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Mollā Nasreddin and the creative Cauldron of Transcaucasia

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ABSTRACT

In the early 20th century, a group of artists and intellectuals in Transcaucasia reinterpreted a Middle Eastern trickster figure to construct a reformist and anti-colonial Muslim discourse with a strong emphasis on social and political reforms. Using folklore, visual art, and satire, their periodical *Mollā Nasreddin* reached tens of thousands of people in the Muslim world, impacting the thinking of a generation.

The reinterpretation of myths and folklore has been an essential theme in Western literature. From Sophocles and Euripides to Maxine Hong Kingston and Toni Morrison, poets and writers have reinterpreted old tales to forge new social criticism. This article is an historical exploration of a similar theme in Transcaucasia, a region between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. Today it comprises the countries of Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia, as well as parts of Southern Russia. In the early 20th century, a group of artists and intellectuals reinterpreted a Middle Eastern trickster figure to construct a reformist and anti-colonial Muslim discourse with a strong emphasis on social and political reform. Using folklore, visual art, and satire, their periodical *Mollā Nasreddin* reached tens of thousands of people in the Muslim world, impacting the thinking of a generation. The present study will look at the milieu in which *Mollā Nasreddin* was born and examines the influence of European graphic artists, especially Francisco Goya (1746–1828), on the periodical.

The legendary trickster Nasreddin, who is claimed by both the Persians and the Turks as one of their own, is the most popular folk character in the lore of the Middle East, Central Asia, the Balkans, Southern Russia, and Transcaucasia.¹ The folk character Nasreddin would seem to have several homelands. Some Persian and Arabic sources suggest he originated from Kufa (present day Iraq) and lived in the second half of the 9th century CE. Turkish sources insist that he was originally a Turk and a contemporary of the Turco-Mongol ruler Timur (Tamerlane) in the early 15th century. Modern Turkey has adopted Nasreddin as a national symbol. An annual festival celebrating his deeds has been held in Aq Shahr since 1959. The first modern printed edition of the Nasreddin Hoşa trickster stories appeared in Turkish in 1837. An Arabic edition was published in Cairo in 1864, followed by a Persian one in 1881.

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¹There are some regional variations on his name. See our earlier article on the folk trickster, Janet Afary and Kamran Afary, 'The Rhetoric and Performance of the Trickster Nasreddin', *Iran Namag* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2017): II-XXVIII.

As a wise fool—a variant of the trickster character—Nasreddin can be compared to similar characters in Renaissance drama or the Br'er Rabbit figure in African-American lore. All of these characters rely on language and *double entendre*—not so much as commentary, but as persuasive techniques to get themselves out of trouble and others into it. By the turn of the 20th century in Iran, the Ottoman Empire, and the Caucasus, hundreds of anecdotes, folktales, and vignettes were attributed to Nasreddin, a not-so-pious Muslim cleric whose foolish deeds and clever sayings turned him into the most popular folk character. As with most tricksters, the vague origins of Nasreddin might have contributed to his enormous popularity by increasing the charm and mystery of the stories attributed to him. The humour surrounding Nasreddin transcends ethnicity, religion, national boundaries, age, and sometimes gender. The tales of Nasreddin address many social and cultural concerns, from unfulfilled bodily needs and desires to anger towards stifling rituals and taboos. There are Nasreddin tales about how Nasreddin stole the robes of a judge and impersonated him, how he found clever ways to avoid fasting in the month of Ramadan, and how he had sex in the mosque. Then there are also tales in which others trick Nasreddin, including his wife.

Carl Jung, Michel Foucault, Mikhail Bakhtin and Lewis Hyde have all delineated the transgressive character of the fool and the folk trickster, descriptions that can also be attributed to Nasreddin.² At one level, the trickster functions as a ‘safety valve’ for the social order, offering moments of respite from normal hierarchies. But the trickster can also open the door to the world of imagination and present us with a glimpse of alternate forms of living. Both readings are possible in discussions of the wise fool in the history and literature of the region.³

In 1906, the sophisticated satirical periodical *Molla Nasreddin* appropriated both the name and the role of this trickster figure and began publication in Tbilisi. *Molla Nasreddin's* appropriation of the trickster offered a new challenge to the social order. At the turn of the 20th century it disseminated a consciously radical and social democratic discourse on religion, gender, sexuality, and power in Transcaucasia and Iran—one that a generation of intellectuals adopted and propagated through articles, graphics, and political activism. The most creative period of *Molla Nasreddin* was its formative years, 1906–1911, when a highly talented group of artists, writers, and poets, many ethnically

²Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 13; Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009); Carl Gustav Jung, *Four Archetypes: Mother/ Rebirth/ Spirit/ Trickster*, trans. by R. F. C. Hill (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959 [1992]); and Lewis Hyde, *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), see especially 173–202.

³For a discussion of the transgressive character of Nasreddin see Afary & Afary, ‘The Rhetoric and Performance of the Trickster Nasreddin’. See also Ulrich Marzolph, ‘Nasr Al-Din Khodia’, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. H. A. R. Gibb et al. (Leiden: Brill, [1993] 1996), 1018–19; Marzolph, ‘Persian Nasreddiniānā: A Critical Review of Their History and Sources’, *Milletlerarası Nasreddin Hoca Sempozyumu Bildirileri* (Ankara: Ankara Üniversitesi Basimevi, 1990), 239–47; Inea Bushnaq, *Arab Folklore* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 1. See also Mohammad Ali Modarres, *Reyhānat al-Adab*, vols. 1–9 (Tabriz: Shafaq Press, 1970); and Charles Downing and William Papas, *Tales of the Hodja* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1964). For a discussion of the satirical publications during the Iranian Constitutional Revolution see Ali Akbar Dehkhdā, *Charand-o Parand: Revolutionary Satire from Iran, 1907–1909*, ed. and trans. Janet Afary and John R. Perry (New Haven: Yale UP, 2016), as well as Ali Gheissari, *Despots of the World Unite! Satire in the Iranian Constitutional Press: The Majalleh-ye Estebdad, 1907–1908*, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 25: 2 (August 2005), 360–76. For a discussion of the different styles of satire in Persian literature see Hasan Javadi, *Satire in Persian Literature* (Vancouver: Fairleigh Dickenson UP, 1988). For a broader discussion of political humour and satire in the region at the time see also Palmita Brummett, *Image and Imperialism in the Ottoman Revolutionary Press, 1908–1911* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000).

Muslim Azeris and Christian Georgians comprised the staff. In these years, the paper reflected the social and political concerns of three major upheavals of the early 20th century: the 1905 Russian Revolution, the 1906–1911 Iranian Constitutional Revolution, and the 1908 Young Turk Movement.

The eight-page weekly had full-page lithographic cartoons in colour. The founder and editor of *Mollā Nasreddin*, Jalil Mamedqolizādeh (1866–1932), was a Muslim playwright and social democrat. His wife Hamideh Khānum (1873–1955) was an early Muslim feminist whose support for the continuation of the periodical was indispensable. Another regular contributor was Ali Akbar Tāherzādeh Säber (1862–1911), a celebrated Azeri-language poet of the 20th century. The principal artists were two Georgians, Joseph Rotter and Oscar Schmerling (1863–1938), as well as an Azeri Muslim, Azim Azimzadeh (1880–1943).⁴ The paper was published in Azeri-Turkish. Hence it was directly accessible to readers of Turkish inside Iran, a language that was spoken by Azerbaijanis and others. In appropriating the name of the famous trickster figure, the periodical *Mollā Nasreddin* sharpened the sting of its socio-political criticism. At the same time, it shielded itself against outright accusations of blasphemy since the folk trickster was well-liked as an idiot-savant who told it like it was.

The 1880's oil boom in Baku, and the spurt of industrialization in certain parts of the Caucasus, had brought both Western investors and migrant Iranian and Ottoman workers to the region. Baku, Tbilisi, and other towns experienced significant economic growth, accompanied by political and literary movements. Tbilisi (Tiflis), today the capital of the Republic of Georgia, was then part of the Russian Empire. At the turn of the 20th century, Tbilisi was an eclectic cosmopolitan city where 'the East and West met.' It was a vibrant centre of politics, with more than 20 parties and political movements. Much like German beer gardens, Tbilisi's gardens were home to vocal and instrumental musical performances. Tbilisi had theatres with special effects, circus acts, and a remarkable Opera House, the Tbilisi Imperial Theatre, one of the oldest opera houses in Eastern Europe. It was also a major cosmopolitan centre for many Muslim intellectuals, as well as for Georgians, Armenians, and Russians, who attended its cultural events.⁵

Mollā Nasreddin soon captured the imagination of a wide sector of the Muslim world. Historians of Iran and the Transcaucasia have called the birth of the paper a 'historic moment' in the annals of Middle East. Edward G. Browne, the contemporary British scholar of Iran and the Middle East, called it, 'one of the best and most entertaining papers of this sort, and indeed, unrivalled in the Oriental world'.⁶ Soon after its publication, conservative Iranian clerics issued fatwās (religious rulings) against the paper. Nonetheless *Mollā Nasreddin* was smuggled across the border to Iran and other countries. (Figure 1) With a circulation of 5,000 copies, it reached a wide audience in the coffee shops and bazaars within the Ottoman Empire, Iran, Egypt, and India. In these spaces, it was read aloud to

⁴For more information on the editor, writers, and artists of the paper see the biography by the foremost Azerbaijani scholar of *Molla Nasreddin*, Issa Habibbeyli, *Jalil Mammadguluzadeh*, trans. Zeidulla Agayev and ed. Dilsuz (Baku: Chinär Chäp, 2003); See also the memoir by Hamideh Khanum Javanshir, *Awake: A Moslem Woman's Rare Memoir of Her Life and Partnership with the Editor of Molla Nasreddin, the Most Influential Satirical Journal of the Caucasus and Iran, 1907–1931*, trans. Hasan Javadi and Willem Floor (Washington, DC: Mage Publishers, 2016); and Ziyadkhan Aliyev, 'Azim Azimzade (1880–1943): Baku's Art School Named After Self-Taught Artist', *Azerbaijan International* 7, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 28–30.

⁵Marina Bulia and Mzia Janjalia, eds. *Old Georgian Cities and Towns: Tbilisi* (Tbilisi: Eka Privalova Centre BETINA for Scientific Research of Paintings, 2002), 88.

⁶Edward G. Browne, *The Press and Poetry of Modern Persia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914), 16.

diverse groups of people, many of whom were illiterate urban workers or rural peasants. The writers of *Mollā Nasreddin*, who worked closely with the social democratic organization *Himmat* [Endeavour], were committed to its platform of fighting political despotism and religious orthodoxy and pushed for political and social reform. The paper promoted secular education and greater civil rights for women and children. It also addressed the concerns of peasants and migrant workers. In addition, *Mollā Nasreddin* called for reform of Shi'ism (i.e. the predominant branch of Islam in the Caucasus and in Iran) and mocked many sacrosanct Shi'i rituals like the religious processions of the month of Muharram. But the paper was not anti-religious as such. Rather, it was the first graphic periodical in Transcaucasia, and the first publication available in Iran, to extensively, steadfastly, and unapologetically reinterpret Quranic verses in light of modern social concerns, such as gender equality. Through satirical stories and poems, the paper challenged both the prevalent Western colonial discourses and the conservative social and political practices of Muslim communities. It did so by linking itself to the earlier folkloric traditions of the trickster Nasreddin tales and their centuries-old satirical portraits of political and religious authorities. Modern traditions of graphic arts, critiques of Shi'i rituals of penance, and Persian poetry created a new cultural discourse in the pages of *Mollā Nasreddin*. Often, *Mollā Nasreddin*'s artists mingled modernist and social democratic influences with the older humanist traditions of classical Persian



Figure 1. No. 8 (May 26, 1906) No caption—*Mollā Nasreddin* confiscated at the border

poetry to highlight the violence and hypocrisy of the Western powers and Japan and critique indigenous social and cultural practices of the region.

In this article, we will focus on the art of *Mollā Nasreddin*. The paper belongs to a tradition of satirical graphic art that stretches back to early 19th-century lithographic work. The artists of *Mollā Nasreddin* were influenced by the Spanish artist Francisco Goya (1746–1828), whose art had been influenced both by the republican ideals of the French Revolution and the French military atrocities committed in Spain by Napoleon's forces in the Peninsular War of 1808. By the, early 20th century, Goya had come to influence a generation of artists on the European continent and Russia.⁷ The artists of *Mollā Nasreddin* also drew upon new forms of caricature in periodicals such as the French *Le Charivari* (1832–1937), the British *Punch* (1841–1992), the German *Simplicissimus* (1896–1914)⁸ and the Russian periodicals of the turn of the 20th century such as *Leshii* (Wood Goblin), *Hell-Post*, *Flame*, *Signals*, and *Zritel* (Spectator), which were themselves influenced by Goya, and the Critical Realist style of Art.⁹

The key to the success of this cultural mélange was the paper's creative use of the trickster figure as a medium of social criticism. The traditional wise fool broke conventional boundaries of rationality, morality, and artistic creativity, revealing the hypocrisy of existing social reality, and ridiculing the ignorance of the pompous theologian, the arrogant scholar, and the wealthy aristocrat or king. The folk humour of the trickster figure Nasreddin also succeeded because of its 'grotesque realism.' Powerful objects of folk humour were brought down to earth, undressed (literally or metaphorically), debased, and symbolically killed. The ground was levelled so that something newer and better could emerge.

The present-day Republic of Azerbaijan has celebrated *Mollā Nasreddin* as an early expression of the Azerbaijani nation. The first years of the paper were transcribed in Baku before and after the fall of the Soviet Union.¹⁰ Iranian historians have also stressed the historical and religious ties between Iran and Transcaucasia, and pointed out that both Sāber and the editor of the paper, Jalil Mamedqolizadeh commonly referred to as Mirza Jalil, came from immigrant Iranian families. These scholars have called attention to the fact that a large volume of *Mollā Nasreddin*'s poems, and graphics were about Iran, demonstrating the editorial board's preoccupation with all things Iranian.¹¹ Georgians can also make a claim on the paper since two of its main cartoonists were Georgians and

⁷In our discussion of Goya, we have drawn on José Lopez-Rey, *Goya's Caprichos: Beauty, Reason, and Caricature*, vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953); Richard Schickel, *The World of Goya, 1746–1828* (New York: Time-Life Books, 1968); Pierre Gassier, Juliet Wilson, and Francois Lachenal, *Goya: Life and Work* (New York : Harrison House, 1981); Fred Licht, *Goya, the Origins of the Modern Temper in Art* (New York: Universe Books, 1979); Eleanor A. Sayre, *The Changing Image: Prints by Francisco Goya* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1974); and Mariarosa Schiaffino, *Masters of Art: Goya* (New York: Peter Bedrick Books, 1999). The prints of Goya that are reproduced here were taken from the on-line collection of the Metropolitan Museum of the Art in New York and are in the public domain.

⁸Stanley Appelbaum, *Simplicissimus* (New York: Dover Publications, 1975); Fritz Arnold. *One Hundred Caricatures from Simplicissimus, 1896–1914* (Munich: The Goethe Institute, 1983); and Timothy W. Hiles, *Thomas Theodor Heine; Fin-de-Siècle Munich and the Origins of Simplicissimus* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996).

⁹Copies of these publications can be found at the library of the University of Illinois Champagne-Urbana. A more comprehensive collection exists at the University of Melbourne, Australia. See Anthony Tedeschi, 'Russian Satirical Journals from the 1905 Revolution', <https://blogs.unimelb.edu.au/librarycollections/2013/12/19/революция-российских-сатирических-журналов-из-1905-революции/> (accessed March 24, 2019).

¹⁰See the reprints of the first five years of the periodical: *Molla Nasreddin* (1906–1931). Vol. 1: 1906–1907 (Baku: Azerbaijan Academy of Sciences, 1988); *Molla Nasreddin* (1906–1931). Vol. 2: 1908–1909 (Baku: Azerbaijan Dovlet Neshriyati, 2002); *Molla Nasreddin* (1906–1931). Vol. 3: 1909–1910 (Baku: Çınar-Çap Neshriyati, 2005).

¹¹Yahya Aryanpour, *Az Saba ta Nima*, vol. 2 (Tehran: Kitab'ha-yi Jibi, 1972), 52–60.

it was published in Tbilisi. Indeed, what made the paper a sensation was its illustrations and cartoons, especially those by Rotter and Schmerling, who belonged to the migrant German-Georgian communities of Tbilisi. Their mastery of the lithographic arts—obtained during their studies at the Munich Academy of Arts—was an essential factor in the paper's popularity.

It may be that we are defining the contribution of *Mollā Nasreddin* and these Transcaucasian intellectuals and artists in national terms when in reality they belonged to a transnationalist milieu, one that more aptly fits our contemporary description of a hybrid, diasporic, and migrant society. In this region, Russians of a variety of religious and political persuasions, Azeris, Armenians, Persians, Georgians, Germans, Jews of varying ethnic backgrounds, and other ethnicities mingled on a daily basis and shared some common cultural and/or social and political spaces. To this we must add the relatively rapid industrialization in parts of the region due to Baku's oil fields, because of which so many had migrated to the region. Finally, there was the growth of a variety of political parties on the left, organizations which introduced a new generation of activists to new ideologies, and the transformative experience of three major revolutions, in Russia, Iran, and the Ottoman Empire between 1905 and 1908.

The themes of diaspora, of living in transition between and across cultures, and of crossing borders are prevalent ones in *Mollā Nasreddin*. As cultural theorists Hamid Naficy and Stuart Hall have argued, the diasporic community, suspended as if in midair between very different societies and cultures, faces a daily clash of political, ethical, spiritual, aesthetic, familial, and even dietary and culinary values that have to be creatively negotiated. The collision of cultures, including religious precepts, and the contestations of traditional modes of thought and modernity, can generate both defensively intolerant reactions as well as refreshingly innovative, complex, and progressive perspectives and practices, a form of cross-fertilization that does not fully replicate the oppositional categories of colonizer and colonized, of centre and margin.¹² The latter cross-cultural interchange, we are suggesting, is what happened with the periodical *Mollā Nasreddin* at the turn of the 20th century.

Transcaucasia at the turn of the 20th century and the impact of Akhundzādeh

Transcaucasia refers to the territory located between the Caucasus Mountains (to the north), the Black Sea (to the west), the Caspian Sea (to the east) and the Iranian Plateau (to the south). At the turn of the 20th century the term Azerbaijani referred only to the residents of the province of Azerbaijan inside Iran. Those who lived north of Aras River and spoke the various dialects of the Azeri language, including the editor and various writers of *Mollā Nasreddin*, referred to themselves as Muslims (to distinguish themselves from Christian Georgians and Armenians who also resided in the territory) or as Caucasian ('Qafqazi'), while the Russian administrators referred to them as Tatars.

Until the 20th century, most of the region was organized into *khanates*, territorial administrative units overseen by regional chieftains, similar to European feudal fiefdoms,

¹²Hamid Naficy, *Making of Exile Cultures: Iranian Television in Los Angeles* (University of Minnesota Press, 1993); and Stuart Hall, *Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (Routledge, 1996).

albeit technically under Russian state authority, and inhabited by members of the same tribe. The region was considered part of the Iranian world until the early 19th century. That would change with Tsar Alexander I (1800–1825) who initiated a vast campaign of conquest. First, he proclaimed the Kingdom of Georgia a province of Russia. Next, he annexed the khanates between the Caspian Sea and the Aras River. Iran's Qajar rulers pushed back in two Russo-Iranian wars but were defeated both times. Following the Treaty of Golestān (1813) and the Treaty of Turkmanchāy (1828) Iran renounced its sovereignty over the khanates north of the Aras River. A Russian victory over the Ottoman Empire led to the Treaty of Adrianople (1829) completing Russian colonial rule over the area between the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea. (Figure 2) The territory inhabited mostly by Azeri-speaking Muslims was now permanently divided into two parts. One-third of the population, about 500,000, lived in the region known as Arran and Shirvan, north of the Aras River, which became part of the Russian Empire. The area south of the river Aras, known as the Province of Azerbaijan, remained part of Iran.

Initially, the size of the Shi'i and Sunni populations of Arran and Shirvan in Transcaucasia was roughly the same. However, following a series of unsuccessful insurrections against Russian rule by the Sufi Naqshbandi Order, many Sunnis of Transcaucasia migrated to the Ottoman Empire. By 1860, the Shi'is formed a clear majority of the Muslim population of Transcaucasia comprising two-thirds of the population. The region included other ethnic and religious minorities, such as Sunni Kurdish and Turkic nomads, as well as Christian Armenians and some Jews. Encouraged by Russian rule, Armenians of Iran and the Ottoman Empire began to emigrate to Transcaucasia to live under Christian Russian rule. Tsar Nicholas I (r. 1825–1855) granted them an Armenian district in the adjacent khanates of Erivan (Yerevan) and Nakhchivan.¹³

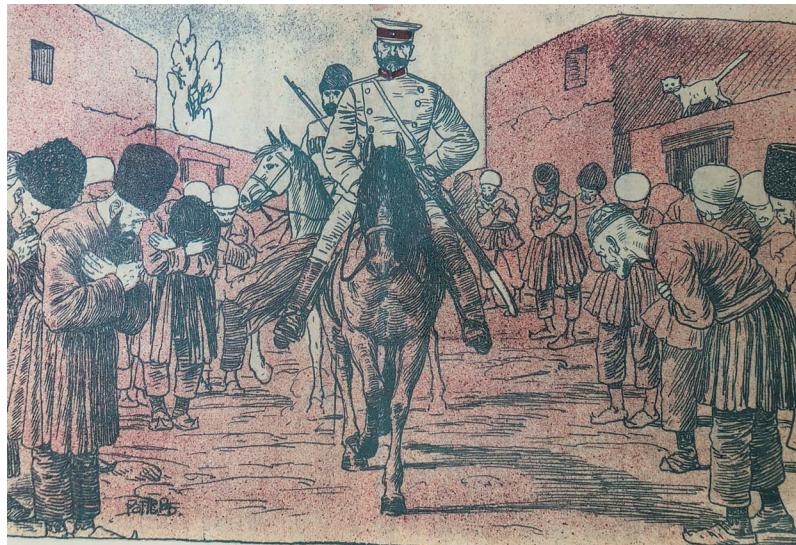


Figure 2. *Molla Nasreddin* No. 6 (May 12, 1906) Russian colonialism

¹³For the history of the Russian Caucasus in the 19th century see Tadeusz Swietochowski, *Russian Azerbaijan, 1905–1920: The Shaping of National Identity in a Muslim Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 1–10; Swietochowski, *Russia and Azerbaijan: A Borderland in Transition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995); and Firouzeh Mostashari, *On the Religious Frontier: Tsarist Russia and Islam in the Caucasus* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2017).

Russian authorities freely admitted that their government did not care much about the economic development of the inhabitants in the colonized region and simply wanted to turn the area into 'a colony producing the raw materials for a southern climate.'¹⁴ By the mid 19th century, the Russian government had built no factories in the region. However, it had changed the region's economy from subsistence agriculture combined with a healthy craft industry, into a mostly cash crop economy, which produced the raw materials for Russian factories elsewhere. This transition would also lead to the ruination of Transcaucasia's local craft industry.

A major change in policy took place during the tenure of Mikhail Semenovich Vorontsov, Governor General of the Caucasus (1844–1853). He had served as a military officer during the Russian annexation of Transcaucasia and the Crimea in his youth and now decided that the best policy for maintaining the colonies was the gradual integration of the population into Russian institutions. Under Vorontsov, natives of Transcaucasia were admitted to Russian schools and the Tsarist military, and were also offered civil service jobs. Transcaucasian natives also entered Russian universities and teachers' seminaries in Tbilisi and Gori (about 90 miles north of Tbilisi). Many teachers also ventured into journalism and engaged in literary careers.

These writers were encouraged by the example of the literary giant, Mirza Fath Ali Ākhundzādeh (aka Ākhundov, 1812–1878) who is considered the founding father of Muslim Enlightenment in Transcaucasia and Iran. He wrote the first modern Azeri plays and pioneered both the Azerbaijani and Persian modern literatures. He also introduced a simplified Azeri literary language, which he called Türki, shorn of many classical Persian and Arabic terms, which was more accessible to ordinary people of Muslim Transcaucasia. A loyal tsarist official who worked as a translator in the Chancellery of the Viceroy of the Caucasus, Ākhundzādeh was both passionate about his Iranian heritage, and painfully embarrassed by its shortcomings. Although born in Nukha in Russian-controlled Caucasus (today known as Shaki, in the Republic of Azerbaijan), he regarded Iran, where his father was born, as his ancestral homeland (*vatan*). But he had an equal affinity for his native Azeri tongue as well as the Caucasus where he grew up. He cherished both Azeri Turkish and Persian languages and published in both. Because Ākhundzādeh felt secure in his credentials as an official of the Tsarist government, he was able to raise issues that no one before him had dared to air publicly. He was an abolitionist who condemned the African slave trade in the Middle East and the castration of slave boys employed as eunuchs in royal harems. He also championed schools for girls and marriage reforms. In his anti-clerical and anti-religious satire, he even discussed the marital conflicts of the prophet and blamed these disputes on the institution of polygamy.¹⁵

The region's fortunes would change dramatically with the oil boom of the 1870s, such that Baku surpassed the United States' oil production in 1898. A number of European industrialists invested in the region. Among them were the Swedish Nobel Brothers who founded the world's largest oil company, as well as the French Rothschild family who formed the Caspian-Black Sea Society for Commerce and Industries, as well as British,

¹⁴ Świetochowski, *Russia and Azerbaijan*, 17.

¹⁵Fath Ali Ākhundzadeh, *Maktabāt*, ed. Bahram Chubineh (Frankfurt: Alborz Verlag, 2006); Janet Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 114–5.

German, Belgian, and Greek entrepreneurs who also invested in Baku's oil industry. By 1903, Baku had become a multinational urban centre, with a population of over 200,000. But the city was not a melting pot; after work hours each ethnicity retreated to its own enclave. The Muslim population, which stood at about 40–50% of the overall population, was the least educated segment of the general population. Hence, better jobs went to more educated and experienced Russian and Armenian workers, while Muslims were primarily employed as unskilled manual workers. Still, a few Muslim families who were fortunate enough to retain oil-rich land became quite wealthy by the late 19th century.¹⁶

The most well-known of these wealthy men was Zeyn al-Abadin Taghiev (d. 1924), an industrialist of humble origin, who is often dubbed the Father of the modern Republic of Azerbaijan. Although he was barely literate, Taghiev nevertheless became a generous patron of the arts and educational philanthropist. He built the first modern theatre in Baku in 1883 and provided scholarships for a new generation of Muslim youth to study at Russian and European universities. He also founded the first boarding school for girls in Baku in 1901. This palatial school, adorned with cascading marble stairs, had a vast library of Persian, Russian, and European classics, including works by Nezami Ganjavi, Shakespeare, Pushkin, Tolstoy, Molière, and Voltaire.¹⁷ The library received all of the region's important publications and journals, including the works of Ākhundzādeh, and the periodical *Mollā Nasreddin*. Taghiev sent an emissary to the Ottoman province of present-day Iraq—home to the Grand Shi'i clerics in Najaf and Karabala—and received a fatwā from the religious establishment to produce the first Azerbaijani translation of the Qur'an.¹⁸

At the turn of the 20th century, Baku's expanding oil fields and their related industries had encouraged Iranian villagers to migrate north in search of higher-paying work. Many remained seasonal workers who would periodically return to their Iranian villages. By 1913, when the population of Iran was around 10 million, the number of Iranians who worked in southern Russia was estimated at around 500,000, or 5% of the population. Most of these labourers worked under extremely difficult conditions in agriculture, construction, masonry, oil, or as dock workers. While away from their families, these men would write letters and send money back home. From time to time they might travel to Iran to visit relatives or find spouses. In these ways, the two communities remained deeply connected.¹⁹

Mollā Nasreddin: a diaspora publication

Mirza Jalil's grandparents belonged to one such immigrant family. Both his grandfather and his grandmother hailed from Khuy, Iran. In 1840, their families relocated 120 miles to the other side of the border and settled in Nakhchivan.²⁰ Mirza Jalil learned Azeri and

¹⁶See Swietochowski, *Russia and Azerbaijan*, 27–8; Mostashari, *On the Religious Frontier*: 95; and Swietochowski, *Russian Azerbaijan*, 22–3.

¹⁷Swietochowski, *Russian Azerbaijan*, 22–3. See also Mais I. Amrahov and Garat Gafarova, 'Haji Zeynalabedin Taghiev's School for Girls—An Educated Girl Means an Educated Family', *Visions of Azerbaijan* (March-June 2012), www.visions.az/en/news/388/aca96e32/ (accessed November 18, 2018).

¹⁸Aynur Jafarova, 'Baku Oil Tycoon, Great Philanthropist [sic], Great Man'. *Azernews*, 25 January 2013 (accessed September 20, 2018).

¹⁹Hasan Hakimian, 'Wage Labor and Migration: Persian Workers in Southern Russia, 1880–1914', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 17 (1985): 447.

²⁰The ancient city of Nakhchivan, about 175 miles north of Tabriz and 280 miles West of Baku, had witnessed the march of the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius to the Persian Empire in the 7th century, a war that would exhaust both empires and open the doors to Arab-Muslim rule.

Persian in Nakhchivan, and studied Russian at school there. The family earned a meagre living from selling salt. Mirza Jalil was sent to a traditional *maktab* religious school and later attended the local Russian school in his town. Next, he went north, where in 1887 he graduated from the Gori Pedagogical Seminary, becoming active in the theatre department.

After graduation, Mirza Jalil became a schoolteacher for a decade in the Georgian countryside and subsequently in Nakhchivan. This experience would later provide him with great material for his short stories and comedies. He also learned Armenian, studied law, and joined Russian, Armenian, and Azeri intellectual circles where he immersed himself in Western classics from the Greeks to Marx, Darwin, and John Stuart Mill. In 1903, Mirza Jalil moved to the predominantly Georgian city of Tbilisi, where he worked for *Sharq-i Rus* (Russian East) the only Transcaucasian Azeri Turkish periodical of the time whose editor Mamed Shāhtakhti had spent years in Europe as a journalist. Shāhtakhti encouraged Mirza Jalil's literary career and published his early work *Post Box* as well as his Azeri translations of some Tolstoy's stories. With his younger brother Mirza Ali Akbar, Mirza Jalil also directed some of the plays of Ākhundzādeh.²¹ Mirza Jalil found that he had a close affinity for the diasporic identity Ākhundzādeh had first articulated.

After the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905, when *Sharq-i Rus* stopped publication, Mirza Jalil purchased its printing press to publish *Mollā Nasreddin*. The Russian Revolution of 1905 provided a new intellectual and political milieu. It was within this atmosphere that *Mollā Nasreddin* and numerous other dissident journals began publication. In October 1905 Tsar Nicholas issued the October Manifesto, which granted basic civil liberties, including freedom of speech, to people of the empire. Soon censorship regulations were relaxed, leading to the emergence of a free press. Satirical journals were the most distinctive product of this period, reaching the unprecedented distribution of close to 30 million copies. According to Levitt and Minin, 'soon the press went from serving as a vehicle of social and political dialogue and compromise to become a weapon of militant and harsh criticism, in some cases, aimed at doing away with the tsarist state'.²²

Mollā Nasreddin targeted the cruelty and corruption of political despots, religious authorities, and the landed aristocracy, who together exploited the people of the Muslim Middle East and devoured the resources of the region (Figure 3). A close reading of the periodical also reveals a great deal of longing, affection, and nostalgia for Iran, as well as great pride in Iran's achievements during the 1906 Constitutional Revolution. At the same time, the paper displayed a significant degree of rage, frustration, and even contempt towards contemporary Iranian social and cultural norms. This sense of frustration and resentment, while not yet a fully formed expression of distinctly Azeri ethno-national identity in the Caucasus, was a preliminary step in that direction. *Mollā Nasreddin*'s relentless critique of Iranian culture stemmed from a perception that Iran was the source of negative cultural qualities that an educated and enlightened Muslim resident of Baku or Tbilisi must shed before becoming a modern person in the eyes of the dominant Russian colonial power. The paper was critical of the Iranian population's vast illiteracy, lack of health care and proper hygiene, and rampant superstition. Still

²¹Javanshir, *Awake*, 1–3.

²²Marcus levitt and Oleg Minin, 'The Satirical Journals of the First Russian Revolution, 1905–1907: A Brief Introduction', *Experiment* 19 (2013): 23, 18–19.



Figure 3. *Mollā Nasreddin* No. 6 (Feb 10, 1907) The feast—clerics, statesmen, and landowners, roasting the peasants

Mollā Nasreddin felt a complicated emotional attachment to Iran (perhaps resembling that of an estranged child towards his/her parents). A strong sense of attachment is apparent in the biography of Mirza Jalil, who writes:

I was born in the city of Nakhchivan, which is six *farsang* (36 miles) from the River Aras and 40 *farsang* (240 miles) from the village of Julfa. I am here deliberately mentioning the names "Aras" and "Julfa" because the River Aras marks [our] common border and Julfa is the customs bureau between us and Iran, and I am proud of my association with this river and this region ...²³

In the pages of *Mollā Nasreddin* the word 'vatan' or homeland nearly always referred to Iran, not so much as a location, but as a locale or state of mind—and carried a sense of nostalgia and longing. This deep sense of attachment to Iranian land also manifests in the paper's poetry, essays, and lithographic prints. But it can best be captured in the many articles and drawings that addressed the Iranian Constitutional Revolution, which began in the summer of 1906 and ended in December 1911 as a result of Russian intervention.²⁴ There was a vibrant exchange of ideas between *Mollā Nasreddin* and the Iranian constitutionalist periodicals of this period, such as *Sur-e Israfil* of Tehran, *Azerbaijan* of Tabriz, and *Nasim-e Shemal* of Rasht. All of these periodicals swapped concepts and style with *Mollā Nasreddin* and included Persian and Azeri Turkish poems and articles within their pages.²⁵ The articles and drawings in *Mollā Nasreddin* celebrated the major democratic achievements of the Iranian constitutionalists. The revolution in Iran horrified the Tsarist authorities who had just put down similar aspirations in the Russian Caucasus. At the same time *Mollā Nasreddin* continued to criticize Shi'i religious practices. These articles resulted in periodic attacks on

²³Rahim Rezāzādeh Malik, *Zābān-i Barā-ye Engelāb: Hop Hop* (Tehran: Sahar Publications, 1979), 54.

²⁴Our forthcoming monograph will include most of these images, providing a narrative of the Constitutional Revolution in graphics.

²⁵See Yahya Aryanpur, *Az Sabā tā Nimā*. Vol. 2: 66–8; see also Nassereddin Parvin, 'Nasim-e Šemāl'. *Encyclopaedia Iranica*. 15 April 2010, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/nasim-shemal> (Retrieved March 17, 2019).

the editor by both Tsarist authorities and Shi'i clerics of Iran and Transcaucasia, which led to censorship, occasional closure, and confiscation of the paper at the border between Russia and Iran. (Figure 4).

The influence of European graphic arts, especially Francisco Goya

The prints of *Mollā Nasreddin* can be traced to the tradition of satirical graphic arts that began with the woodcuts and etchings of the British and Spanish artists William Hogarth (1697–1764) and Francisco Goya (1746–1828). Their works expressed the diverse social and political concerns of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. At the beginning



Figure 4. No. 4 (April 28, 1906) The beating

of the 19th century, new technological developments in lithography and a general rise in literacy resulted in the creation of popular illustrated periodicals and journals. Political satire and the art of caricature had developed along two distinct French and British styles. *Le Caricature* (1831–1834) and *Le Charivari* (1832–1937) in Paris printed the illustrations of Honoré Daumier (1808–1879) and welded the Enlightenment traditions to the burgeoning socialist ideas that were central to the 1830, 1848, and 1871 revolutions in France.²⁶

In contrast, the enormously popular British *Punch* or *The London Charivari* (1841–1992) moved away from the dominant left-wing politics of the Continent and adopted the condescending and Eurocentric tone of the British upper classes. *Punch* became a mouthpiece for Britain's colonial politics and a vitriolic critic of British suffragists and working class movements at home.

The artists of *Mollā Nasreddin* were influenced by *Punch*'s journalistic style, format, and graphic representations of *Punch*, but they remained deeply committed to the left-wing political ideals of Goya, Daumier, and the artists of the 1905 Russian Revolution. This influence may have directly resulted from Schmerling and Rotter's trainings at the Russian Academy of the Arts in Saint Petersburg and the Munich Academy of the Arts. But it surely resulted from the Russian Empire milieu in which they lived when they created their works. As Levitt and Minin have pointed out, 'The Russian journals built on the experience of well-known European satirical magazines such as the German *Simplicissimus*, England's *Punch*, and France's *Assiette au beurre*, and were part of the international upswing of political satire that also reached the Mideast and the Ottoman Empire, as well as many non-Russian speaking peoples of the Russian Empire.'²⁷ Goya's influence can be found on the socially-committed cartoons that appeared in *Simplicissimus* and the many Russian journals appearing after 1905. *Simplicissimus*, whose editors were briefly arrested for their attacks on Kaiser Wilhelm and the clergy, may have had a more direct influence on Rotter and Schmerling's artistic style, since the two men belonged to the German-Georgian community and would have been familiar with *Simplicissimus*.²⁸

Mollā Nasreddin was heavily engaged with the classical works of Russian and European art and literature. Leah Feldman shows that Mirza Jalil was influenced by both the works of Honoré de Balzac and Nikolai Gogol. However, when he 'translates' their work, "he does not reproduce the text or even the plot of Gogol's story, but transcribes the rhetorical-political violence that animates his work. The reception of Gogolian parody in the Caucasus represents an important epistemic shift of 'translation' of a Russian identity, through its encounter with an emerging discourse of Muslim Turkic identity"²⁹ A similar process happens when *Mollā Nasreddin* attempts to adapt or

²⁶Howard P. Vincent, *Daumier and His World* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968); Robert Rey, *Honoré Daumier* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1964); and Oliver W. Larkin, *Daumier: Man of His Time* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1966).

²⁷Levitt and Minin, *Satirical Journals*, 19. Both Ilya Repin (1844–1930) and the gifted Georgian artist Niko Pirosmani (1862–1918) might have also influenced the Georgian artists of *Mollā Nasreddin*. For examples of their work and of Russian revolutionary art in 1905–06, we have relied on Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier, *Russian Realist Art* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1977); Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier, *Ilya Repin & the World of Russian Art* (New York: Columbia UP, 1990); John E. Bowlt, *The Silver Age: Russian Art of the Early 20th Century and the World of Art' Group* (Newtonville: Oriental Research Institute Partners, 1982); and especially Erast Kuznetsov and Ketevan Bagratishvili, *Niko Pirosmani, 1862–1918* (Leningrad: Aurora Art Publishers, 1983).

²⁸Schmerling and Rotter also worked with *Khatabla*, a satirical journal of the Armenian community in Tbilisi.

²⁹See Leah Feldman, 'Reading Gogol' in Azeri: Parodic Genealogies and the Revolutionary Geopoetics of 1905', *Slavic Review* 75, no. 2 (Summer 2016): 260.

'translate' the tradition of European Graphic Arts for the Muslim Caucasus. *Punch*, for example, unabashedly defended Britain's foreign policy in the East. In contrast, and for the first time in an illustrated periodical, the artists of *Mollā Nasreddin* while appropriating some of the stylistic devices of *Punch*, produced a visual counter-discourse that represented the Muslim East perspective on issues of colonialism and Imperialism. Through this hybrid rendition, the caricatures of *Mollā Nasreddin* remained progressive in their criticism of imperialism, while the sharp palettes of the artists also turned inward towards issues closer to home. *Mollā Nasreddin* criticized conservative cultural practices that limited the region's growth. Further, through its deeply penetrating sketches it magnified many intimate gender and social concerns that had never been so publicly discussed before, from sexual violence to paedophilia.

The European Enlightenment movement had espoused vastly differing world-views, ranging from greater rights for women, abolition of slavery, pacifism, and other similar progressive ideas to much narrower views that legitimized social, gender, and other sets of hierarchies. The cross-fertilization we witness in the pages of *Mollā Nasreddin* involves an appropriation of many progressive Enlightenment ideas. In some areas, *Mollā Nasreddin* even transcended the myopia of European Enlightenment. There were, however, limits to the paper's ability to offer an intersectional approach that addressed race, gender, class, and ethnicity in a progressive way. In addressing the new political and social concerns of Transcaucasia, Iran, the Ottoman Empire, and Central Asia *Mollā Nasreddin* sometimes reproduced racist and sexist Enlightenment tropes in its portrayal of non-Muslim communities.³⁰

The consternations of *Mollā Nasreddin* are manifold and the ideologies of the artists are a pastiche of various positions on the left. Sometimes, when glorifying the martyrs of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution, *Mollā Nasreddin* adopts the expository and propagandistic tone of the artists of the French Revolution who portrayed their leaders as strong and heroic figures. Sometimes, the paper adopts the moralistic tone of the British satirist Hogarth and his student Thomas Rowlandson, who condemned gambling, drinking, and prostitution in harsh pedantic images, and who mocked the hypocrisy of the aristocracy and the religious leaders by adopting a similar tone towards the Shi'i clergy. At times *Mollā Nasreddin* follows the tradition of Daumier and condemns the monarchy for its disregard of the people and the royal court's political corruption, here pointing its sharpest arrows at the autocratic king of Iran, Muhammad Ali Shah (r. 1907–1909), but avoiding criticism of the Tsar which would have led to the closing of the paper. However, by condemning Mohammad Ali Shah, *Mollā Nasreddin* was also circuitously attacking the Tsarist state that abetted the Iranian autocrat in opposition to the Iranian Constitutional Movement. And sometimes the paper appropriates the concept of the devil from *Simplicissimus* and the Russian satirical journals—themselves preoccupied with the notions of demons and devils—though attributing to them a moralistic tone that is absent from the Modernist artistic tradition—in order to point to vices committed by colonial powers in Iran and the Ottoman Empire.³¹ Often the artists of *Mollā Nasreddin* try to combine their adherence to Western ideals of the

³⁰Most notable in this regard are a few cartoons depicting African cannibalism, also common in European publications of the period, and others criticizing the supposed promiscuity of urbanite Russian women.

³¹For the Russian artists' fascination with devils, skeletons, and vampires see Willian Richardson, *Zolotoe Runo and Russian Modernism: 1905–1910* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1986) and Levitt and Minin, *The Satirical Journals*, 22.

Enlightenment, modernity, and social democracy with their criticism of imperialist nations—pointing to the violence, greed, and hypocrisy of Europe and the United States in India, the Middle East, North Africa, the Philippines, and Japan.

In spirit—and to some extent, in style—some cartoons of Rotter and Schmerling resemble the dark satire of Goya, whose influence had become part of the extensive discursive tradition of protest art in Europe and Russia by the early 20th century.³² A brief sketch of Goya's life might help explain his predominant influence in the field of graphic arts and on the artists of *Mollā Nasreddin* in particular. The French Revolution, like the Reformation before it, had an enormous impact on the arts. Printmakers responded to this major political event and its aftermath with grotesque and visual commentaries that "literally taught the public about its newfound power and constantly undermined the governing class."³³ Goya, who lived the comfortable life of a court painter under the King Charles IV of Spain (r. 1788–1808), was influenced by these political and artistic transformations. Spain at the turn of the 19th century bore some similarities to Iran and Transcaucasia at the turn of the 20th century. With great clarity and artistic achievement, Goya addressed public concerns during the monarchy of Charles IV, the powerful authority of the Catholic Church, rampant superstition, and immense social and economic inequalities.

As with other progressive artists of his era, Goya cherished the ideals of the Enlightenment and the belief that humanity could be improved through science and education. He believed that reason could eradicate superstition and religious dogma, and that despotic governments could be replaced by democratic ones. Goya, who knew members of the Inquisition, and was familiar with their morbid accusations of witchcraft and communion with supernatural powers, poured out his condemnation in a series of satirical etchings known as *The Caprichos* (1799). These etchings show various members of society in hilariously funny or grotesquely nightmarish renditions. They also deal with social taboos such as rape, arranged marriages, prostitution, maltreatment of children, superstition, and religious abuse of power.³⁴ These were often the same social issues that the artists of *Mollā Nasreddin* addressed, particularly in their criticism of Shi'i clerics. Indeed, sometimes there are striking thematic similarities between the prints of *Mollā Nasreddin* and those of Goya.

Goya produced *The Disasters of War*, a series of private etchings drawn between 1810–1820 that depicted the Napoleonic Wars and their aftermath in Spain. *The Disasters of War* has been called 'the cornerstone of our modern civilization' since it was exclusively concerned with the violence and brutality of war. *The Disasters of War* is a testament to Goya's sophisticated vision of humanity and his ability to portray great evil as well as abstract ideals. The collection was first published in the 1850s and has since inspired generations of artists, who have dealt with the subject of war, including Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*.

In these series, Goya drew horrific images that condemned the Peninsular War with Napoleonic France with striking originality. Spanish liberals such as Goya, who had initially

³²Goya did not invent this tradition. Rather, a long tradition of protest art in the West preceded his work, to which Goya introduced many new elements. For contemporaries of *Mollā Nasreddin* who produced popular images that were also reminiscent of European protest art and Goya's work see the works of the Mexican artist, José Guadalupe Posada (1852–1913), in his *Posada's Popular Mexican Prints* (New York: Dover Publications, 1972).

³³Linda C. Hults, *The Print in the Western World: An Introductory History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 392.

³⁴Francisco Goya, *Los Caprichos* (New York: Dover Publications, 1969); and Hults, *The Print in the Western World*, 397–8.

supported the entrance of the French Army into their country as their only hope against the Inquisition and the old order, were severely demoralized when the war ended with the French massacres of Spanish resistors.³⁵ As Fred Licht has argued, Spain had strayed so far from the European family of nations that ‘the French troops regarded the Spanish people with ideas and feelings that were later to inspire colonial armies in Africa and Asia’.³⁶ Rotter was probably inspired by these series of Goya’s work, when he turned to the subjects of colonialism, imperialism, and the dismemberment of the Middle East and North Africa.

Goya and the pseudo-science of physiognomy

Goya recognized the double-edged nature of modernity with remarkable acumen. But his prints could not escape the flaws of scientific modernity. Like many artists of his generation, Goya was an aficionado of physiognomy, which sought scientific proof that one’s appearance determined one’s character. People with physical deformities were seen as morally corrupt, while those endowed with beauty (mostly according to Western European standards) were viewed as inherently ethical and moral.³⁷ This 18th century desire to use science to understand everything, including human nature, was at the root of physiognomy. The face and various parts of the body were charted, classified, and catalogued, and the argument was made that an individual’s character could be predicted based on various resemblances with animals.³⁸ The most celebrated work of this genre, *Essays on Physiognomy* by the Swiss author Johann Kaspar Lavater (1741–1801), became widely popular in Europe.³⁹ His four-volume commentary included meticulously drawn graphics that compared the physical and behavioural traits of humans and animals. The ‘slavish subjection’ of the dog, the ‘wicked and obstinate’ crocodile, the ‘crafty and malignant’ serpent and the ‘noble’ swan, all became irrefutable facts of science. Likewise, the man with the flat forehead was claimed to be devoid of intelligence and reflection, the one with ‘turned-down’ nose was never good and noble, and the one with larger upper lips was stupid and rude.⁴⁰ Lavater’s book would appear alongside the Bible in many homes and was printed in numerous editions in German, French, and later English. It became “a basic resource in a gentleman’s home, to be consulted when hiring staff, making friends, and establishing business relations.”⁴¹

Goya and his contemporaries were too indebted to the ideals of the more universalist, and empirically discerning and nuanced trends in the Enlightenment thought to accept the

³⁵Francisco Goya, *The Disasters of War* (New York: Dover Publications, 1967).

³⁶Licht, *Goya, the Origins of the Modern Temper in Art*, 105.

³⁷Hults, *The Print in the Western World*, 391.

³⁸One of the most egregious examples of this approach can be found in the purportedly ‘scientific’ medical pronouncements by the French naturalist and Zoologist Georges Léopold Cuvier (d. 1832). Cuvier believed there were three distinct races—white, yellow, and black—which had physical and mental differences. Among others, these theories contributed to Cuvier’s classification of a Khoikhoi woman from southern Africa, named Sara Baartman (d. 1815)—known as the ‘Hottentot Venus’—who had been put on public display in England and France as a supposed link between animals and human beings. After her death, Curvier dissected her body, displayed her remains, and created anatomical studies and illustrations in an attempt to prove his theories. Thanks to the anonymous reviewer of the journal for suggesting this reference.

³⁹See John Caspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy* (New York: R. Worthington, 1880). Lavater drew on a wide range of sources from Aristotle and the Bible to Descartes, Leonardo de Vinci, and Hogarth. He systematized this type of thinking and elevated it to the level of a science.

⁴⁰Lavater, *Essays*, 217–24. These obviously embodied anti-Semitic as well as anti-Black racism.

⁴¹Judith Wechsler, *A Human Comedy: Physiognomy and Caricature in 19th Century Paris* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 23–4.

pseudo-scientific claims of physiognomy in toto. Nevertheless, because of its influence (or perhaps because it offered the artist an irresistible tool for the art of political and social caricature), Goya and generations of caricaturists—from Daumier to the artists of *Punch*, and even many artists of our time—have continued to incorporate elements of physiognomy into their art. The art of political caricature, therefore, was constructed on two distinct tendencies within the Enlightenment: 1) the progressive and universalistic values that called for greater tolerance and reacted against the religious intolerance of the *ancien régime*, and 2) the pseudo-science of physiognomy—a curious blending of the arts, anatomical sciences, human and animal psychology, and a certain belief in racial hierarchy.

The owl, the donkey, and the bull: Mollā Nasreddin's reenactments of Goya

There are many stylistic similarities between the works of Rotter and Schmerling and those of Goya, a similarity that is shared by several other artists of satirical periodical in the 1905 Revolution. Among them are the striking use of darkened background and contrasting shades (in Rotter's work), the exaggeration of traits such as arrogance, gluttony and debauchery, the allegorical use of animals and symbolic imagery, such as devils and demons, and of course the artists' use of the pseudo-science of physiognomy in all these cases.⁴² The satirical journals of the 1905 Revolution likewise show an obsessive interest in ghosts, supernatural creatures, and medieval Christian images of demons and the devil—a testament to the artists' 'doubts about the health of the Russian political organism and the viability of the political process.'⁴³

Long before Freud wrote of dreams as a channel to the unconscious and suppressed desires, Goya portrayed dreams as a symbolic stage on which "human errors, vices, follies, and blindness common in every society" may be enacted.⁴⁴ Goya's work associates night, darkness, and sleep with evil and the pre-rational stage of humanity. Dreams are the domain of witches and goblins, who represent ignorance and the absence of reason. Daylight, sunshine, and awakening signify the presence of reason and scientific knowledge. The double themes of "sleep of ignorance" and "awakening of reason" are core concepts in Goya's art. *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, one of the most well-known of the *Caprichos*,⁴⁵ shows a sleeping man who is surrounded by frightening creatures of the night: a bat, a black cat, and various ghost-like figures, all of which represent superstition and ignorance. The *Caprichos* end with *Be Quiet! They are Waking Up!* in which creatures of the night prepare to leave the scene in anticipation of daylight. Their departure signals the arrival of a brighter and more enlightened time for humanity.

The idea of awakening from the sleep of ignorance was an enormously popular concept in the pages of *Mollā Nasreddin* and many editorials and commentaries of this period are devoted to the subject. Schmerling uses it in the first issue of *Mollā Nasreddin*, wherein

⁴²The use of shadow to create the illusion of light emanating from a specific source to illuminate figures and objects in the painting (Chiaroscuro technique) dates back to the Renaissance and appears in a wide range of other contemporary and socially-engaged Russian cartoons. By the turn of the 20th century, it was a common artistic device to produce 'light-dark' effects. The symbolism of animals and insects in Renaissance art was also well-known. Thanks to the anonymous reviewer of the journal for pointing this out.

⁴³Levitt and Minin, *The Satirical Journals*, 23.

⁴⁴Lopez-Rey, *Goya's Caprichos*, Vol. Two, 84. The themes of dreams and demons also occurred in Renaissance Art. However, the notion that demons abound when reason sleeps was definitely Goya's own touch and reflected the Enlightenment faith in rationality. Thanks to the anonymous reviewer who pointed this out.

⁴⁵See Francisco Goya, *Los Caprichos* (New York: Dover Press, 1969). Plate 43.

a group of ordinary people is portrayed as being fast asleep while *Mollā Nasreddin* hastens them to wake up. Several variations on this theme appear throughout the paper's existence especially with regard to Iran. The Iranians are presented as a people who are fast asleep, while *Mollā Nasreddin* tries to awaken them. (Figure 5)

Another of Goya's common devices is the use of masks and mirrors. Masks represent the hypocrisies and prejudices that surround human beings' deceptive conduct in society, while mirrors reveal the attributes that are hidden from the common view.⁴⁶ In *Mollā Nasreddin*, the symbolic device of a curtain often replaces Goya's mirror. *Nasreddin* stands next to a partly drawn curtain and peaks into people's private lives and public performances. In one print, Nasreddin stands behind a curtain and observes an old man who is performing his daily prayers. We become voyeurs alongside *Nasreddin* and eavesdrop as the old man makes supplications to God and asks him for "a wife that is as beautiful as angels in the sky" (Figure 6). In yet another scene, we watch a puppet show from behind the scenes. The puppets represent the deputies of the Iranian Majles (parliament). The puppeteers are bearded and turbaned old men (clerics) who chuckle to one another as they control the puppets and make them move as they wish (Figure 7)

Goya was very critical of the monastic orders and their excessive wealth and land holdings. He portrayed the reactionary and anti-constitutional forces of Spain, including the Catholic Church, as hybrid and grotesque creatures with monstrous features.⁴⁷ The church, the wealthy land-owning nobility, and the autocrats were all popular targets of the Russian satirical journals after 1905.

On a few occasions, *Mollā Nasreddin* portrays Muslim clerics in sympathetic light, as in the case of the senior Iranian Shi'i cleric, Seyyed Muhammad Tabataba'i, who had liberal views and supported the Constitutional Revolution in Iran. He is drawn with a great deal of respect and deference in one graphic, in which he is administering resuscitative medication to a sick Iran. (Figure 8). However, this is a notable exception. The artists of *Mollā Nasreddin* often were merciless in their portrayal of Shi'i clerics. In most prints, clerics are drawn as deceptive, repulsive, and corpulent, suggesting a lavish lifestyle. In such depictions, clerics start their careers from famished and emaciated young men of humble origins. With every religious certification (*ijāzeh*) they acquire, their waists expand in diameter, their beards become longer, and their turbans bulge larger. (Figure 9) These changes are not limited to their appearance, as the clerics steadily lose their moral character. If the monks of Goya become more like witches and goblins, the clerics of *Mollā Nasreddin* cavort with the devil himself. (Figure 10). The drawings of *Mollā Nasreddin* reached a large audience and enraged the conservative clerics of Iran. On numerous occasions the ulama (religious authorities) tried to prevent the paper's distribution. These prints were astonishing in their boldness, and often appeared alongside scathing articles by the editor and the writers of the periodical. The sentiments were not unique to *Mollā Nasreddin*. The periodical *Sur-i Israfil* (1907–1908), which was published in Teheran, lacked satirical cartoons, but was equally negative about the Shi'i clergy. It published the tale of Qandarun—the first modern short story in Persian—in

⁴⁶The appearance of masks and mirrors can also be traced back to the Renaissance, with mirrors in different symbolic configurations appearing in works of diverse artists such as the Flemish painter Jan van Eyck (d. 1441), the German painter Hans Holbein (d. 1543), and the Spanish painter Diego Velazquez (d. 1660). In other words, Goya himself was working within a multifarious preceding artistic tradition, rather than entirely inventing such symbolisms and techniques. Thanks to the anonymous reader of the article who pointed this out.

⁴⁷As Philip Hofer points out, 'The scarecrow to whom the ignorant peasant woman is praying wears a monk's cowl and gown'. See Goya, *Los Caprichos*, plates 52. See also plate 53 in the same collection and Hults, *The Print in the Western World*, 414.



Figure 5. No. 1 (Apr 7, 1906) The awakening

which the poet and satirist Ali Akbar Dehkhoda mocked the many sexual transgressions of an *ākhund* (low-level cleric) as the *ākhund* moved up in society. *Sure-i Israfil* also published short essays about the anti-constitutionalist clerics and their communion with the devil.⁴⁸

Goya was also critical of the aristocracy, as well as professionals such as doctors and teachers, who (mis)led society. In a series of six drawings in *The Caprichos*, Goya used a common device, the donkey, to portray the men of learning as arrogant idiots who rode on the backs of the peasants and other ordinary people.⁴⁹ (Figure 11). *Mollā Nasreddin* used similar imagery on several occasions. The donkey is a common motif in the folk tales of

⁴⁸Dehkhoda, *Charand-o Parand*, 262–70.

⁴⁹See Goya, *The Caprichos*, plate 42. The caption on this print reads "Thou who canst not". Also translated as 'You who cannot [carry me on your shoulder]' and according to Hults refers to the Spanish proverb that says, 'oppress the feeble who cannot resist'. See also Hults, *The Print in the Western World*, 407.



Figure 6. No. 36 (Sep 8 1908) Praying for an angelic wife.

Nasreddin, as anyone who has read or heard these stories knows very well. The artists of the paper *Molla Nasreddin* used the donkey motif both in its Middle Eastern folkloric meanings and in the sense that Goya had used it. In one drawing the donkey appeared as the leader of a caravan of men riding on the backs of camels on their way to the holy pilgrimage of Hajj in Mecca (Figure 12).⁵⁰ In another, intellectuals rode on the backs of ordinary people, much in the same way that Goya's professionals did so. (Figure 13)

In Goya's art, the owl was not a symbol of wisdom. Rather, it was associated with the night—representing witches, goblins, and all things evil. The owl also stood for old-fashioned ideas, outmoded customs, and religious dogmas.⁵¹ In one of Goya's drawings, a giant and

⁵⁰This print is also a reference to the Turkish proverb that "the camel does not want to be led by the donkey".
⁵¹See Sayre, *The Changing Image*, 110.

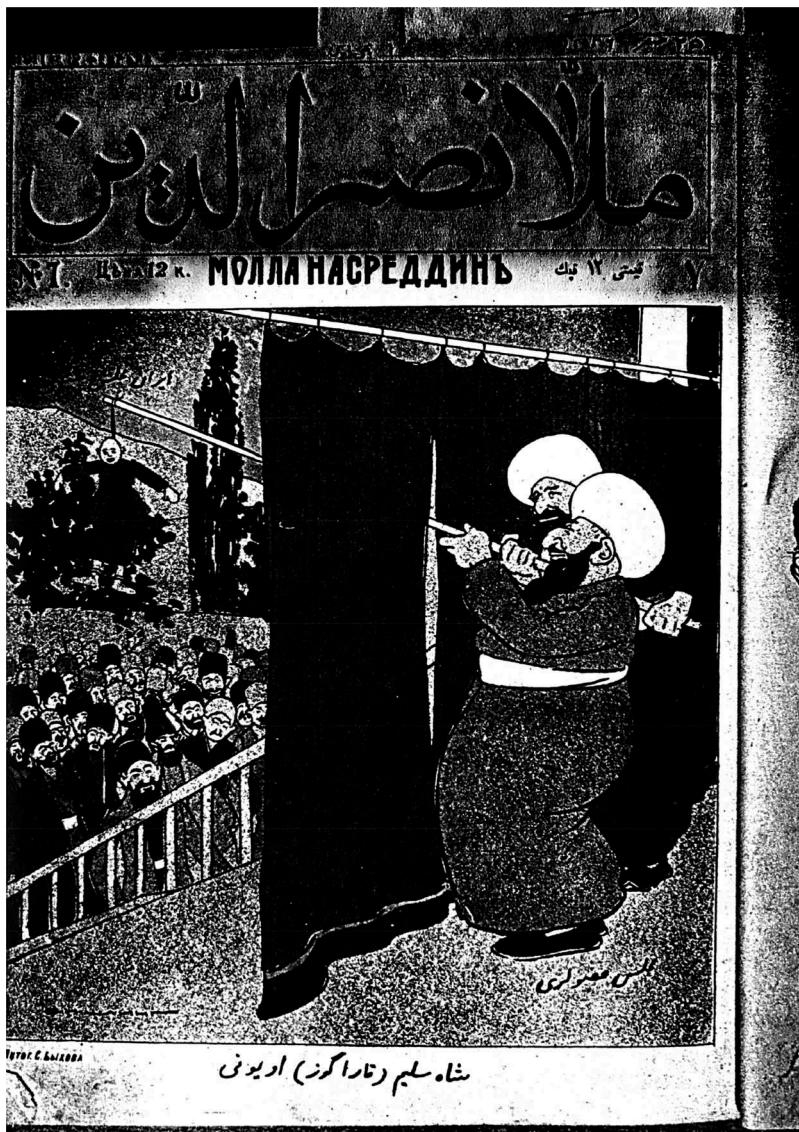


Figure 7. No. 7 (Feb 1911) Puppeteers who manipulate the Majles

menacing owl hovers over a husband and wife who are unhappily bound together for life by the Catholic Church's ban on divorce.⁵² (Figure 14) Both Schmerling and Rotter deal with an equally imperative issue for young girls: their education. (Figure 15) Women's education was an important issue in the Caucasus at the turn of the century and became a highly-contested topic during the Iranian Constitutional Revolution. In the first year of the Iranian revolution, urban middle- and upper-class women, Muslim and non-Muslim, began a campaign for girl's education and opened a number of private schools by drawing

⁵²See Goya, *The Caprichos*, plate 75. Lopez suggests that "the two are bound together at their waists in such a fashion as to bring to mind the image of Eve born from Adam's rib". See Lopez, *Goya's Caprichos*, 161.



Figure 8. No. 33 (September 1907) Ayatollah Tabatabai the pro-constitutionalist Iranian cleric revives the ailing nation

on their personal and family assets. But the two ranking conservative clerics of Iran—Sheikh Fazlullāh Nuri and Seyyed Ali Shushtari—issued a fatwa against modern schools for girls, declaring these new institutions contrary to Islam.⁵³ In one of *Molla Nasreddin*'s prints, an owl—drawn with dark shades reminiscent of Goya's, and representing patriarchal attitudes in the Muslim community, hovers over the head of a girl who wants to go to school but is prevented from doing so, while a young Armenian girl of the same age attends school freely (Figure 16).

As noted earlier, Rotter was influenced by Goya's portrayal of war and its atrocities. In *What More Can One Do*, Goya draws a horrifying scene in which a naked and helpless man is about to be mutilated by soldiers. Three of these soldiers, wearing pale and sadistic smiles, grasp him by the legs and dangle him upside down, while a fourth moves his sabre towards the victim's groin.⁵⁴ Rotter's reenactment of this scene, adds a few significant elements. (Figure 17). The victim becomes a clothed Moroccan man who is about to be dismembered by a variety of European colonial powers. These

⁵³Janet Afary, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 1906–1911* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 190.

⁵⁴Francisco Goya, *The Disasters of War* (New York: Dover Publications, 1967). Plate 33.



Figure 9. *NoMollā Nasreddin* No. 4 April 28 1906) Life cycles of a mullah.

Western Europeans are portrayed as aggressive murderers, while the peoples of the East are depicted as helpless victims or ignorant bystanders.⁵⁵ As the terrified victim watches soldiers hack at his body, we observe the reactions of various representatives of the East. From Afar, the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid casually observes the Arab man's dismemberment. Meanwhile, a group of Iranians dance and entertain themselves with their backs to the scene, while a cluster of Indians sleep peacefully. (Figure 18) Rotter was not only concerned with colonialist and imperialist wars; he was also a harsh critic of ethnic

⁵⁵In the Turkish language, Morocco is known as Fas, derived from its ancient capital Fez.



Figure 10. No. 23 (Jun 25, 1907) The devil and the clerics

and tribal civil wars. In another war scene, he depicts the tribal wars between Kurds and Shahsevans in the Iranian province of Azerbaijan, wherein men with swords and sabres mutilate one another and collecte war booty, much like the senseless killings depicted in Goya's *Disasters of War* (Figure 19).

Goya is also remembered for a series of bullfighting prints.⁵⁶ Rotter adopts one of Goya's bullfighting scenes (which may at first seem incongruent with Transcaucasia or the Middle East). In Rotter's graphic, European diplomacy is embodied as Satan, who is depicted as a masterful bullfighter. With his red matador's cape, Satan attempts to entice yet another nation of the East—represented by a remarkably muscular bull—towards a valley of death. The bull stands precariously at the precipice of this valley, while the people of the East actually push him over the edge. Meanwhile, in the valley below, smiling colonial powers await the bull's imminent fall with their machetes drawn, such that they might carve it up. (Figure 20)

⁵⁶Hults, *The Print in the Western World*, 410.



Figure 11. Francisco Goya. *Los Caprichos*. New York: Dover Publications, 1969, plate 42 'Thou who canst not'



Figure 12. *Mollā Nasreddin* No. 45 (Nov 8, 1909) Haj pilgrimage



Figure 13. *Mollā Nasreddin* No. 10 (Mar 10 1907) 'One of our quotidian sights'

The influence of Goya, Daumier, and 19th century French graphic artists is evident also when the artists of *Mollā Nasreddin* deal with abstract concepts such as truth, justice, freedom, or constitutionalism. (Figure 21) In the Spanish, French, and USA. traditions of graphic arts, such abstract ideals are often represented by a young, strong, and beautiful



Figure 14. Francisco Goya, *Los Caprichos*. (New York: Dover Publications, 1969) 75, 'Can't anyone untie us?'.

woman, who sometimes holds a shining torch in her hand, and always sends forth beams of light, as if to make the world a more enlightened place.⁵⁷ (Figure 22) A very similar image is

⁵⁷Goya, *Disasters of War*, plate 82. 'This is the Truth.'

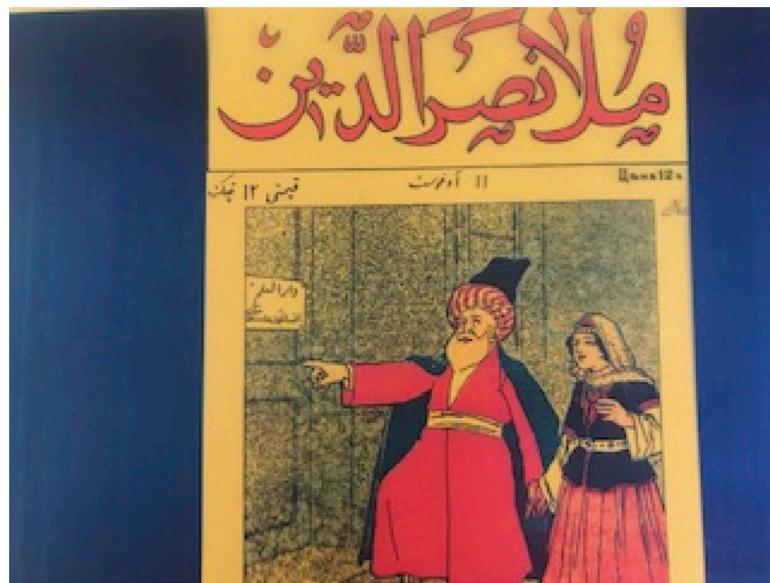


Figure 15. *Mollā Nasreddin* No. 19(August 11, 1906) Mollā Nasreddin guides a girl to a modern school that offers a humanist Muslim education.



Figure 16. *Mollā Nasreddin* (1911?) Owl representing conservative clerics who support veiling and oppose girls' education

adopted by the artists of *Mollā Nasreddin*, as a young woman—holding a torch, a flag, or a placard—stands for the ideals of the new order, such as justice, freedom, and constitutionalism (Figure 23)



Figure 17. Francisco Goya. *The Disasters of War*. Toronto: Dover Publications, 1967, plate 33. 'What more can one do?'

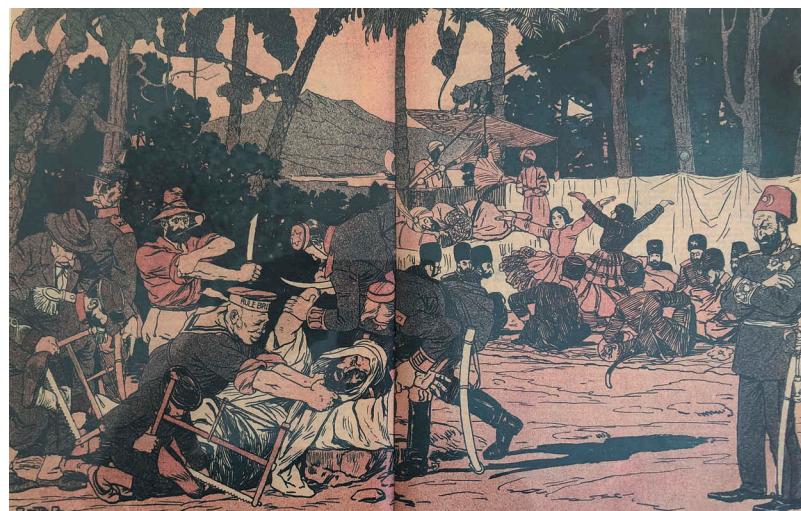


Figure 18. Mollā Nasreddin No. 37 (Dec 15, 1906) Dismemberment of Fez, (Morocco)

As these examples demonstrate, the discourse of *Mollā Nasreddin* on politics, religion, and the arts was often complex and formed in dialogic tension with Western modernity. Inside Iran, *Mollā Nasreddin* would remain the model for satirical journalism over the next 70 years. During this period, its female symbol of justice became a regular feature of Iran's political satire, representing the nations' lost hopes for constitutionalism and for political equality.

Following the Iranian Revolution of 1978–79, the Islamic Republic transformed this form of symbolic representation. As the new theocratic order abrogated many rights



Figure 19. *Mollā Nasreddin* No. 20 (May 19, 1908) ‘Dear Neighbours, do not trouble yourselves. We ourselves have sufficient forces for the destruction of Iran.’—Tribal Fighting: The Kurds and the Shahsevens Tribes of Iran

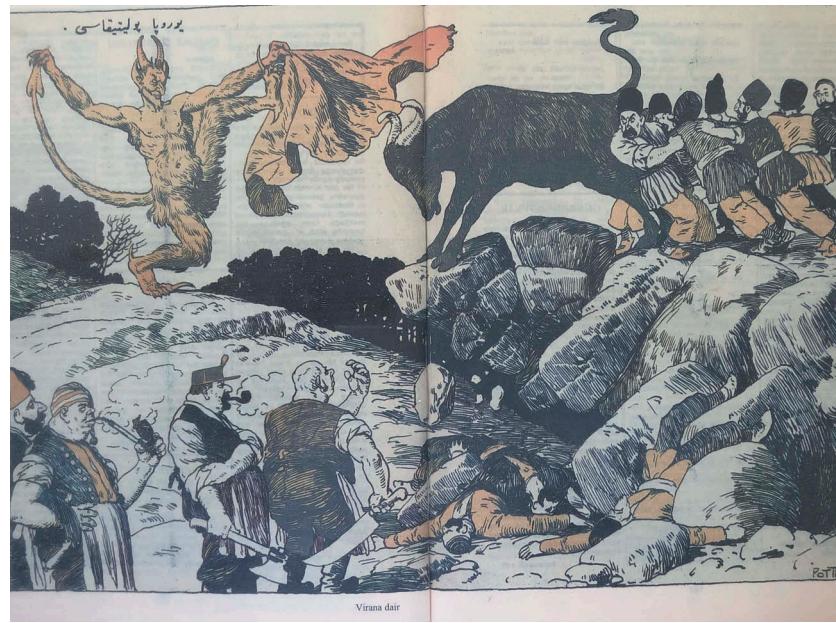


Figure 20. *Mollā Nasreddin* No. 24 (June 16, 1908) European politics



Figure 21. *Mollā Nasreddin* No. 1 (Jan 6, 1907) Justice, constitutionalism, and freedom.



Figure 22. Francisco Goya. *The Disasters of War*. (Toronto: Dover Publications, 1967): 82, 'This is the Truth.'



Figure 23. No. 1 (January 4, 1909) No caption—Light of freedom.

that urban middle class women had gained over the course of the 20th century, images of strong and independent women representing the abstract ideals and voice of justice, freedom, and constitutionalism were banished from the pages of Iran's periodicals and replaced by those of grieving mothers who had sacrificed their sons to the revolutionary cause and the nation's subsequent war with Iraq from 1980–1988.

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