentlessly kept her distance. She unveiled her poetic voice but covered the private details of her life.

E'tessami never wrote an autobiographical poem in the sense of openly and directly talking about her private life. Neither did she leave behind a memoir, a diary, or even a few letters. These omissions set her apart from many of the women writers who followed her, especially the poet Forugh Farrokhzad. Bothered by this detachment and self-concealment as opposed to Farrokhzad's blunt self-revelation, Barahani in *Tala Dar Mes* [Gold in Copper] claims: "Parvin is not revolutionary. She can never be passionate either. The love as well as the pure and transparent world of lovers didn't mean a thing to her. . . . Her poetry is neither exciting nor excited; neither startling nor moving."[51]

True, E'tessami's poetry, by today's standards, is detached and impersonal. While Forugh projects herself without reserve into her poetry,

E'tessami places barriers between self and direct expression of that self. The persona in Farrokhzad's poetry is both participator and observer. The "I" of the poem is not only the speaking voice but also the spoken, the "I" represented. E'tessami's language, on the other hand, her images and metaphors, her whole poetics create distance and concealment. If Farrokhzad's poetry is autobiographical, very little of E'tessami's poetry is even remotely personal.

But can we or should we expect all poetry to be autobiographical? T. S. Eliot, one of E'tessami's contemporaries, basked in a cult of impersonality that proclaimed that: "the more perfect the artist the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates"; and "poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality."[52] It is also important to remember that this reluctance to address private matters in public is a cultural pattern rather than merely a stance devised by E'tessami to protect her privacy. In other words, apart from the subjective and personal inclinations of the individual poet, there exist cultural and social realities that leave their marks on the poem. A woman who has been taught to pride herself on her inaccessibility and modesty may have little interest or talent to reveal herself publicly in her cultivated poetry. She prefers to keep out of sight, covered up, concealed. By no small coincidence, more than forty years after E'tessami's death, traces of her personal life are decidedly scarce. Her friends and relatives, especially her family members, have meticulously guarded all information on her personal life even after her death.

The same push and pull between continuity and change, between transgression and submission, between compliance and resistance exhibited in E'tessami's life can be felt thematically in her poetry. In some respects, her poetry expresses the norms and values of a patriarchal culture. Time and again, it celebrates such traditional feminine virtues as modesty, a sense of devotion, and commitment to family. Sexual propriety rules supreme. Chastity and associated traditional ideals are the cornerstone of its value system. Even when the poet is attracted to women's independence and intellectual growth, this attraction remains, to some extent, confined within the limits set by tradition. Many of the social institutions, customs, and codes of moral behavior have an inherent, almost unquestioned validity for her, a validity that is repeatedly given priority over personal inclinations and dispositions. The poem

entitled "Iranian Women," which E'tessami wrote to celebrate the mass unveiling of 1936, epitomizes this view. The poem expresses distaste for the *Chador* but wants to see it replaced with veiled hearts and eyes. Old sanctions remain untouched. Boundaries and enclosed spaces become more psychosocial than physical. The removal of the physical veil is compensated by the imposition of an invisible veil, faithfully carried on the shoulders.

Only the robe of abstinence can mask one's faults.
The robe of conceit and passion is no better than nakedness.

A woman who is pure and dignified can never be humiliated.
That which is pure cannot be affected by the impurities of incontinence.

Chastity is a treasure, the woman its guard, greed the wolf.
Woe if she knows not the rules of guarding the treasure.

The Devil never attends the table of piety as guest.
He knows that that is no place of feasting.

Walk on the straight path, because on crooked lanes
you find no provision or guidance, only remorse.

Hearts and eyes do need a veil, the veil of chastity.
A worn-out *chador* is not the basis of faith in Islam.[53]

If, in the words of Susan Juhasz, women poets in the West are caught in a "double bind,"[54] their Eastern counterparts have to struggle with a triple bind. The first, the difficulty of self-assertion for women; the second, the necessity for self-assertion for the poet; and the third, the cultural unfamiliarity with and unconventionality of public self-revelation. Torn between admiration for her poetry and scorn for its results, between such values as *Sharm* (modesty/shame) and self-expression, Parvin E'tessami in her poetry eloquently expresses the push and pull between self-acknowledgment and self-censorship. Indeed, the very ambivalence toward absence and presence, voice and silence is one of the central paradoxes of E'tessami's poetry. In one poem she calls herself a star in the firmament of poetry, in another she considers her work unworthy of

scholars, a mere souvenir in a humble volume. The introductory poem to the *Divan,* entitled "In the Garden of Poetry," best exemplifies this ambivalence. On the one hand, her poems and words are nothing in comparison to the countless others in the literary arena. On the other hand, she entrusts her legacy to the judiciousness of time that eventually separates zinc from gold.

In poetry's garden roses bloom and multiply.
May my sapling gift bear some leaves and fruit.

Though they be counted nought, my poems and words
add up in numbers amongst others.

May it please men of letters to approve
what I attempted, hoping against hope.

As a dust particle rises to meet the sunlight,
so my longing rose but fell short.

My heart's not troubled. I'm not dejected,
for still some dust to light was attracted.

This legacy I entrust to Time itself.
Time is an intelligent assayer and critic.

In Time's kiln copper and zinc do blacken,
but gold untarnished stays when pure.

The gardener of the world is a good one.
He allows to die shrubs of thorn that bear no fruit.

If my words are found unworthy, O men of excellence,
take them as a remembrance collected in a humble volume.[55]

Ironically, the only two photographs of E'tessami included in her *Divan* delineate the layered complexity of personal expressivity—be it physical or verbal—for this pioneering poet. The first one pictures E'tessami with a headscarf looking you directly in the eyes. The other, unveiled, portrays her with eyes cast down. There is a certain sense of

self-effacing timidity about this second picture. Perhaps it is her disinclination to see or be seen. Perhaps this inward pose is her attempt to close in, to disconnect herself, to cloak herself in an armor of self-detachment, to erect an invisible wall of separation, to limit contact—to veil.

6

Unveiling the Other

Forugh Farrokhzad

Toward the middle of the present century, a new tradition of women's poetry came into being in Iran; a tradition of women intensely involved in self-reflection and self-revelation, not sheltered or restrained by the anonymity or opacity of a veil; a tradition of women who not only revealed themselves but also unveiled men in their writings. The list includes, among others, Zand-Dokht Shirazi (1911–1952), Jaleh Esfahani (b. 1921), Parvin Dowlatabadi (b. 1922), Simin Behbahani (b. 1927), Lo'bat Vala Sheybani (b. 1930), Mahin Sekandari (b. 1940), Forugh Farrokhzad (1935–1967), and Tahereh Saffarzadeh (b. 1936).

These women wrote about hitherto private, autobiographical ideas and feelings, "facts." With body unveiled and pen in hand, they led the reader behind walls and veils to the domain of the private. They strove to reconcile the emotional, sensual, and social aspects of a female self. In their works, the authorial voice is neither subordinated to stereotypes nor hidden according to prescribed rules of psychological and social distance. Feelings are not rationalized, passions are not diluted, emotions are not flattened, details are not evaded, men are not absent. These writers created, to varying degrees, a sense of self divorced from the conventional definition of womanhood in Iran, a self that is all the more vulnerable in a society where walls and veils have been customary and censored communication the order of the day, where, in the words of the novelist Shahrnush Parsipur, "people whisper even behind tall walls."[1]

Most of these pioneering poets reject the silent whispers of a woman