

Review of *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* by Hamideh Khānum Javānshir

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Translated from the Azeri by Hasan Javadi and Willem Floor

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In 1906, a group of intellectuals and artists in Tiflis (Tbilisi in modern-day Georgia) began to publish an Azerbaijani-language satirical journal called *Mollā Nasreddin*. South Caucasus, the part of the Russian Empire bordering Iran, had been nominally part of Iran until a century earlier. The Shi'i Muslims population of South Caucasus was spread throughout the region including cities such as Yerevan, Baku and Tiflis.

The periodical disseminated a progressive anti-colonial discourse with a strong emphasis on social reforms, especially women's rights. The founder and editor of the journal was Jalil Mamedqolizādeh (also known as Mirza Jalil), a Muslim Azerbaijani educator and playwright. Using folklore, visual art and satire, the weekly periodical with full-page lithographic cartoons in colour, reached tens of thousands of people across the Muslim world. It could be found in the coffee shops and bazaars of South Caucasus, Iran and the Ottoman Empire, and as far away as Egypt and India where it was read aloud and impacted the thinking of a generation.



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In 1907 Mirza Jalil married Hamideh Khānum (1873-1955), a feminist and philanthropist, who was drawn to him for his journal's support of Muslim women's rights. This memoir, written after the death of Mirza Jalil – during the Soviet period – is both a testament to the remarkable life of Hamideh Khānum and one of the most detailed surviving accounts of the periodical. In many ways, *Mollā Nasreddin* survived and thrived because of her sustained financial and intellectual support. Indeed, while she is recognised for her role as a companion of Mirza Jalil, she ought to be credited as both the primary financial backer and as a member of the periodical's advisory board.

This was Mirza Jalil's third marriage, as his two earlier unions had ended tragically. His first marriage in 1894 was with Halimeh Khātoun, a village girl from Nahrem where Mirza Jalil taught for a few years. She died in 1898, leaving Mirza Jalil with a one-year-old daughter, Monavvar (1897-1965). His second wife, Nazli Khānum, came from an affluent family that held the governorship of the Nakhchivān Khānate before the Russian conquest. She was divorced from her first husband and had a ten-year-old son. Theirs was a short-lived union of love (1900-1904), though most of her upper-class relatives were opposed to the marriage because Mirza Jalil was poor and did not have a steady job. Additionally, he was not a conventional husband. He spent a great deal of his time on his literary and political activities and was often away from home. Nazli Khānum suffered from mental illness. Following bouts of severe depression, Mirza Jalil took her to a psychiatric ward in Tiflis, where she starved herself to death in 1904 as he watched helplessly.

These two tragic losses in his life appear to have made him more aware of the harsh lot of women and the dramatic gender disparities they faced. In his own life, he had seen how vulnerable women's bodies and minds were to the ravages of pregnancy, miscarriage and childbirth, as well as domestic conflicts and summary divorce (*talaq*) by men. He had struggled

to provide an education for his younger sister Sakineh and also saw her vulnerability after her speedy divorce. Mirza Jalil was raising his daughter from his first marriage and after his sister's untimely death in 1912, he also supported his nieces and nephews and provided for their education. These experiences may have led this highly sensitive writer and social democrat to become a sympathetic and steadfast supporter of women's rights throughout this life.

His third marriage to Hamideh Khānum Javānshir was also an unconventional one. She was born in the estate of Kakhrizli, which was part of the Karabākh district, and belonged to a landowning family. The Javānshir family had ruled the *khānate* before the Russian conquest. In the decades that followed – as with many other local elites – they became one of many more Russified aristocratic Muslim families whose sons became officers and important members of the imperial government. Her father, Ahmad Bey Javānshir, attended the St. Petersburg Military School and served six years in the Russian army before returning to the family estate. He was an intellectual known for implementing new agricultural techniques on the farm on his estate. He was also a historian, poet and translator of classical Russian poetry.

Hamideh Khānum was educated at home, where she learned to read and write Russian. Her first husband, Ibrahim Bey Davatdārov (1851-1902), was an aristocrat and military officer. From 1893 to 1898, the couple had lived in the Polish city of Brest-Litovsk. Ibrahim Bey died in 1902, and a year later Hamideh Khānum also lost her father. Left with the responsibility of supporting her two children, Mina (1890-1923) and Mozaffar (1900-1959), she took over the management of the family estate and the village of Kakhrizli in 1903.

Hamideh Khānum met Mirza Jalil in early 1905 when she came to Tiflis to arrange the publication of her deceased father's literary works. This

influential 33-year-old woman, who never wore the veil, was living a thoroughly modern and independent life. Her 15-year-old daughter Mina followed her mother's lead, and attended the Girls' Institute of Tiflis, living in its dormitory, far away from Kakhrizli.

When Hamideh Khānum first met with Mirza Jalil, he encouraged her to form a charitable society for Muslim women in Tiflis. She followed his suggestion and formed the Muslim Women's Benevolent Society, which was composed of influential women in Tiflis, and received backing from Muslim and Russian dignitaries. Soon after, the society opened the city's first primary school for Muslim girls (Rice 2018, p. 133). She and Mirza Jalil went on to become close acquaintances, discussing the latest political strikes and social movements as the 1905 Russian Revolution unfolded. In December 1906, Mirza Jalil proposed to her but she turned him down, saying she was too busy running her estate.

Mirza Jalil had to prove that he was devoted to her and her cause of women's rights before she would agree. Such an opportunity arrived in February 1907. In anticipation of a locust swarm and famine in the region of Karabākh, Hamideh Khānum was invited to present a paper at an Armenian-Muslim conference in Baku on the impending catastrophe. The clerics and *beys* of Karabākh objected to her presence, claiming that Muslim women's participation was against the *sharia* and they would not attend a public event where an unveiled Muslim woman spoke. She therefore declined the invitation.

Then, the locust swarm happened, leading to hunger and starvation in the community followed by the spread of typhus. Hamideh Khānum appealed to the authorities to help her villagers and received aid from several agencies including the Muslim Men's Charitable Society of Tiflis, where Mirza Jalil was a secretary on the board. When he learned the details of how Hamideh Khānum had been denied the opportunity to speak at the

Baku conference, he published an article titled “Muslim and Armenian Women,” in *Mollā Nasreddin*. The column referred to the Qur’an (24:31-32) to argue that wearing the hijab was not mandated in the holy book, and that forcing women to veil and keeping them cloistered did not make them any more chaste.

However, the article did more than call for removing the face veil in public. It argued that instead of mandatory unveiling, girls should be sent to school and once they became educated ‘they themselves would know what to do’. Finally, in its most explosive segment, the article argued that men who engaged in all forms of perversions – from paedophilia in bathhouses, to taking temporary wives (*sigheh*), and hiring Russian and Georgian prostitutes – had no business ordering their women around:

Let’s look at ourselves a bit and see who are we?

We go to dance and music gatherings and sleep with the performers

We force our women to stay home, but take eight-year-old boys to bathhouses

We force our women to stay home, but on the side, take others we like as sigheh wives

We force our women to stay home, but spend their daily keep on blond foreign prostitutes. (MN, 20, 19 May 1907)

The article caused quite a commotion in the Muslim quarters of Tiflis. News reached Mirza Jalil that the *akhunds* (clerics) of Shaitān Bazaar had gathered at a mosque, cursed Mirza Jalil and issued a *fatwa* for his death. They also sent a mob to kill him. The commotion eventually subsided, but Mirza Jalil’s courage in standing up for Muslim women’s rights had paid off and Hamideh Khānum agreed to marry him. In her memoir, she wrote: ‘I said yes to Mirza Jalil’s marriage proposal. More than anything else, I was attracted to his progressive ideas and wanted to be his wife and supporter’ (HMQ, p. 36).

News that a wealthy aristocratic woman was marrying the ‘atheist’ journalist Mirza Jalil, a man with meagre means and social status, outraged the *beys* of her community. Mirza Jalil faced death threats, but ignored these attacks and they married anyway with a modest wedding at her estate. Issa Habibbeyli notes that on their marriage certificate, Mirza Jalil was introduced as *bey* – suggesting he was a tribal chieftain – to make the marriage more palatable to her relatives (Habibbeyli 1999, pp. 31-32). The couple had two sons, Midhat (1908-1932) and Anvar (1911-1979).

Mirza Jalil did stay true to his word. A vast majority of the articles he wrote or commissioned concerned Muslim women’s rights, including issues that had affected Hamideh Khānum and the other women in his life. Shortly before their marriage in June 1907, *Mollā Nasreddin* provoked the highest Shi’i authority in Transcaucasia, the Sheikh al-Islam, on the subject of gender segregation. The Sheikh al-Islam had regularly visited the high school where Hamideh Khānum’s daughter Mina studied for nine years. He had met with the principal and encouraged the girls with their studies and had also given guest lectures on Islam and Azerbaijani language there. This high school provided regular religious education for Christian Armenian, Russian and Georgian students but not Muslim students, due to lack of funds. Nor did it provide regular instruction in the Azerbaijani language, also due to lack of funds. Hamideh Khānum had pleaded with the community to support the school, and eventually used her own funds to hire a language teacher for the school. When Mina and her friends, all unveiled, graduated from the Institute in May 1907, the Sheikh al-Islam was present and congratulated them. Yet in public, he maintained that unveiled women must not speak and interact with unrelated men.

Using Mina’s graduation ceremony as an example, *Mollā Nasreddin* published two open letters exposing the hypocrisy of the Sheikh al-Islam. The journal asked why he had not helped raise funds for religious studies at the school, why he had not supported education in the Azerbaijani

language and why – despite his private support for female education – he never supported it in public (*MN*, 22 May 1907). This article, which humiliated the sheikh, led to the closure of the periodical for two weeks by state officials. Mirza Jalil followed this pattern throughout his years as editor. Events that happened in the lives of his wife and his stepdaughter, or to those around them and to women from his own more religiously observant community, became the basis for satirical stories in *Mollā Nasreddin*.

It seems that Hamideh Khānum's life, and the lives of other independent and productive Muslim women, became the high bar of comparison for Mirza Jalil when he observed women in other Muslim communities. We can therefore assume that many of the stories and illustrations that compare the lives of more modern Muslim/Russian/Armenian families to those of traditional Muslim families in Transcaucasia referred to the way that he and Hamideh Khānum and their friends lived in contrast to life in his own community of origin in Nakhchivān.

For example, a number of cartoons in *Mollā Nasreddin* mocked veiled Muslim women walking in the more cosmopolitan sectors of Tiflis. This seems to reflect his own personal experiences. When his sister Sakineh and her children came to Tiflis to visit, Mirza Jalil took them to see the city's funicular, a tram built for steep inclinations. At his request, Sakineh continued to cover her face while wearing the traditional veil of women from Nakhchivān. Given the strict gender norms of Nakhchivān, it may be that Mirza Jalil was trying to protect her reputation while she was in Tiflis. However, the sight of a fully-veiled Nakhchivāni woman was such a shock to the more cosmopolitan Christians of Tiflis that a group of curious men stalked her. After this incident, which seems to have profoundly rattled Mirza Jalil, Hamideh Khānum ordered modern clothes for her sister-in-law Sakineh. Yet the memory of the startled people of Tiflis stayed with him and was routinely reflected in the pages of *Mollā Nasreddin*.

As the above suggests, while he did his best to support women's rights Mirza Jalil was not averse to holding on to some traditional mindsets. In another case in 1912, Hamideh Khānum was invited to present a paper at the annual meeting of the Cotton Growers of Transcaucasia. She wrote a detailed presentation and asked him to read it. But his first response was 'Do women also write reports?' She was hurt by his statement but bit her tongue, and eventually he read her report. When she presented her paper at the conference, the audience was impressed with her erudition in agricultural matters and her courage to present a paper before 500 people. After this experience, Mirza Jalil took back what he had said – whether in jest or seriousness – and wrote a laudatory article about her achievement.

From the beginning, the couple agreed to maintain a long-distance relationship and keep their separate residences. The distance between Kakhrizli and Tiflis was around 360 kilometres (220 miles). It would take at least three to four days to travel this road by carriage, their usual mode of transportation. He would visit her a few times during the year. They also vacationed at the resort town of Shushā (Nagorno-Karabākh), around 50 miles from Kakhrizli. Many Caucasus Azerbaijani writers, poets, musicians and singers resided in Shusha, which had a lively culture of plays and performances.

Hamideh Khānum credited her family doctor for suggesting their long-distance marriage so they could continue their individual responsibilities. However, it is more likely that her independent wealth, and the fact that the estate was their principal source of income, gave her the right to break with patrilocal norms and not move in with her husband. In Tiflis, Mirza Jalil lived in a small apartment with his daughter Monavvar, as well as several young people from their extended family who were under his care. The youth reciprocated by bundling the newspapers each week and taking them to the post office to be mailed to subscribers.

Mirza Jalil was meticulous but also unconventional in his working and living habits. According to his wife he was a kind and generous person but also reclusive. He craved long hours to himself and had no patience for socialising that did not relate to his work. In her candid memoir Hamideh Khānum talks about the occasional ups and downs in their marriage, including a brief separation. However, the marriage on the whole brought out a more joyous side of Mirza Jalil, one that was visible when he was at the estate or vacationing with her. He once told her: 'I was not created for family life. I am essentially a dervish-like person. I have a difficult character. I am nervous. I confess, that living with me is difficult. I have no patience to raise children. You made me a family man' (quoted in Javānshir 2016, p. 69).

Their unusual but successful marriage opened doors to both of them. Her wealth provided a steady income for many years – a comfortable house in Kakhrizli, access to her father's large library as well as quiet and enjoyable visits to the estate where he went fishing, horseback riding, hunting, and swimming. He also was able to enjoy vacations at the Shusha resort. He could now devote himself to publishing *Mollā Nasreddin*, and from time to time help his wife with the estate – overseeing the planting of the crops and harvest, doing the bookkeeping and occasionally teaching the village children. In the process, he also learned a great deal about village life and relations between landlords and peasants. The estate grew a variety of crops such as cotton, grains, fruit and vegetables. It also housed a workshop with multiple looms where Muslim and Armenian women weaved woollen shirts, socks and gloves, and produced floor mats. Many of Mirza Jalil's articles were written in Kakhrizli and reflected the lives and struggles of the working people he saw around him.

Hamideh Khānum also benefited from this arrangement. She continued to live with her young son in Kakhrizli, tending to her village and the considerable responsibilities of the estate, which included overseeing the

harvest, grinding grain in their mill and the yearly dredging of the local spring. Mirza Jalil's reputation and philanthropic involvements allowed her to play a more prominent role in society, especially in activities related to women's rights, which might have been difficult had she stayed a widow or married a more conventional husband. In Shushā and Tiflis, she organized plays, held fundraisers and benefits and used the funds to support the education of impoverished girls and boys. She established close links with an Armenian women's society, and together they tried to build bonds of friendship between their embattled ethnic communities.

Mirza Jalil mischievously helped his wife's fundraising activities by lampooning the parsimonious community members who did not contribute to charitable causes. He also praised those who did, such as Hajji Zeyn al-Abedin Taqiov. In these ways, he enticed wealthy members of the community into becoming more generous benefactors and aided her causes. But even with his support, many of her activities were considered outrageous by the *beys* and Muslim clerics, and they did everything in their power to stop her. The *beys* wrote letters of complaint to the governor of Ganja, who generally ignored them. Periodically, her enemies let loose their herds of animals in her vineyard in Kakhrizli, destroying her crop. In her words 'no walls or barriers could stop these two-legged animals' (HMQ, p. 63).

The estate was large, and far away enough from major cities to provide the couple with the opportunity to shelter several political refugees. Among them were Georgian revolutionaries who had gone to Iran to participate in the restoration of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution in 1908-09, but fled back to Russia when the tsarist government occupied the Iranian province of Azerbaijan. Through harbouring refugees, Hamideh Khānum benefited from the expertise of some highly educated men and women who helped with the farm as they quietly sought protection from the tsarist police.

To prevent waves of contagious diseases, Hamideh Khānum administered first aid and personally vaccinated her community. She had to convince her village community of the benefits of inoculation, which was deemed ritually impure. Hamideh Khānum also created a small pharmacy in her house to help her community. While in Poland, she had learned herbal medicine and homeopathy, and thus used a variety of modern, traditional and alternative medicines to cure illnesses. Through these practices, she must have saved hundreds of lives. With Mirza Jalil she also opened a mixed-gender school for the girls and boys on their estate in 1909, where he occasionally taught during his visits.

On top of all her responsibilities, Hamideh Khānum was a wife and mother in a blended family. There was Mirza Jalil's daughter from a previous marriage, her son and daughter from a previous marriage, and the couple's two sons, as well as several orphaned children of their extended family who were periodically left in their care. When Mirza Jalil's daughter Monavvar married a military officer in 1919, Mirza Jalil could not attend the wedding. It was Hamideh Khānum who assembled her stepdaughter's trousseau and sent the bride off to her husband's house.

How involved was she with the periodical? She was a widely read intellectual in her own right, with a diverse set of interests from agriculture and medicine, to women's rights and the folktales of Karabākh. In her letters to her husband from Kakhvizli or Shusha, she routinely suggested topics for articles in *Mollā Nasreddin* (HMQ, p. 43). We don't know if she ever wrote articles under a pseudonym, but according to Issa Habibbeyli, the Azerbaijani historian of *Mollā Nasreddin*, "she was always the first to read and to criticize Jalil Mammadqolizādeh's papers, articles, and novels" (Habibbeyli 1999, 33).

After Mirza Jalil's death, she translated some of his works into Russian. In 1939, she became a member of the Azerbaijani Writers' Association and

was commissioned to write a memoir of their life together. This candid work, written between 1934 and 1938, is the most comprehensive account of the life of Mirza Jalil and *Mollā Nasreddin* and reveals a great deal about their remarkably modern marriage. It shows that while she was a relentless supporter of her husband and his activities, she kept her own voice and vision as well as her independence, both during and after their successful 25 years of marriage.

The English-language literature on Muslim feminists has until now neglected the lives of Muslim feminists of the Russian Empire before the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. This wonderful English translation by Hasan Javadi, a distinguished historian of Azerbaijani culture in both Iran and Transcaucasia, and Willem Floor, a prolific historian of modern Iran and the Middle East, is a welcome step in redressing this gap. It is a must-read for anyone interested in the lives of late 19th and early 20th century Muslim and Middle Eastern feminists.

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