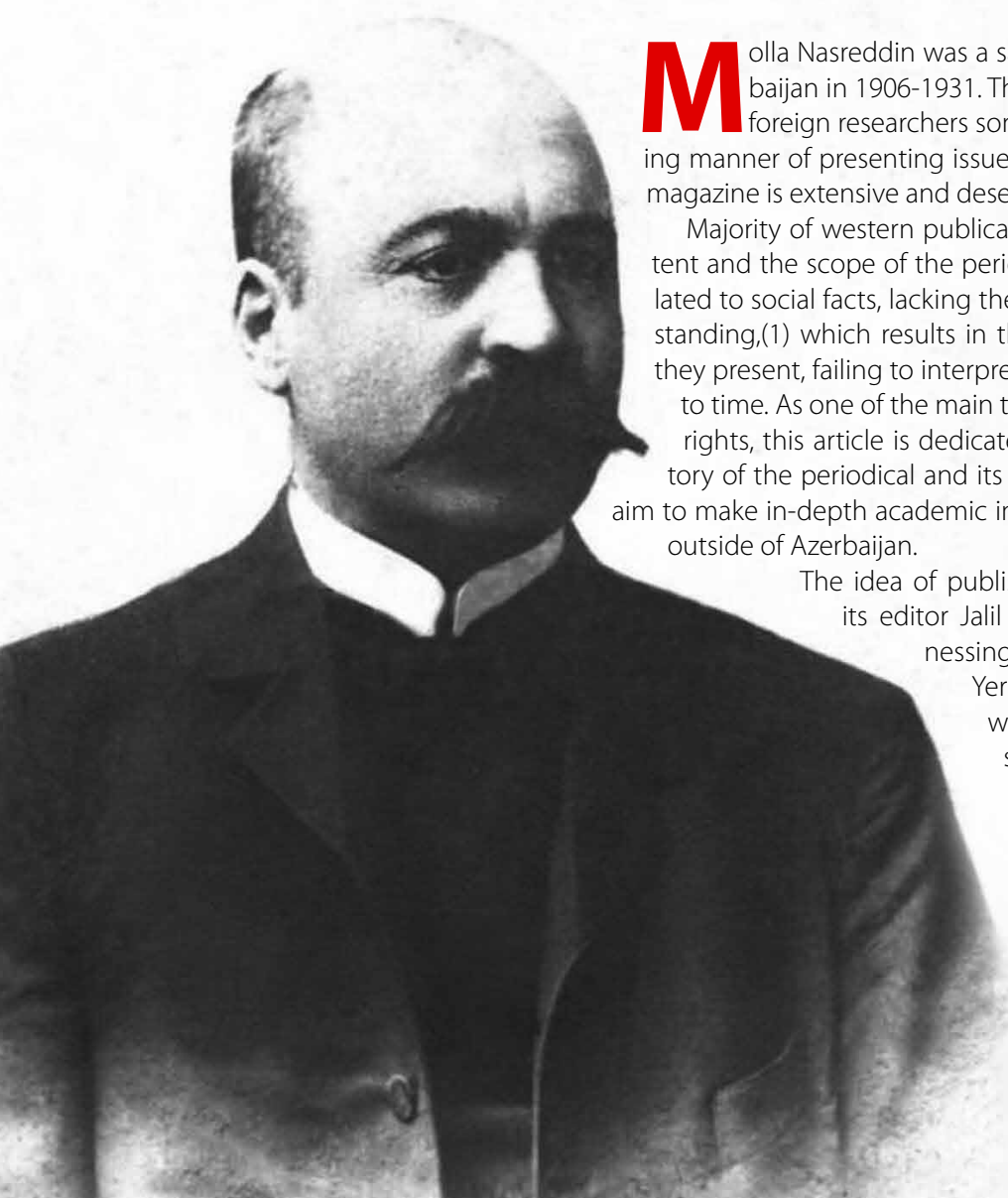


SOCIAL STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE MOLLA NASREDDIN MAGAZINE

Jalil Mammadguluzadeh (1866-1932)



Molla Nasreddin was a satirical magazine published in Azerbaijan in 1906-1931. The Magazine became well known to foreign researchers some years ago thanks to its outstanding manner of presenting issues. Yet the knowledge related to this magazine is extensive and deserves further investigation.

Majority of western publications dedicated to the history, content and the scope of the periodical leave aside certain details related to social facts, lacking the tools for interpretation and understanding,(1) which results in their being repetitive in information they present, failing to interpret the content correctly(2) from time to time. As one of the main topics of the magazine were women rights, this article is dedicated to presenting details on the history of the periodical and its content related to women, with an aim to make in-depth academic information accessible to those from outside of Azerbaijan.

The idea of publishing a satirical magazine came to its editor Jalil Mammadguluzadeh upon his witnessing the activity of Armenian editor Yeritsian at the “Kukareku” (a magazine which was banned after the first issue of it. Yeritsian published caricature of Tsar Nicholas II as a rooster). Despite the outcome of the “Kukareku” was pitiful, seeing the first issue of it had a huge impact on Mammadguluzade’s imagination. He immediately understood how much there is in Azerbaijani society to

*Muslim delegates of the 2nd State Duma of Russia, 1907.
Mustafa Mahmudov (second from the right) with Molla Nasreddin Magazine.*



criticise. His main goal apart from politics was primarily the society itself, ignorance of some part of it, oppression, shameful behaviour of religious clerics and much more. The fact that the majority of the targeted readers were not highly educated and even illiterate, was also demanding a variety of appropriate solutions, which would be resolved thanks to a form of a caricature magazine.

Decision of Mammadguluzadeh was prompt in a way that within less than 2 months on *April the 7st, 1906* the first issue of the *Molla Nasreddin Magazine* was published in 1000 copies, while upon the enthusiasm of readers the second issue reached the number of 2000.(3)

Describing political orientation of the periodical in his memoirs, the editor in chief Jalil Mammadguluzadeh stated: "We did not have much to do with Tsar Nicholas II, because we saw that the Russian Tsar and the Russian tyranny were marked by the sharp arrival of our northern Christian comrades, who were much stronger in anyhow; while the oppression that stood in front of us like a mountain was the oppression of the East and the darkness of it. The Shah and the Sultan were oppressive, and the Sharia was dark. On the Iranian side of our homeland, there was a "pleasure stream" of sultans and shahs."(4)



Muslim and Baydigül Magomayevs, 1906.

'Long live the Turkish constitution! Long live the reforms!'



"Oh the horror! Is this reform? We don't need this kind of constitution!"

Remarkably, after the first issue of the "Molla Nasreddin" was published, the editorial office started receiving dozens of letters daily. In those letters readers were expressing their enthusiasm about the content and quality of the magazine. Some intellectual readers became permanent writers of the magazine, finding by this a vibrant platform for their prosaic and poetic activity, as well as rising to fame by getting acknowledgements from their compatriots.

One of the main topics of the magazine was the social status and condition of women in Azerbaijan. Yet the way this matter was considered during soviet times is far from sharing enthusiasm of the periodical for the benefit of Muslim women. Such an attitude goes in line with the tendency of not recognising progressive achievements of pre Soviet Azerbaijani history opting for superficial indication of this fact without going into details.

Upon the legal improvements brought by social developments of the uprisings of 1905- 1907 in Russia, the publisher and authors of the "Molla Nasreddin" were seeing direct connection in granting equal rights to women and its tremendous importance in the strive against narrow mindedness. In other words, the strive for the improvements through education and civilization for the Molla Nasreddinians was directly correlated with the fact that women should gain a status of another half of the world's population, equal in every right with men, and that they cannot be treated as a solely unconscious labour force. Simultaneously, their aim was to grant women full independence in social aspects, along with liberation from financial dependence.(5)

Importantly, it should be also stressed that the press of the time in Azerbaijan was overflowing with the voices of oppositionists to "Molla Nasreddin"'s views regarding total liberation of women, including liberation from the obligation of covering face and head. Remarkably, publishers and authors of such newspapers and magazines as: "Füyuzat", "Həyat", "Yeni Füyuzat", "Təzə Həyat", "Şəlalə" were writing numerous articles on "usefulness" of women's being covered.

Particular are the forms thanks to which the "Molla Nasreddin" would implement its aim of education, while targeting the least literate audience, mostly not capable of extensive article reading. Editors of the periodical were targeting mostly the Muslim population, majority of which was either scarcely literate or illiterate at all. Messages of criticism of their own society, which the authors of "Molla Nasreddin" were willing to pass, re-

"Honey, take a good look at your teacher and then take a look at me. Now tell me, who looks more like a lady!"



quired solutions for smooth spreading of the material. Specifically, the published information would need to be served to audiences either incapable of reading or able to read just a few lines, yet not discouraged with the fact of their scarce literacy, on the contrary preserving the interest and contentment from the fact of becoming a reader of a periodical despite educational limitations.

Azerbaijani researcher Amalia Qasimova indicates specifically, that on example of the Molla Nasreddin Magazine we are dealing with a new dimension in the press tradition, which is based on introduction of new for the press in Azerbaijan journalistic forms such as: dialogues based on questions and answers, proverbs, dictionaries, riddles and so on framed into satirical content.(6)

Indeed, "Molla Nasreddin" applies a wide range of expressive forms, being extremely creative in it. The first example presents Mammadguluzadeh's personal ideas on the conditions of women. They are poetically realistic, being simultaneously sharp, defined in a straightforward manner: "While I am writing those words, I am

"Look sister, she can wrtie like a man!"



looking out of the window, seeing black clouds. It seems to me, those clouds are evaporations from the Black and Caspian seas, which were brought here by the heat of the day, to fall as rain. Yet at the same time, it comes to my mind that those clouds are sighs and lamentations of Muslim women, while the rain will be nothing else than their falling tears..."(7)

Alternatively, "Molla Nasreddin" was exceptionally creative in terms of finding various ways of communication to reach the consciousness of the targeted literate readers, in which the main goal was detailed specification of inappropriate conditions of Azerbaijani women. The goal was to exhibit to readers the fact of girls and women being permanently deprived of education possibilities, bearing a life of servants primarily in the houses of their fathers, then in the houses of their husbands and then even sometimes in the houses of their children as house workers. The following example is presenting the so-called voice of women, through the words of poet Mirza Alakbar Sabir, as if speaking on their behalf:

*"Would we know at all what those damn books are?
 Would there be any at the houses of ours?
 We all were amazing people,
 We would have had to deal neither with teachers, nor
 with lessons,*

*We would not hear any word resembling a notebook,
 Not to mention that we would not know what it looks
 like."*(8)

Next to the written content of the magazine, we find numerous caricatures criticising some parts of Azerbaijani society's attitude towards women. Outstandingly, those caricatures are timeless in terms of demonstrating common attitudes towards women and girls in the Muslim society.

Mocking the attitude of mullahs towards the matter of women wearing European style shoes, the Magazine was writing: "You are making a problem for women's shoes, but look at yourself, as a man and a mullah, have mercy! Is it fine for you to wear a shoe that has been made by a Russian or Armenian shoemaker, going to sacred places for a pilgrimage, think well if such an act can be accepted (by Allah) according to you?"(9)

Indeed, questioning the deeds of religious clerics publicly had an extensive influence on public opinion, on other comrade journalists and on the targeted religious authorities, securing in some cases the latter rethinking of their own attitude. Specifically, we see that the activity of "Molla Nasreddin" in 1907 was gaining new dimension with publishing open letters to the top religious leader of Caucasus, the Sheikh-ul Islam. The

"Damn girl, I will rip your skin off!" (with his Muslim wife)



"I am sorry, honey, it's all my fault." (with his Russian lover)



letters were pointing out matters of teaching by clerics non veiled female students at non-Muslim schools in Tiflis or reluctant attitude towards lack of Azerbaijani language lessons in schools for Muslim pupils.(10)

While working towards the establishment of awareness for the importance of women's rights, "Molla Nasreddin" was also expressing concern of the social impact of the issue. The following statement voices an idea expressed by many intellectuals of the time, while the magazine was sharing this thought with a larger audience. "In a hundred years, all our men will be educated, but only one percent of our women will be educated just a little more. Our boys will not look for an educated girl from among Muslims and will go to marry girls of other nations, then Muslims will understand their faults and rush to open schools for girls."(11)

While investigating the publishing history of the magazine the pattern of the mentality of opposers of women's rights can be easily verified. Specifically, upon concern expressed in one of the articles which was arguing that: "If women will obtain their rights, men would not be able to tell them to stay quiet and not to talk much. Those women will stand against men saying:

"No, this is not right, we know better what is right and what is wrong..."

Following this article, "Molla Nasreddin" replied: "Well done lad! Good you stated this. Now you see why you do not want women to study, to be liberated from narrow minded parents and open their faces. I have no words for this. If this is indeed the matter that you have concern for as not being able to say to a woman: "Be quiet, you little girl", then surely you have a right to stick to the hijab with all your hands and feet."(12)

In 1910 in the feuilleton titled "Qanlı Facia" (Bloody Disaster) Mammadguluzade was writing: "How many bloody disasters the Moon that tours up the skies of Allah is witnessing every night. If we will collect the tears of little girls dragged into the rooms of men, the new Gulf of Oman will come out. This is what a bloody disaster is."(13)

We consider instrumental presenting and explaining caricatures of the "Molla Nasreddin" related to the social status of Azerbaijani women

Mindset based on the idea that education is a right reserved to men: The cartoon presents a woman dressed in European attire, who sits behind the table

Carriage driver: "Sir, are these girls your daughters?" Gentleman: Shut up, idiot. Don't you know, that one is my wife?



writing. In front of her, there are two boys sitting and writing also. The composition indicates that this woman is a private teacher, tutoring schoolboys. Behind the female teacher two other women, presumably owners of the household, dressed traditionally are talking to each other saying: "Look at her, sister! She is writing just like a man does." This cartoon visualises aspects such as insufficient or complete lack of education of mothers to help their children with homework despite the financial position to bring home a teacher which will do this job. In this case we deal with the lack of education of women in economically sufficient families, which are uneducated not due to the financial incapacity, but due to the conviction that women do not require to be educated. Next aspect brings forward the differences in how the teacher and how the Muslim ladies of the house are dressed. While the teacher is dressed according to European fashion, what also makes her look amiable, women of the house are dressed sloppily, lacking style and having covered heads, yet revealing exceedingly uncovered legs.(14)

Lack of own political ideas, demonstrated in superfluous submissiveness in which boycotting women's rights is constantly the main priority: The double picture caricature presents a reaction

of Azerbaijani men in traditional attire on the news of the establishment of the constitution in the Ottoman Empire. In the first picture they are happy and enthusiastic, instead in the second picture upon learning that the constitution gives a right to women for gatherings and meetings so as to express their aspirations for equal rights, the very same men say: "No! We do not need such a constitution!"

Muslim men abandoning their life priorities and marrying western women: Caricature consists of two pictures in which first represents the situation when an educated Muslim intellectual promises to the crowd of his compatriots to fight for improvements of their socio-political conditions. The second caricature represents the situation, when the same intellectual, bids farewell to his comrades, while holding under his arm a woman in western clothes. The cartoon reflects one of the main concerns(15) of the Muslim society of the time, when educated men would marry non-Muslim women, because they were failing to find women of their kind, educated and capable to share their ideas. In this context some may fall into the conviction of Muslim men out of desire for "leisure rather than principle, marrying a European woman." Yet the matter is more complicated than that, being actually the opposite. Leisure is the sec-

Look, even Sheikh ul-Islam is bringing his daughters to Tagiyev's school.



ondary aspect if at all. Typically, Muslim men marrying western women were those individuals, who after obtaining western education, were not able to build family relationships with uneducated and backward women in general. We can see that the concern about it existed in Azerbaijani society within the idea that marriages to non-Muslim women would contribute in time to the nation's losing its identity. Therefore, we find the matter of "leisure" being attributed to the marriage with western women unconvincing and degrading for the latter altogether. Significantly, the majority of Azerbaijani men who were obtaining a higher education were economically self-sufficient; they would not need a marriage to a western woman to have a life of leisure. Simultaneously, it is important to strongly emphasise the fact of numerous marriages of Azerbaijani intellectuals of the time to non-Azerbaijani, yet Muslim women, that would dress as Europeans. As an example, we can refer to the photos of Azerbaijani couples of prominent intellectuals of the time with their wives.

Defined by Ahmed Agaoglu as the mirror of the Azerbaijani society, the Molla Nasreddin Magazine can evidently be considered as the most precious periodical in entire Eastern press history of XIX and XX century; as

its visual content is authentically particular and highly ethnographically representative on the scarce forum of the illustrated periodicals of the Muslim press in general, constituting a fertile source for various research topics with a social background. ❀

Bibliography

1. Elisabeth Minkel describes the content as: "...impossibly foreign illustrations, men and women from a time and place I couldn't really pinpoint..." see Minkel Elisabeth, "The Magazine That Almost Changed the World", The New Yorker, digital version at newyorker.com dated May 26, 2011. Accessed: 10.12.2022.
2. Some descriptions presented by authors on the following pages of the "Molla Nasreddin: The Magazine that Would've, Could've, Should've" are subject to misinterpretations.
3. Aşırılı A., Azərbaycan mətbuatı tarixi (1875-1920), Bakı "Elm və Təhsil", 2009, p. 83.
4. Məmmədquluzadə C., "Seçilmiş əsərləri", I v, pp. Bakı 1959, 432-433.
5. Axundov N., «Molla Nəsrəddin Jurnalının Nəşri Tarixi»... p. 104.
6. Qasımova A., XX Əsrin Əvvəllərində Şimali Azərbaycan mətbuatında qadın problemləri (1901-1917), Bakı 2010, p. 39.
7. "Molla Nasreddin" No. 19, 1907.
8. "Molla Nasreddin" No. 19, 1909.
9. "Molla Nasreddin" No. 28, 13 October 1906.
10. "Molla Nasreddin" No. 22, 2 July 1907.
11. "Molla Nasreddin" No. 11, 16 March 1908.
12. "Molla Nasreddin" No. 13, 29 March 1909.
13. Hüseynov Mir Cəlal Firidun, "XX Əsr Azərbaycan Ədəbiyyatı", Ali Məktəblər Üçün Dərslük, Maarif Nəşriyyatı, Bakı 1982, p. 38
14. Molla Nasreddin: "The Magazine that Would've, Could've, Should've", p. 56.
15. Gürcü Selcan Sağlık Şahin indicating Hablemitoğlu as a source (Hablemitoğlu Şengül – Necip, (1998) Şefika Gaspıralı və Rusya'da Türk Kadın Hareketi (1893- 1920), Ankara 1998, p. 40), mentioned that "the issue of Turkish men marrying Russian women also appeared on the pages of Alem-i Nisvan being considered as "the bleeding wound of the time"; See Sağlık Şahin Gürcü Selcan, "İsmail Gaspıralı, Türk Kadını ve Âlem-i Nisvan Dergisi", Cilt 11, Sayı 4 (Aralık 2014), ss. 210-223, p. 221.