

Representation of Social Inequality in Parvīn E'tesāmī's Poetry: A Semiotic Study

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Received on: 20-12-2021

Accepted on: 23-5-2022

Abstract

The significance of Parvīn E'tesāmī's poetry as a social satire, rendered in debates (*munāzere*) subordinated to 'no authorial voice,' has received insufficient treatment. The present study proposes to focus on the representation of social inequality in E'tesāmī's debate poetry through an in-depth analysis of her most recurring signs. We will argue that her poetry is built upon an 'opposition' between various entities all personified, 'signifying' the conflict between the opposite social classes: the dominant vs. the subordinate. Six oppositions are examined in sections of "drunk and sober," "jewel and tear," "two drops of blood," "wolf and dog," "flower and thorn," and "two courts." In each poem, E'tesāmī exploits 'classical' Persian literary repertoire in a 'topical' context to criticize the corrupt ruling system for the deplorable conditions of her homeland. Despite their engagement with contemporary issues, E'tesāmī's poems seem to function within a fatalistic framework, much of which being informed by Islamic scripture.

Keywords: Debate, Satire, Didactic, Fatalism, Allegory.

Introduction

The origin of *Munāzere* (debate, dispute) goes back to pre-Islamic times. The most famous debate poem is the Middle Persian text *Drakht-i Āsū rīk* which depicts the arguments between a goat and a date tree (Seyed Gohrab 2014). After the introduction of Islam in Persia, the poet Abū Mansūr 'Alī b. Ahmad Asadī of Tūs (born ca. 1010) included *munāzere* in his heroic romance, *Garshāsp-nāma*, as well as his *qasīdas* (panegyric poems). Asadī did not commence his *qasīdas* in *taghazzol* (lyricism) as was the common practice among the panegyric writers; rather, he introduced dialogues into the classical form and opens his poem with disputes between day and night, heaven and earth, the bow and lance, and a Muslim and a Zoroastrian, etc. (Seyed Gohrab 2014). Following Tūsī, later poets such as Nizāmī of Ganja (d. 1209) and Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 1273) wrote debate poems in *masnavī* (rhyming couplets) while Balkhī exploited the technique in his prose work *Maqāmāt Hamīdī*; but on the whole, Persian poetic forms were more often utilized in writing *munāzere* (Shamisā 2007).

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* Doi: <https://doi.org/10.47012/jjml.16.3.10>

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Munāzere became in high favor at the turn of the twentieth century as it enabled Persian writers to stage a debate between opposite social concepts such as rich vs. poor, justice vs. injustice, man vs. woman, etc. and to invite their audience to identify themselves with one group or the other (Seyed Gohrab 2014, 99). It particularly culminated in Parvīn E'tesāmī's *Dīvān* (1935) which contains 209 poems in the classical form of *qasīde*, *qet'e*, *masnavī* as well as *ghazal*. Claiming the best portion of her *Dīvān*, E'tesāmī's *munāzerāt* or debate poems are rather akin to narrative or dramatic works, in that they provide a platform for the plurality of conflicting, and occasionally unconventional, characters all endowed with intellectual, moral, and emotional traits to interact without being subordinated to the omniscient voice of the author. E'tesāmī selects these characters from all species, people from all walks of life, fauna, fowls, flora, cosmic and natural elements, concrete objects, and abstract concepts (Moayyad 1994). The theme of her poetry is also "broadly human, rather than being women-focused per se," although as we shall see later, "her quiet pleas for emancipation are there, waiting patiently to be heard" (Brookshaw, 298). In his insightful chapter on prominent female poets in the first decades of the twentieth century, Brookshaw (2015) attributes E'tesāmī's popularity to her engagement with social problems particularly the situation of the disenfranchised in late Qajar Iran. Discussing Parvīn E'tesāmī's Niche, Moayyad (1994) also maintains that E'tesāmī "resisted conformity and mustered enough civic courage not to yield to political pressure" favoring poetry over the plain prose because this "disguised mode of expression" allows her "to vent her feelings of dissatisfaction and social protest without arousing social suspicions" (164-166). In an essay on the Legacy of Parvīn E'tesāmī', Dabashī (1994) observes that E'tesāmī's politics cannot be detached from her ethics: she was a "relentless moralist with a clear vision of good and evil" (p. 69). Ghanoonparvar (1994) also argues that E'tesāmī was a humanist and a friend of the disenfranchised who inhabits "a world of moral absolutes, a world in which no change can take place" (114).

Research Methodology

Several studies have discussed various social and moral aspects of Parvīn E'tesāmī's debate poetry. One important aspect of such debates that has as yet received insufficient scholarly treatment is their semiotic function. Drawing on Roland Barthes' *Elements of Semiology* (1977), the present study proposes to explore the representation of social inequality in E'tesāmī's debate poetry through an in-depth analysis of her most recurring signs. As Barthes argues, any system of signification comprises three components: "the plane of expression E (the signifier), the plane of content C (the signified), and the relation R between the two planes" (89).¹ This ERC can become, says Barthes, "in its turn a mere element of a second system, which thus is more extensive than the first" (89). Barthes suggests that, in literature, language forms the first system, and claims that the second plane could be the basis of a connotative semiotics (90). Following Barthes, the present study will argue that E'tesāmī's debate poetry is most often built upon an opposition between wide-ranging arrays of entities all personified, 'signifying' the conflict between opposite social classes, namely the dominant vs. the subordinate, as well as manifesting her

views on such philosophical matters as the brevity of life, inevitability of fate, evanescence of the phenomenal world, and gnosis of God. As we shall see, whether presented in the form of anecdote, allegory, or beast fable, E'tesāmī's debate poems are all composed in a classical didactic framework most clearly witnessed in 'drunk and sober,' 'jewel and tear,' 'two drops of blood,' 'wolf and dog,' 'flower and thorn,' and 'two courts.'

Analysis of the Poems

1. *Drunk and Sober*

The conflict between drunk and sober, as two metaphors for spiritual ecstasy, permeates the poetry of A'ttār, Rūmī, Hāfez, and several others for whom *sukr* (mystical intoxication) is the loftiest experience because "it obliterates the human attributes and annihilates man completely in the object of adoration, taking him out of himself" (Schimmel 1975, 58).² Rūmī goes so far to declare that "the mystical intoxication of the saint is superior to the sobriety of the prophet because the prophet is not lost in the vision of God but turns back to his people to teach them the will of God" (204). Rūmī composed over 60000 verses filled to the brim with the wine of divine love;³ also remarkable is his framing the intoxication motif into debate verses in censure of sensuality and the hypocrisy of the profane pretenders to piety upon which E'tesāmī models "The Drunk and the Sober".⁴ Although as a poet whose writing career coincided with the aftermath of the Constitutional Revolution in Iran (1905-1911) she stages Rūmī's debates in a modern context – a literary commitment some of her contemporaries refuse to make.⁵ E'tesāmī's "The Drunk and the Sober" is most akin to Rūmī's mystical verses in its problematization of the classical duality: it includes 'drunk' and 'sober' in the title but introduces the voices in the opening lines of the poem as 'drunk' and 'police', intentionally deferring the signification of 'sober'. Its treatment of 'drunk' is not any less problematic either: the further the debate proceeds, the more skeptical the reader will be of the intoxication of the 'drunk' for, the drunk's replies are singular in their wit and mocking tone that suggests the opposite of what they express:

A policeman saw a drunk on his way and seized him by the collar,

The drunk said: "My friend, this is a shirt, not a bridle."

The former said: "You are drunk; for you totter and stagger."

The latter said: "Walking is not a sin, the road is uneven." (347)⁶

The first lines of "The Drunk and the Sober" also recall Rūmī's mystical dictions, in that they appear to put a special emphasis on *rah* ("way" and "road") for, aside from the occurrence of the debate on the 'way', this word along with its related concepts (walking and road) keeps recurring in the course of four lines. As Yāhaqī (2001) also notes, the word *rah* in this poem might allude to *rah-e-tasawwuf* (the path of mysticism) which must have been obstructed ("uneven") by the prevalence of corruption in late Qajar period, seducing the people to sin ("stagger"). "The Drunk and the Sober", nonetheless, deviates from Rūmī's mystical verses through the inclusion of Iran's social authority symbols like the judge and the governor. The drunk's response, to the legal threat of the police, that the judge is "not awake" at

midnight could mean that the court is closed and the latter is 'asleep' but his mocking tone points to the second signification of 'not awake' as 'drunk' which is reinforced by the inclusion of 'tavern'⁷ in the lines that followed:

The former said: I must take you to the judge's court."

The latter said: "Come back in the morning, for the judge isn't awake at midnight."

The former said: "The governor's house is near; we will go there."

The latter said: "The governor may well be in a tavern." (347-8)

In addition to classical literature, "The Drunk and the Sober" might be better understood with reference to *the Qur'an*: the drunk's remonstrance, in the next line, that mosque is no place for the "wicked" might allude to a Qur'anic verse that orders Muslims not to enter the mosque when intoxicated⁸ which, given the sarcastic tone of the drunk, could indicate that the mosque is frequented by the hypocritical profane. By the same token, as all the threats of the police fail to intimidate the drunk, the former resorts to bribery and fine in exchange for the release of the latter. The drunk's reply, which cites another verse from the *Qur'an* that forbids Muslims from bribing authorities,⁹ further points to the corruption of the ruling system at that time. His description of his clothes as "rotten" and "lacking warp and woof," in the lines that follow, can both refer to his 'poverty' and the corrupted system that oppresses the poor:

The former said: "Wait in the mosque until I call the police chief"

The latter said: "A mosque is no bedroom for the wicked."

The former said: "Pay me a dinar and release yourself."

The latter said: "Divine law allows no dinars or drachmas."

The former said: "Let me take away your coat as a fine."

The latter said: "It is rotten and lacks warp and woof." (348)

The last lines of the poem invoke the title duality of 'drunk' vs. 'sober' only to reverse their significations. While the police's use of the two opposing terms in, "sober must lash the drunk," is denotative, that of the drunk, "no one is sober," could either mean everyone is drunk in that toxic society or everyone is unaware of what is going on in that corrupted system. Should the latter be the case, then, the 'drunk' signifies 'sober' by virtue of his social consciousness:

The former said: "Sober ones must lash the drunks."

The latter said: "Bring me a sober one; for no one is sober here." (348)

2. Jewel and Tear

You may have heard that a drop of tear,
Fell one morning from an orphan's eyes.
It suffered much in its ups and downs;
For, it fell down and then rose to run.

It glittered some moment and then went dark,
It was hidden one moment and then reappeared. (336)

The reader's initial impression of the poem as the allegory of an unjust society is reinforced when the narrative switches to the direct speech of the jewel, revealing the second level of signification, that is, 'the rich and the poor'. As the representative of the privileged, the jewel seeks to perpetuate this unequal structure of tyrannical opposition by an essentialist narrative positing a superior origin, "pure," for its class "I am a pure jewel while you are a drop of water,

I have always been pure, but you are mean and unclean."

"The rich and poor can't become friends,
And vice and virtue can't be companions." (336)

The dominance of the jewel terminates as the tear initiates its reconstruction of the former partial narrative. The early lines of the tear are impregnated with equality, "I am the bright jewel," which might indicate that no entity is, in essence, inferior but becomes so in the course of life. To call attention to the various forms of 'injustice' that have reduced her peers to their present status, the tear employs various metaphorical phrases such as "The wind of events," "The fire of sighs," and "The darkness of life:"

"I am the bright jewel of the heart's treasure,
and am in no need of the labour of lock and key."

"The wind of events took away my power,
But the messenger of happiness brought you good tidings...
"The fire of sighs has melted me;
Have you heard of water leaping out of fire?...
"The darkness of life has made me suffer,
And my paleness is due to that pain." (336)

The narrative, however critical in its tone and theme, concludes, surprisingly, in a passive acceptance of the inevitable; a fatalistic motif recurring in E'tesāmi's allegories modeled upon Islamic Persian poetry. As we will see in this study, the vast repertoire of allusions to Qur'anic terms such as *qazā wa qadar* (pre-ordained decree of God) and *Alast day¹⁰* (eternity without beginning) that runs through the poetry of Kayyām, Hāfez, and Sa'dī can also be detected in E'tesāmi's poetry, illustrating the perennial influence of this mode of thought throughout the history of Persian literature (Zarrīnkūb 1999). In the poem under discussion is, accordingly, the fate decreed that 'jewel' must be a precious stone and 'tear' a mere drop of water:

"I wish that destiny had elevated me,
and the sphere had chosen me like you." (337)

In spite of the numerous references to fate, there are instances in Persian literature which negate the doctrine of complete *jabr* (constraint), citing some verses from *the Qur'an* on *tafwīz* (human volition) as their proof.¹¹ Following the Islamic doctrine of *lā jabr wa lā tafwīz* (neither force nor freedom), Persian poets negotiate between 'the abandonment to divine providence'¹² and 'the defiance of the sphere,'¹³ a

paradoxical doctrine that also informs E'tesāmi's writing. Thus the attitude of resignation that prevails "Jewel of Tear" gives way to a defiant tone in "The Orphan's Tears", a poem built on the same opposition, jewel vs. tear, but replete with literal references to its social context. Singular in its exclusion of the privileged voice and abundance of subalterns in the debate, the poem recounts the jubilation of a crowd at their king's parade. An inquiry, initiated by an orphan spectator concerning the entity on the king's crown, elicits the following responses:

Someone said: "How do we know what it is?
Obviously, it must be very precious."
A hunch-backed old woman went near and said:
"This is the tear of my eyes and the blood of your heart...
He has deceived us with the garment and staff of a shepherd
This wolf has been familiar with the flock for years...
O Parvīn, of what use is talking about uprightness to the misled?
Where can you find a person who is not vexed with the truth? (119)

The first voice, representing the oblivious crowd, "how do we know," draws attention to the denotative signification of the 'jewel' as something 'precious' whereas the elderly woman identifies a second level of signification beneath the word 'jewel' which is associated with orphan's "tear" and "blood." In her further references to the monarch as a "wolf" disguised as "shepherd" and people as the "flock," in the lines that follow, the female voice seems to suggest that the monarchy is thriving through hypocrisy and prolonged oppression of the people. To the regrets of the narrator, however, her speaking out the truth carries no weight with the oppressors persisting in their falsity.

3. *Two Drops of Blood*

An allegorical debate on the conflict between two drops of blood representing a king and a thorn-digger, "Two Drops of Blood" also criticizes the increasing social gap between the aristocracy and the working class in the twentieth-century Iran. The poem opens in a street featuring two drops inquiring about each other's origin:

One of them said to the other: "whose blood are you?
"I have fallen from the hand of a king."
The other said: I fell from the foot of a thorn-digger
Due to a wound caused by a thorn like a lancet." (352)

Despite the friendly attitude of the king's blood, "let us join together to become one big drop," the poem recalls the debate between the jewel and the tear in its critical tone, gloomy imagery and, above all, the representation of inequality through metaphorical use of "orphan's tear," "Labourer's leg," "Labourer's blood," "fire of a sigh," and "water of an eye" which are all contrasted with "the comfort and pleasure" of the royal blood, rendering the idea of their union impossible:

It answered smilingly: "There is a great difference between you and me
You belong to a king's hand, and I to a labourer's blood
"To be united and joined with such a one as me,
The best thing is an orphan's tear, or a labourer's blood."
"You are created through comfort and pleasure,
But I am produced by a bent back and painful waist." (352)

Soon after the labourer's blood states the moral of the tale which is an exhortation to stand up to oppression, ("The tree of tyranny would never bear fruit, if the hand of punishment deals it the blow of an axe"), the poem closes by inviting the reader to reflect on the role of fate in the universal injustice, personified here as the tailor sewing unjust clothes:

The old sphere has not sewn many an unjust garment,
If it did not possess such a patience and repose.
Then when a wicked one is raised to the gallows,
No worse one would by force take his place. (353)

4. *Wolf and Dog*

Wolf and dog, an ancient duality in the fable genre, figure prominently in the Didactic literature; wolf being the emblem of "evil," "devouring," and "fierceness" while dog symbolizing "fidelity," "watchfulness," and "nobility" (Cooper 1987). Persian poetry exploits the secondary significations of these animals to refer to *An-nafs al-ammārah*¹⁴ (ego in its unrefined state) as "wolf of ego" and "dog of ego" (Rahīmī, et al. 2014). Following the Islamic scripture, Persian poets did not treat these animals as opposites, merely as symbols of different evil features in a person's ego.¹⁵ For Sanā'ī, Attār, as well as Rūmī, 'wolf' signifies the greedy and insatiable ego in ambush to launch its destructive spiritual attacks whereas 'dog' represents a shrewd but corrigible ego in pursuit of momentary pleasure (Rahīmī, et al. 2014). E'tesāmī redefines the traditional significations of wolf and dog referring to wolf in "The Orphan's Tear" as a metaphor for a king who uses his power to oppress the common people (the flock). In "The Wolf and the Dog", she stages a debate between that tyrant and a dog responsible for guarding the same flock:

One night a wolf sent a message to a sheepdog,
"Send me a lamb in the morning; for, I have guests."
"Don't enrage me; for, a wolf shows violent anger,
My heart is black and my teeth bloodthirsty." (301)

The poem opens in a playful tone, "I have guests;" also humorous is the exaggeration in "my heart is black" and "bloodthirsty," in the lines that follow. This light-hearted humor is very soon replaced by sarcasm as the poem takes on the voice of the dog directing a sequence of scornful metaphors towards the wolf including "robber," "thief," and "fraud," with the intent of shaming the latter:

The dog answered: "I am not acquainted with you;

For, you are a robber, and I am called watchdog...
“The shepherd has always praised my courage and prudence,
And this silver collar is the reward for my deeds.”
“I won’t make friends with a thief by fraud;
For, I have remained loyal a whole lifetime...
“The cruelty of a wolf is not something new to me;
for, I still have three old scars on my back, thigh, and body
“Go and open your shop of enmity elsewhere;
For, there is no sale for you where I have a shop.” (301-2)

Though the dog’s exaggerated account of his deeds is amusing, its greater aim is to censure the lack of moral commitment like “courage,” “prudence” and “loyalty.” E’tesāmī gives more instances of social anomalies in “Inopportune complain”, another poem on the confrontation between the wolf and the dog, dedicated to criticizing the hypocrisy in real life. As the threat to intimidate the dog fails in the previous poem, the wolf comes back in disguise of a kin to further its own benefits. The discrepancy between the wolf’s benign appearance and its malicious reality is also reflected in the ample use of opposite words in the poem such as “old” vs. “young,” “night” vs. “dawn,” “kinship” vs. “hostility,” “lost” vs. “found,” etc.

A wolf said to a dog that was far from the flock,
“All dogs are the kith and kin of wolves.”
“Why have we loosened this kinship?
And turned to hostility with one another?...
“The first duty of a relative is surely
To try and find his lost kin...
“I have been helpless owing to old age,
Did you, young one, ever take my hand...
You have driven us to the desert from night till dawn
For the sake of a small lamb only.” (328)

Rather than speaking in harsh and wrathful words, the wolf presents itself with a sympathetic tone, amusing the reader with such exaggerated phrases as “groaning deeply with fever,” “helpless owing to old age,” etc. The brief response of the dog which is meant to echo the moral of the poem, i.e. deeds rate above words, once again disappoints the wolf:

“One should not betray oneself with words,
And people are recognized by their deeds.” (329)

There are more references to dog and wolf, among other animals, in E’tesāmī’s *Dīvān* as representatives of different features and personages, illustrating their great literary potentials for the poet to vent her sense of frustration at human follies. To amuse the reader, her treatment of these animals, as we see, is often witty and humorous even though her tone occasionally tends to bitterness and sarcasm

towards grave social matters. In the next section, we are going to explore the significance of two plants, flower and thorn, in her poetry to see how they reflect her moral commitment as a writer.

5. Flower and Thorn

A salient feature of Persian poetry is the abundance of nature imagery, especially imagery relating to gardens filled with flowers of every sort evoking a world of beauty, love, and virtue (Meisamī 1985). In Rūmī's garden, every element is subordinated "to the central unifying purpose: praise of the Divine"; thus, the image of the flower (rose) invokes "the earthly manifestation of Divine beauty" and thorn is associated with "spiritual blindness, the incapacity of Reason, and the obscuring veils of physical existence" (242-243). For Hāfez, the garden was the center of the world and the flower is at the center of the garden, "emblem at once of all that is noble and beautiful and all that is transient and fading" while man's "perception of mortality is symbolized in the world-garden by the thorn that, in the garden of love, figures the lover's suffering" (249).

If the love gardens of the medieval poetry owe much of their evocative power, as Meisamī (1985) argues, to an abundance of lively images, those found in the poetry of E'tesāmī gain theirs, by contrast, from the 'clash' between its constituents. As illustrated in the opening lines of "A Flower and a Thorn", the invocation of such concrete images as "rose," "fruit," "odour," "colour," etc. is not to people the poem with sensory images so much as to reinforce the second signification of the flower as the 'fortunate' species over the 'unfortunate' thorn which is characterized as "dejected," "sorrowful" and "disgraced" due to the "pain" inflicted on it. In this respect, E'tesāmī's garden signifies our real world – as opposed to the love garden of medieval poetry – in that it is permeated with inequality and discrimination:

One morning in a garden a flower said to a thorn:
"Aren't you ashamed of your ugly face?"
A garden is a spot for a rose, lily and sweet basil.
A thorn had better find a place in a salt-marsh
Anyone who lacks colour, odour and fruit
Is dejected, sorrowful and disgraced...
The thorn laughed and said: "you have seen no hardship;
For, anyone who suffers pain is distressed." (322)

As in "Jewel of Tear," the motif of fatalism permeates "A flower and a thorn," reflected in the existential gloom overshadowing the poem ('fallen', 'futile', 'annihilation', etc.) as well as the vast repertoire of metaphorical terms, *ġardōn*, *sepehr*, *ġītī* (sphere), in reference to fate. Also, the use of the flower as the metaphor for the evanescence of life in the last lines of the poem, which appears to allude to the imagery used by Omar Ḳayyām in his *Rubaiyāt*¹⁶, adds to the melancholic undertone:

"I am placed here, not with my own consent,
And if you are wise, laugh not at the fallen one."
The sphere does not look upon a recluse favourably

And such a hope or expectation is futile.” (322)
“The decorator of the sphere did not make up my face
So, don’t ask me why I have no suitors.”
Whether we are a thorn or a flower, annihilation is the end,
And no flower remains eternally in the world’s garden.” (322-4)

6. *Two Courts*

The last opposition to be considered in this study introduces a modern theme, gender inequality, to the writing of poetic debate. Here, E’tesāmi displays, in Milānī’s words, “unusual courage in articulating women’s experience from women’s perspectives” calling attention to what she perceives to be “the forces victimizing them” (32). In a culture that regarded her as inferior in gender and literary credentials, she defied traditional modes of expression and clichéd amorous themes and concerned herself with the status of women in Iranian society, using her poetry as a platform to demand equal rights (Brookshaw 2015, 242). She has already introduced the woman as “The Pillar of Home” in a non-debate poem entitled “The Angel of Sociability” (269). In “Two Courts,” she stages a debate between a woman and a man on the importance of their roles in life, using ‘court’ in two different senses, namely law court and home. The poem captures a bad-tempered judge at the end of his working day giving vent to his anger by mistreating his household members, particularly his wife whom he accuses of idleness:

“You rest and sleep while I run day and night
I decreased in everything while you increase in all.”
“You keep company with kin and friends,
Whereas I am skinned by the world in many ways.”
“Unpleasant things have annihilated me,
But you lie down between soft and silken sheets.” (193)

To acquit herself, the woman abandons the house on the following day. Overwhelmed by the state of chaos and the mess caused by his wife’s absence, the judge decides to flee this “riotous court” and take refuge in his own court which he now sees as involving nothing beyond “pen and paper” (196). To his embarrassment, the woman arrives just in time to point out the significance of a woman’s role as the judge of the house:

“Each person is given a task to perform,
And for each wayfarer there is a guide.”
“How can you know who the thief of the house is
Or what part of the story is true or false?”
“It is the woman of the house who traps the thief
and separate the true story from the fable.” (196)

When discussing E'tesāmī's feminine poetry, it is important to remember that she was among one of the few Iranian women of her day whose privileged background allowed her to further her education and literary career. Others, as E'tesāmī herself remind us in "Woman in Iran", had no share in the "shop of knowledge;" they "remained in a cage and died in a cage" (222). Therefore, to claim that there is a lack of transgressive act with regard to the status of Iranian women in E'tesāmī's feminine poetry is to disregard the social reality of the time. It would also require one to ignore her earliest poem, "The Young Tree of Desire," which contains some of E'tesāmī's most outspoken comments on the role of women in Iranian society (Brookshaw 2015, 307):

Why are women deprived of their deserving right?
And why is their names omitted from every book?
With such a distress let us regard Parvīn as an exception;
Even though few of us are given wings of knowledge. (375-76)

For Mīlanī, E'tesāmī's verses are unmistakably feminine; her reworking of fables captures the voice of women storytellers, and "elevates women's vernacular storytelling to the status of a literary discourse" (150). E'tesāmī bases her reasoning, in Mīlanī's reading, on relationships and interdependence, thereby "portray[ing] things from the vantage point of a woman" (150).

Conclusion

The present study explored the poetry of Parvīn E'tesāmī as a satire of modern society of Iran deplorably marked by a significant gap between its social classes. As we have seen, whether presented in debates between human beings, objects, animals, or plants, E'tesāmī's writings aim to offer social and moral criticism clearly witnessed in most of her poems including "drunk and sober," "jewel and tear," "two drops of blood," "wolf and dog," "flower and thorn," and "two courts." Despite their modern engagement with such topical issues as the plight of the working class, the situation of the disenfranchised and the subjugation of women in Iranian society, these debates are informed by fatalism, a motif that Zarrīnkūb (1999) traces back to the very first instances of Persian literature after the rise of Islam. References to predestination using such terms as *kar-e qaza* (the work of destiny) permeate the writings of almost all the great Persian poets, as a result of which, they have been accused and condemned by some modern intellectual for having contributed to backwardness of eastern nations by belittling human efforts. Maiti (2017) also reminds us that fatalism is as common in the 'Orient' as is uncommon in the 'Occident' for the latter in large part is based on the freedom of the will and the idea of the predetermined destiny is in general a foreign one (515). If we interpret some of E'tesāmī's poems on these fatalistic grounds, we find her sometimes seeking consolation in spiritual reflection, in efforts towards resignation with the divine and occasionally admitting no other philosophical doctrine than fatalism, "the world's gardener is not unjust" (E'tesāmī' 2002, 324). Besides the recurrence of fatalistic notions, the motif of the evanescence of the phenomenal world is also very strong in E'tesāmī, another motif she shares with the classics and yet her perception of it never leads to the futility of life and an exhortation to 'seize the

moment.' E'tesāmī is all compassion and sympathy toward the sufferings of the other, "laugh not at the fallen one;" and indulgence in cliché amorous themes seems to be utterly unfamiliar to her (322).

تمثيل عدم المساواة الاجتماعية في أشعار بروين اعتصامي: دراسة سيميائية

سمية شريفى، ناصر مالكي، عامر الغيطوري
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الملخص

لم يحظ شعر بروين اعتصامي بوصفه هجاء اجتماعياً، طُرِحَ في عدد من المناظرات، باهتمام كافٍ. تقترح الدراسة الحالية التركيز على تمثيل عدم المساواة الاجتماعية في أشعار بروين اعتصامي من خلال تحليل متعمق لإشاراتها الأكثر تكراراً، وتناقش أن شعرها مبني على "معارضة" بين مختلف الكيانات التي تجسد جميعها ، " دلالة" على الصراع بين الطبقات الاجتماعية المعاكسة: المهيمن مقابل المرؤوس. اختيرت ستة تعارضات رئيسة لهذه الدراسة التي يجري تفحصها في أقسام "مخمور ورضين" و"جوهرة ودمعة" و"قطرتان من الدم" و"ذئب وكلب" و"زهرة وشوكة" و"محكمتان." في كل قصيدة - كما سنرى - تستغل اعتصامي الذخيرة الأدبية الفارسية "الكلاسيكية" في سياق "موضعي" جديد لفضح النظام الحاكم الفاسد وانتقاده بسبب الظروف المزرية في وطنها. إلا أنه على الرغم من انخراطها في القضايا الاجتماعية المعاصرة ، تعمل قصائد اعتصامي الحوارية ضمن إطار قدرتي ، ومعظمه مستلهم من القرآن الكريم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: مناظرة، هجاء، تعليمي، قدرتي، رمزي.

Endnotes

- ¹ Some studies insist that semiology refers to the tradition of Saussure/Barthes and semiotics to that of Charles Sanders Peirce. The *Longman dictionary of language teaching and applied linguistics* (2002) includes both Saussure's and Peirce's conceptions of the 'sign.' In the present study, semiotics and semiology are also treated as synonyms and the former term is preferred and used throughout the text.
- ² For other Islamic writers (mainly prose writers), in contrast, *sahw* (sobriety) is the highest experience: "after the ecstatic intoxication, man becomes once more aware of himself in the "life in God," when all his attributes, transformed and spiritualized, are restored to him" (Schimmel 1975:59).
- ³ In Western poetic tradition, wine and cup are often employed for imagery and sensuous appeal whereas in Persian mystical poetry of Rūmī, Hāfez, etc. they signify spiritual enlightenment. See also Saeed, Amna and Sabri, Madad "Metaphors of Wine, Cup and Tavern in Poetry of Rūmī and Hāfez", *Al-Idah* 36, 1 (2018):67.
- ⁴ See also Rūmī, Jalāl al-Dīn. "How a law-enforcer summoned to gaol a drunkard who was totally drunk". Lines: 2395-2405.
- ⁵ Seyed Gohrab (2015) notes that some modern Persian poets refused to engage in social and political activities and continued "writing poetry with mystical, epic and lyrical contents in the classical forms, and so extended the classical Persian tradition. One difference that modernity made, was that their works were in many cases published, in bulky divans, whereas in had selected a poet's most worthy production" (37).
- ⁶ E'tesāmi', Parvīn 2002, *A Collection of Poetry*, Trans. Alaeddin Pazargadi, Tehran: Rahnama. All the cited poems are from the same text.
- ⁷ Tavern is an archaic form of bar but, as Masciandaro & Booth observe, in Persian Mystic poetry it is "a metaphorical spiritual advancement [which] takes place through the ruin of one's spiritual state brought about by the intoxication of God's love (wine). See also Saeed and Sabri (2018): 69.
- ⁸ "You who believe, do not attempt to pray while you are drunk" (Women, 43).
- ⁹ "Do not eat up one another's wealth to no good purpose, nor try to bribe authorities with it" (The Cow, 188)
- ¹⁰ It refers to the vow God makes with his creatures long before their material existence, "Am I not your Lord?; they said: Of course, we testify to it!" (*Qur'an*, 9, the heights, 172).
- ¹¹ "Each soul may be rewarded for whatever it accomplishes" (Taha, 15)
- ¹² On the day of eternity without beginning, they ordered me no work save profligacy Every partition of destiny that here passed, more than it, will not be. (Hāfez: 165)
- ¹³ The sphere, I will dash together and destroy unless to my desire it comes Not that one am I, to endure contempt from the sky's sphere (Hāfez: 301)

- ¹⁴ Based on the Qur'anic verses, there are three stages of *nafs*: *an-nafs al-ammārah* (ego in unrefined state), *an-nafs al-luwwāmah* (ego in self-accusing state) and *an-nafs al mutma'innah* (ego at peace) ((Rahīmī, et al. 2014).
- ¹⁵ Although 'dog' generally symbolizes loyalty, it is regarded as a filthy animal to be avoided in almost all religions; unless it is domesticated or a sheep dog. *Nafs* in its unrefined state is in this sense similar to dog as it is also in need of cleansing and education (Rahīmī, et al. 2014).
- ¹⁶ Kayyām, xxvii: 29. "Oh, come with old Kayyām, and leave the Wise
To talk; one thing is certain, that Life flies;
One thing is certain, and the Rest is Lies;
The Flower that once has blown forever dies."

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