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Research Article

Representing Love in Late Qajar Poetry: The Crisis of the Object, Relationship, and Language

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ABSTRACT

This study examines late Qajar poetry as a key historical site in which the inherited representational order of love underwent a structural crisis. Drawing on travelogues, intellectual treatises, and poetry, the article argues that what occurred in this period was less the construction of a new language for love than a structural "moment of weakening" within the inherited representational order. This normative instability emerged through the gradual internalization of a Western horizon of judgment and unfolded across three interrelated levels. At the level of the love object, the male beloved increasingly lost normative legitimacy within reformist discourse under the pressure of the "natural/unnatural" binary, while woman increasingly emerged as the normatively privileged beloved. At the level of the relationship, this displacement challenged the asymmetrical, denial-based model and brought concepts such as prior acquaintance, mutual inclination, and fidelity to the fore, giving rise to the new horizon of the "wife-beloved." At the level of language, the inherited metaphorical network, fashioned for a gender-indeterminate and unattainable beloved, proved increasingly unable to carry these new signifieds. Poetic attempts to escape this impasse did not yet produce a coherent new language but collectively functioned as mechanisms of weakening that eroded the authority of the inherited semiotic order from within. The article concludes that the late Qajar period constitutes a fertile threshold in Persian literary history, where literary innovation begins not simply with the invention of new forms but with a prior weakening of the inherited semiotic order that makes later forms historically possible.

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Introduction

The mid-to-late Qajar period can be regarded as one of the most significant junctures in Iranian cultural history for the study of love and love poetry. During this period, many assumptions that had organized amorous experience for centuries became subjects of reconsideration and dispute. Questions concerning the beloved, the structure of the relationship, and the language of love poetry no longer had self-evident or uncontested answers. What had previously appeared natural within the horizon of tradition was increasingly exposed to doubt, while new conceptions of love and amorous relations were simultaneously taking shape. The significance of this situation lay not merely in these new openings: a gradual erosion of certain inherited foundations was occurring at the same time. The late Qajar era can therefore be understood as a transitional moment in which the past no longer retained its former authority, while the future had not yet fully established a stable alternative.

In Iranian culture, these transformations were not confined to the sphere of amorous experience alone. Love and poetry were bound together by a long-standing connection in the Persian tradition, and poetry played an active role in shaping the image of the beloved, organizing amorous relationships, and formulating the experience of love. For this reason, a transformation in the understanding of love inevitably altered the conditions of its representation. Whenever the conception of the beloved changed, whenever relational models underwent transformation, poetic language, too, was confronted with a new problem. From this perspective, these two processes were not separate but advanced one another through a reciprocal bond.

Familiarity with Europe and the expansion of contacts with the new world opened up novel horizons for imagining love, male-female relations, and the link between love and marriage. Nevertheless, the historical significance of this encounter lay less in the direct transfer of new models than in the disruption of the self-evidence of earlier ones. As a result, some older formulations lost their legitimacy while, at the same time, new possibilities for imagining the beloved and the amorous relationship emerged. The traces of this complex transitional situation can be followed across various cultural domains.

By the "crisis in the representation of love," this study means a broader situation in which transformations in amorous experience and changes in the possibilities of representing that experience occur simultaneously, so that new signifieds emerge without fully adequate means of expression. Late Qajar poetry is one of the most revealing arenas in which this situation can be observed. It makes visible how transformations in the love object, changes in relational expectations, and emerging affective conceptions placed inherited poetic language under pressure. Love poetry thus becomes not merely a literary phenomenon but also an archive for understanding broader transformations in the conditions under which love could be represented.

The present study examines this crisis on three interlinked levels: the object (how the male beloved increasingly lost normative legitimacy and woman emerged as the privileged legitimate beloved), the relationship (how concepts such as prior acquaintance, mutual inclination, and fidelity challenged an asymmetrical model), and language (how the metaphorical network of Persian poetry lost part of its efficacy when confronted with these transformations). These are not independent

topics but three manifestations of a single crisis in the conditions of representing love.

The central argument of the article is that the late Qajar period became a stage for a transformation in the conditions of representing love. The weakening of certain foundations of the inherited love tradition and the emergence of alternative conceptions of the beloved and of amorous relationships confronted the previous representational system with problems for which no ready answer existed. Because of its deep-rooted connection with love in Persian culture, poetry offers a particularly revealing archive of this historical transition. To understand how this situation took shape, we must first address the intellectual framework within which a significant part of these developments acquired meaning: the apparatus of self-critique via a Western alternative.

Scope and Method

Methodologically, the article adopts a historical-semantic reading of literary and para-literary texts rather than treating them as transparent records of social practice. Travelogues, reformist treatises, and poems are read here as sites in which changing norms of desire, gender, companionship, and poetic legitimacy become visible. The argument therefore does not assume that the views articulated by elite travelers, intellectuals, or poets were shared uniformly across Qajar society. Nor does it claim that older patterns disappeared as soon as new ones emerged. The emphasis is instead on shifts in legitimacy: on the moment when inherited objects, relational models, and metaphors could be questioned from a newly available normative standpoint, even while they continued to circulate. This distinction is essential to the notion of "weakening" used throughout the article. Weakening does not mean the immediate disappearance of an older semiotic order; it refers to a loss of self-evidence and to the increasing possibility of criticizing, parodying, resemanticizing, or replacing its elements. The corpus is accordingly read comparatively across genres and historical moments. Earlier Qajar travel accounts help reconstruct the longer genealogy of comparison with Europe, while late Qajar reformist prose and poetry show how these comparisons were internalized and transformed into explicit judgments about the beloved, marriage, reciprocity, and poetic language. This method allows the article to trace a process rather than to impose a single date of rupture, and it also explains why apparently heterogeneous materials can be analyzed together as evidence of a changing representational regime.

Self-Critique via a Western Alternative

A fundamental characteristic of late Qajar intellectual life was the emergence of a form of self-critique whose measure derived less from inherited tradition than from a horizon of judgment embodied in the imagined Europe. It rested on the assumption that existing conditions in politics, morality, literature, and human relations had become inadequate and marked by backwardness or decline. Yet criticism alone was insufficient; every critique required an alternative standard. Within late Qajar intellectual discourse, this standard was increasingly found in an image of "the West," valued not because it accurately represented European realities but because it functioned as a normative alternative. Self-critique therefore took shape through the contrast between what existed and what ought to exist (Abedinifard, 2021: 12).

The late Qajar apparatus of self-critique, however, was not simply imported. Before the Western horizon became the dominant criterion of judgment, Iran's literary tradition had already entered a crisis of legitimacy. By rejecting the Indian Style and reconstructing a premodern poetic canon, Bazgasht-e Adabi movement revealed that "tradition" was no longer a self-evident inheritance but a selective and reconstructive enterprise (Shamisa, 2009: 309). This experience rendered the authority of tradition itself contestable. The Western horizon therefore settled upon an already unstable terrain: late Qajar self-critique rested on a normative instability that had begun within the literary tradition itself. As Karimi-Hakkak argues, this period witnessed the rise of a "metalanguage" for describing the classical tradition, one formulated by "new intellectuals" who "used their familiarity with European cultures in order to offer their own 'description' of the classical poetic tradition ... in opposition to the description which had allowed that tradition to evolve through the centuries" (Karimi-Hakkak, 1995: 14).

Numerous instances of this structure can be observed in the texts of the period. When Akhundzadeh speaks of "critique" (kritika) in place of traditional counsel and admonition, he is not merely introducing a new conceptual tool; he is implicitly representing the existing moral and literary tradition as lacking that tool (Akhundzadeh, 1972: 24–25; Arianpour, 1972: 283). Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani, with even greater explicitness, places two literary systems in opposition: Iranian literature is a "smoke-signal tower" (borj-e dudi), European literature a "telegraph" (Adamiyyat, 1978: 230). The comparison opposes not merely two modes of communication but two competing value systems. The smoke tower signifies stasis and the past, whereas the telegraph signifies speed, efficiency, and the future.

This mechanism soon extended beyond literature and politics into other domains of cultural life, including love. Here the same logic prevailed: established amorous practices were recast as inadequate or deviant, as when Kermani dismissed earlier love poetry as morally corrupt and fruitless (Kermani, 2005: 173), while an alternative conception of love, associated with the new world, emerged as the normative horizon. The decisive transformation therefore lay less in the introduction of new ideas about love than in the emergence of a new standard for evaluating amorous experience.

European travelers played an important role in this process by describing certain Iranian amorous practices through the binary of the "natural" and the "unnatural." What proved decisive, however, was not these judgments themselves but their gradual internalization by segments of the Iranian elite, who increasingly came to view their own culture from this external standpoint. The late Qajar period should therefore be understood not simply as a confrontation between tradition and modernity, but as the emergence of an apparatus of self-critique in which indigenous criticism operated through an external normative horizon. The resulting tension between self-critique and an as-yet unattainable alternative generated the crisis of representation examined in this study.

The Crisis of Representation in Late Qajar Love

Doubt in the Traditional Object

Having delineated the broader field in which self-critique via a Western alternative became an influential interpretive structure, we must now trace this structure at the most

sensitive point of intersection between culture and lived experience: the love object. This is the point where the abstract concepts of progress and backwardness penetrate the sphere of the most private human desires and effect their redefinition.

The first point foregrounded by a number of critics and reformist writers in relation to Iran's literary and cultural tradition is that, in significant strands of that tradition, the love object did not possess a determinate gender as a defining condition. Within these strands, the concept of hosn (beauty) could take precedence over gender, and the beloved was apprehended as beautiful before—and sometimes more fundamentally than—as a man or a woman. Hence the beloved could appear across a spectrum of human and trans-human figures: woman, man, adolescent (amrad or shahed), an elder, or, within a mystical horizon, God. This did not imply indifference to the differences among these objects; rather, it suggests that the beloved's gender did not always constitute the primary boundary of legitimacy in love and its literary representation. For example, in currents such as the Maktab-e Voqu', adolescent boys stood at the center of representations of earthly love (Fotuhi, 2016: 244). At least within such literary configurations, gender had not yet become the identity-based and determining category that it would increasingly become in modern reformist discourse. This fluidity did not signify an unawareness of sexual difference, but rather that sexual difference was not invariably treated as the principal boundary of moral or aesthetic evaluation in love (Iranpour & Amini, 2025: 23).

Yet this very taken-for-grantedness gradually became a problem when confronted with the European gaze. Many European travelers viewed Iran through presuppositions about the natural and the unnatural in desire, presuppositions in which the amorous relationship between man and woman held a more normative and legitimate position. They therefore evaluated amorous experiences by measures derived from their own cultural context. Consequently, phenomena that in the Iranian tradition were understood within other frameworks of meaning were described and evaluated in their accounts with concepts such as against nature, corruption, or bacheh-bazi (pederasty).

For example, Tancoigne writes that Iranians "have so degraded the sentiment of love that they sometimes reserve it for their male servants and turn it into a sin against nature" (Tancoigne, 1820: 174). Ouseley, too, interprets the dance of an adolescent boy before men not within the semantic horizon of the host culture, but through his own aesthetic and moral standards, calling it a "disgusting imitation" of women (Ouseley, 1819–1823: 402). The result of such narratives was that the adolescent boy, who in a part of the Persian literary tradition could occupy the position of the beloved, was gradually redefined within a new framework—a framework that increasingly turned the gender of the love object into a moral and normative problem.

The significance of this development did not lie solely in the judgments of European travelers, but in the fact that a segment of the Iranian elite also gradually came to take these same measures seriously and, through them, began to reassess their own love tradition. Iraj Mirza, for instance, asks:

که یارب بچه‌بازی خود چه کار است / که بر وی عارف و عامی دچار است

چرا این رسم جز در ملک ما نیست / وگر باشد بدین‌سان برملا نیست

(ایرج میرزا، ۱۳۶۵: ۷۸)

Lord, what in the world is this bacheh-bazi, / that plagues the learned and the commoner alike?
Why does this custom exist in no land but ours, / and if it does, it is not so openly displayed?
(Iraj Mirza, 1986: 78)

What until yesterday was an act within the spectrum of pleasures was now redefined as a "custom" (a collective habit) and then as a national problem ("in no land but ours"). Moreover, another measure had been thoroughly internalized: the comparison with the outside ("and if it does, it is not so openly displayed") became the primary source of shame and criticism.

If bacheh-bazi is a deviation, why is it prevalent in Iran? The answer draws on the same Western intellectual apparatus, but this time it is appropriated by the Iranian agent for his own ends. The logic of the argument is that nature has inclined men toward women; any obstacle on this path leads to deviation. Bacheh-bazi is therefore seen less as an independent desire than as a product of deprivation and obstacle. Aqa Khan Kermani explicitly explains this causal relation:

> "Since nature has endowed men with an inclination toward the company and companionship of women that exceeds the need for argument or proof, in any nation where people are deprived of this great bounty [women] and denied this immense fortune, the problem of bacheh-bazi and slave-boy love inevitably arises; because smooth-faced boys bear a resemblance to women..."(Kermani, 2005: 173)

And Iraj Mirza, with his bitter humor, turns this same logic into critical verses:

که تا این قوم در بند حجاب‌اند / گرفتار همین شی عجاب‌اند
حجاب دختران ماه‌غبغب / پسرها را کند همخوابه شب
(ایرج میرزا، ۱۳۶۵: ۷۸)

As long as this people remain in the bonds of the veil, / they are ensnared by this bizarre thing.
The veiling of moon-chinned girls / makes boys bedfellows of the night.
(Iraj Mirza, 1986: 78)

Within this intellectual scheme, the veil is presented as a cause and bacheh-bazi as an effect. The paradox, however, is that both sides of this equation had already been marked in the gaze of the European other as signs of backwardness and Eastern barbarism. By accepting the premise that bacheh-bazi constitutes a deviation, the Iranian critic could then turn the same normative vocabulary against the veil. The result is a circular structure of critique in which one element of tradition is condemned through concepts borrowed from an external evaluative framework, while another element is made responsible for producing it.

What occurs in this process is not merely a change in literary taste but a crisis of legitimacy. Traditional love objects—particularly the male beloved, who had occupied a recognizable place within a more fluid spectrum of beauty—were increasingly evaluated through the new "natural/unnatural" binary and lost legitimacy within reformist discourse. Yet a process of exclusion also contributes to the consolidation and redefinition of its opposite. Once the male beloved was increasingly displaced from the emerging normative horizon, the question became:

who would occupy the legitimate position of the beloved?

The Emergence of a New Object

If the first aspect may be regarded as the destabilization of an older order, the second responds to the question: "Now, where and whom should one love?" This aspect begins with a major structural obstacle: the same social and representational arrangements that had enabled male beloveds to occupy a visible place in lyric discourse had often made heterosexual courtship difficult to realize and articulate openly.

The Inside/Outside System

> In the traditional context of late Qajar Iran, the presence and interaction of women and men was regulated not merely by custom and habit but by a spatial-gender logic that can be formulated under the metaphor of inside/outside (darun/birun). Within this semantic system, woman belonged to the inside (the home, private seclusion, the private sphere) and man to the outside (society, the public arena, the social sphere). This separation to some extent produced and stabilized the very categories of femininity and masculinity. The woman of the inside was not merely confined to the home; her social identity was defined precisely through this confinement. To cross this boundary was to rupture the very category that gave woman meaning (Tavakoli-Targhi, 2001: 113).

In such a situation, the expansion of affective relations between the two sexes, which, in the eyes of intellectuals, was the precondition for the broader social articulation of heterosexual love, depended upon a gradual transformation in the modes of women's social presence and a redefinition of the categories of "inside" and "outside." This transformation could not be achieved merely through a shift in intellectual discourse; it required a change in the spatial-gender logic that had organized the structure of both life and the imagination for centuries. For this reason, prior to the encounter with alternative external models, the notion of woman as a beloved present in the public sphere and accessible to amorous experience did not hold a stable place in the cultural horizon of Iranian society.

Travelogues and the Opening of a New Horizon

Just as the inside/outside system was imposing serious constraints on the realization of heterosexual love in Iran, Iranian travelogue writers in Europe encountered a scene that challenged this semantic system not on an abstract level but in the texture of everyday life: the active presence of women in public space and their relatively free interaction with men in parks, theaters, and social gatherings. This encounter provided an opportunity to become acquainted with a different mode of organizing social relations. By describing these norms, travelogue writers acquainted their readers with a new model of male-female relations and, in many cases, presented it as something ordinary and devoid of threat. From this perspective, the significance of these narratives is perhaps to be sought less in their ethnographic accuracy than in their capacity to open up new horizons for imagining gender and amorous relations. It should, of course, be noted that the travelogues did not merely offer an image of the real West but, to some extent, placed before the Iranian audience a kind of constructed West, a West that could function as a desirable horizon.

A chronological clarification is necessary here. Several travel accounts discussed below—

including those associated with Mirza Abutaleb Khan, Abolhasan Khan Ilchi, Ouseley, and Tancoigne—belong to the earlier Qajar decades. They are used here not as late-Qajar documents in a narrow chronological sense, but as antecedents within a longer Qajar archive of comparison with Europe. Their descriptions and evaluative contrasts helped establish discursive possibilities that were later intensified, internalized, and reworked in late Qajar reformist and literary debates.

Itisam al-Din, in his Shigarf-nama-yi Vilayat, describes a garden in London thus: "On Sundays, this garden welcomes all; men and women alike... In every corner, silver-bodied women strut like peacocks... Lovers in this garden have rendezvous with captivating beloveds and make love without fear of police or rival" (cited in Tavakoli-Targhi, 2001: 65). This description can be examined from two angles. First, terms such as "captivating beloveds" and "make love," which in the Persian literary tradition often carry an idealized and literary charge, are here used in a quotidian, public setting, thereby building a bridge between the idealized world of literature and lived experience. Second, the phrase "without fear of police or rival" does not simply emphasize freedom but also depicts a kind of security of presence in the public sphere, something that, within the framework of the inside/outside system, was scarcely imaginable, at least for a large portion of Iranian women.

What takes this observation beyond the level of a mere report, however, is a resemblance that some scholars have discerned between these scenes and the familiar paradisal imagery of the Islamic tradition and Persian literature. Najmabadi notes that for some travelers, the houris and ghilman of paradise seemed to find their earthly embodiment in the streets of Europe—a juxtaposition that gradually moderated initial astonishment and paved the way from wonder toward acceptance (Najmabadi, 2005: 55).

Beyond public spaces, encounters with European women in private settings also shifted perspectives. In a conversation between Abolhasan Khan Ilchi and Miss Pursall at a royal banquet in London, she asks: "Is our way better, or your way, wherein you keep women covered?" and Ilchi replies: "Your way is better" (Ilchi, 1985: 163). Significantly, in the same account Ilchi describes his interaction with English women through words such as "friendship" and "affection", terms that cast the European woman less as a gendered object than as a companion and confidante.

While travelogue writers were speaking of the possibility of forming different kinds of relations between men and women, certain Iranian intellectuals had also, from a different angle, drawn attention to the restrictions on women's presence in society. Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani, in particular, viewed with a critical eye the isolation of women and their elimination from social and cultural arenas as one of the significant obstacles to the progress of society:

> "For a thousand years, the women of Iran, like the dead of the Arabs and the buried-alive of the Tazis... have been veiled and forsaken in houses like graves... [Being forsaken and confined to the home] has become a barrier to their humanity and a great impediment to the acquisition of cultivation and knowledge in their substance, and has prevented them from discovering subtleties, learning the customs [of civilization], and acquiring honor and sciences, which has altogether removed them from the degree of humanity and

deprived them of the joys of life... Half the people of Iran, who are women, are in a state of paralysis—impoverished, deaf, blind, and chained... Alas that Iranians have not yet tasted the pleasure of this source of life that animates a nation with warmth and zeal..."
(Kermani, 2005: 170–174).

In this narrative, the issue is not simply the confinement of women to the domestic space; the broader consequences of this situation for social life are brought into focus. Metaphors such as "houses like graves" or "half the people of Iran in a state of paralysis" show that Kermani understands the isolation of women not as an individual problem but as a kind of structural deficiency in the body of society.

Yet what appeared in the works of travelogue writers as a horizon, and in the works of intellectuals largely in the form of social critique and problem-posing, was reflected in the works of a number of women poets of this period as a lived experience from within. Shams Kasmai formulates the condition of women thus:

«نسوان مسلمان همه چون نقش به دیوار / از وضع زمان
بی‌خبر و بی‌حس و بی‌کار»
(حجازی، ۱۳۸۲: ۹۶)

Muslim women, all like figures on a wall, / oblivious to the times, senseless, and idle.
(Hejazi, 2003: 96)

The simile of women as "figures on a wall" can express a sense of being erased or marginalized from the sphere of social participation—a situation that also restricted the possibility of an active presence in cultural and affective life. In another couplet, she exposes the contradiction between human essence and social reality:

«من اگر اشرف مخلوق ز نوع بشرم / پس چرا همچو
بهایم به ستم بار برم؟»
(همان: ۹۷)

If I am the noblest of creatures, of the human kind, / why then must I, like a beast, bear the burden of oppression?
(Hejazi, 2003: 97)

Her protest-poem is in some respects reminiscent of Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani's criticisms of the condition of women in Iranian society. This voice, at the very moment when travelogues speak of the "woman present in public space" as a possibility, reports the impossibility of this very possibility in Iran. The gap between these emergent horizons and the lived experience of many women thus becomes a notable rift in the social fabric of the period—a rift that holds significance for understanding the transformations in the discourse of love, as well as the crisis of representation in late Qajar poetry.

The Birth of the Wife-Beloved

It is here that the two trajectories of the article—the destabilization of the traditional object and the opening of a new horizon—converge, and their convergence helps produce a new normative configuration of the love object. Woman, who had long been one possible manifestation of hosn alongside other manifestations, increasingly came to occupy the privileged position of the legitimate and "natural" beloved within reformist discourse as the male beloved lost normative legitimacy. Yet this woman, emerging from the new discourse, is no longer simply the powerful, unattainable, and self-sufficient beloved of the Persian lyrical tradition. On the one hand, she is imagined, in the horizon opened by travelogues, as a "companion" and "confidante"; on the other, she acquires

meaning, in intellectual discourse, in relation to marriage. What is taking shape, therefore, is not simply a new beloved but a "wife-beloved," a configuration that had not occupied a comparable normative position in the earlier system. At this point, the crisis of representation moves from the level of the object to that of relational structure. If the new beloved was increasingly conceived as a woman present in social life and linked to the horizon of marriage, then the structure of the relationship itself also became subject to reconsideration.

Redefining the Structure of Relationship

The opening of the horizon of the "wife-beloved" did not remain confined to the redefinition of the beloved. This transformation simultaneously activated the question of the relation between lover and beloved, for a change in who can be the beloved inevitably affected how one relates to the beloved. With the entry of woman into the position of the desirable beloved, three potential consequences emerged, each capable of transforming the foundations of prior amorous experience.

First, the overall orientation of amorous experience could shift: whereas the prior lyrical system was organized around suffering, separation, and unattainability, with the beloved often situated within a horizon of "distance" and "denial" (Meisami, 1987: 255), the entry of woman opened the possibility of a displacement in which union, intimacy, and partnership could stand alongside the long-established motifs of denial.

Second, with woman increasingly occupying the position of the legitimate beloved, two domains that had often remained distinct in classical lyric representation—love and marriage—were brought into new proximity. In the lyric configuration under discussion, the poetic beloved was frequently male or gender-indeterminate and was not normally identical with the spouse, whereas marriage belonged to the institutional and domestic sphere. This separation had allowed love to retain an extra-institutional character. In the new reformist horizon, however, the convergence of love and marriage became newly foregrounded as a normative ideal.

The third consequence, perhaps the most subtle, concerns the word ma'shuq (beloved) itself. In the Persian tradition, ma'shuq is not a neutral term for "someone we love." The word carries a heavy historical burden: the beloved is a being who sits in a position of power, coquetry, denial, and distance. The beloved is the one who slays the lover, and the lover takes pleasure in being slain. Now this word was to be applied to a woman who was supposed to be a "companion," a "partner," and an "intimate." Could the word ma'shuq be emptied of all that semantic charge of domination and distance and come to rest upon an equal relationship?

These three consequences set the stage for late Qajar intellectuals' discussions of "prior acquaintance," "mutual inclination," and "companionship," and for what I term mutual love ('ishq-e do-suyeh). They sought to redefine the structure of the relationship in a way that would be compatible with the new object (woman) and the new horizon (marriage based on love). In the intellectual horizon of Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani, desirable love is a relationship founded on two elements: "prior acquaintance" and "mutual inclination":

> "Whoever became a purchaser of the beauty of Iran's veiled-ones... had to buy unknowing, without understanding, and without acquaintance. This has altogether rendered the conjugal life of Iranians

> suspended and disordered for a lifetime. Thus, on the wedding night, when after agitation the curtain of the veil is lifted, disinclination and the foundation of aversion take root in the soil of the wife's breast and the rancor-filled breast of the husband. For it has often happened that on that very first night, the man and the woman have both found each other unpleasing and, by force and necessity, have both resorted to misplaced praise, hypocrisy, and dissimulation. Neither has the man the power to say 'I do not want this,' nor has the woman the strength to say 'I cannot live with this husband.'" (Kermani, 2005: 174)

Kermani criticizes traditional marriages by presenting "disinclination and aversion" as major sources of conjugal dysfunction. A marriage without romantic attachment had not necessarily been perceived as anomalous within earlier social arrangements. In the new horizon, however, as woman increasingly occupied the position of the legitimate beloved and love was brought into closer relation with marriage, the absence of mutual inclination itself became a problem. Kermani speaks precisely from within this emerging normative horizon: if love and marriage are to converge in a single relationship, then "prior acquaintance" and "mutual inclination" become necessary conditions for the possibility of mutual love.

Timur Mirza links this ideal to the Western model. In conversation with English women who disapproved of polygamy, he replies that English women are "companions and partners in life," whereas Iranian women do not hold such a position. He says: "If it were possible to have one English wife, that alone would be sufficient" (Nayeb al-Ayaleh, 1982: 790). "Companion and partner," on the one hand, points to an equal relationship based on companionship, and "that alone would be sufficient," on the other, presents monogamy as a condition that could consolidate the horizon of mutual love and reciprocal companionship of a profound and reciprocal relationship. In this exchange, Timur Mirza extols an image of a relationship in which the woman is both "companion" (i.e., the beloved in the new sense) and "partner in life" (i.e., the wife). This is the very overlapping of "beloved" and "spouse" that in the prior system of amorous experience was neither possible nor expected.

Abolhasan Khan Ilchi, too, speaks with longing of the relationship between Lady Ouseley and Sir Gore Ouseley, saying that "conjugal affection... is at the utmost perfection," and he wishes that "would that the women of Iran might take instruction from these women" (Ilchi, 1985: 316). Ilchi speaks from within the same new horizon, having witnessed in London a form of conjugal intimacy that he wishes to see emulated in Iran. Taken together, Timur Mirza's "companion and partner" and Ilchi's "conjugal affection at the utmost perfection" mark a shift in criterion: not the "beauty" or "coquetry" of the beloved, but the quality and reciprocity of the relationship.

This redefinition also activated another voice: that of women who, within the new horizon, were expected to become both beloved and wife. They were not merely witnesses to this transformation but participants in constructing the meaning of the new relationship. The issue was therefore not simply the replacement of a male beloved by a woman. As noted earlier, love and marriage had often occupied distinct representational spheres; the beloved was not necessarily the

spouse, nor was the spouse necessarily imagined as the object of lyric love. Bringing these spheres together required a new type of relationship in which amorous desire, conjugal life, and domestic partnership could coexist. The emergence of this configuration required new ways of understanding, experiencing, and expressing intimacy. If male intellectuals articulated its theoretical possibility, women poets, writing from within lived experience, showed that its realization also required new norms, expectations, and affective skills.

Zhaleh Qaem-Maqami's poetry must be understood precisely within this context. In expressing her experience of conjugal life, she portrays the man as lacking an understanding of the affective bond and incapable of grasping an amorous relationship with a woman:

نه علقه‌ی فرزند و زن در او / نه ز الفت سامان در او سری است

(قائم‌مقامی، ۱۳۷۴: ۵۴)

He feels no attachment to wife or child /
nor does he know the bonds of affection
(Qaem-Maqami, 1995: 54)

What takes Zhaleh's poem beyond a simple complaint, however, is her movement from lack toward an affirmative formulation. In the following lines she says:

گر گویمش ای مرد من زنم / زن را سخن از نوع دیگری است

آسایش روح لطیف زن / فرزندی و عشقی و همسری است

خندد به من آنسان که خنده‌اش / بر جان و دل خسته، خنجری است (همان: ۵۷)

If I tell him, "I am a woman, / A woman speaks in another voice
A woman's tender soul finds its peace in motherhood, love, and marriage."
He laughs at me / and his laughter pierces my weary heart like a dagger. (Qaem-Maqami, 1995: 57)

Reflection upon the three words "children" (farzandi), "love" (eshqi), and "wifehood" (hamsari) is vital here, but not merely because in the earlier tradition these three spheres were separate and Zhaleh places them side by side. The more fundamental significance of the poem lies in the fact that she expects the man to understand this linkage. In other words, "children, love, and wifehood" is for Zhaleh an affective demand—a demand whose fulfillment depends upon the man's learning the rules of a new relationship. The woman stands in the new horizon and sees that not only does the man fail to grasp this compound, he does not even know that he ought to grasp it. The man's laugh at the end of the poem — "He laughs at me, and his laughter / is a dagger to my weary soul and heart" — is therefore not merely indifference or contempt; it is a sign of his incapacity to perceive the rules of the new relationship. The gap between the "opened horizon" and social reality reaches its zenith in this laughter.

Kermani raised the theoretical possibility of the bond between love and marriage; Ilchi observed it in the West with longing. Zhaleh shows its human cost from within a real life in which the absence of mutual understanding becomes a "dagger" to the "weary soul and heart."

Shahdokht Malayeri, by condensing the same logic into a single line, reveals a sign of the shift of this demand from the level of individual relationship to that of a public norm:

در مردم این دیار چون نیست وفا / شهدخت برآن سرم که شوهر نکنم.

(حجازی، ۱۳۸۲: ۹۱)

Since there is no fidelity among the people of this land / I, Shahdokht, am resolved never to marry.
(Hejazi, 2003: 91)

To grasp the significance of this line, one must ask why "fidelity" assumes such centrality here. In major strands of the earlier lyric tradition, the beloved's cruelty and unfaithfulness were not necessarily condemned; they could form part of the very logic of love, intensifying the lover's desire through coquetry and denial. Shahdokht, however, speaks from within a situation in which woman is imagined as both beloved and wife. In this configuration, fidelity is no longer a marginal moral virtue but a structural requirement. Within marriage, betrayal cannot be absorbed as simply another form of the beloved's coquetry; it threatens the relationship itself. Shahdokht's decision "not to marry" therefore also carries an affirmative implication: if the conditions of the new relationship—fidelity, acquaintance, and empathy—are not met, the woman may refuse a bond that fails to recognize her as a subject.

What emerges is a relational structure in the midst of transformation. The traditional asymmetrical model is challenged by concepts such as "acquaintance," "companionship," "fidelity," and "spiritual comfort," yet these concepts do not yet possess an established metaphorical vocabulary in Persian love poetry. The gap between an opened horizon and social reality—manifest in the husband's laughter in Zhaleh's poem or in Shahdokht's decision not to marry—reappears at the level of language. The late Qajar poet thus stands in a space where the evaluative scale has changed while many symbolic instruments remain inherited. This leads to the third level of the crisis: what becomes of language? Can a word such as ma'shuq emerge from the weight of its historical associations and be made to signify a more reciprocal relationship? The traditional metaphors, images, and motifs that had long worked with a gender-indeterminate beloved and an asymmetrical relationship must now be made to speak about an accessible woman and a more reciprocal bond. Whether this language can carry such new signifieds is the question addressed in the next section.

The Weakening of the Old Literary Order

The preceding sections have shown how the male beloved increasingly lost normative legitimacy, how woman came to occupy a privileged position within a new horizon of legitimate desire, and how this displacement challenged an asymmetrical model of the relationship, bringing to the fore expectations such as acquaintance, companionship, fidelity, and spiritual comfort. Yet these transformations, however far they advanced at the level of thought and lived experience, encountered a major obstacle: the language of Persian poetry, with its metaphorical and lexical network fashioned over centuries for a gender-indeterminate beloved, an asymmetrical relationship, and a love structured by distance, now had to speak of the "wife-beloved," reciprocity, and a love that took union and intimacy as seriously as separation. The crisis of representation thus manifested itself at the level of language and poetics. The question, then, is how inherited poetic language responded to this new horizon: could it adapt to the new signifieds, or was it eroded from within by the attempt?

The response of late Qajar poetry to this question is traceable less in the form of a "successful transition" to a new language than in the form of a profound process of erosion. In this period, rather than a new language for

love being built, the old language and the established literary order were weakened. This weakening can be observed in several distinct but convergent moves: the concretization of the beloved and the collapse of idealizing abstraction, the expulsion and de-sacralization of older objects, and, finally, direct criticism of the amatory system of traditional poetry.

As noted earlier, the beloved in Persian amatory literature was often formulated in an abstract and transpersonal horizon; however, in the late Qajar period, a tendency toward a more earthly and tangible rendering of this figure emerged. This concretization was not merely a thematic change; it initiated a process of casting doubt upon the foundations of the old representational system. One of the factors contributing to this displacement may be sought in the Iranian observers' encounter with European women. This encounter confronted them with models of women's social presence and other forms of social interaction that contrasted with the relative seclusion of women in Iranian society. In such a context, the reflection of these differences gradually led to the foregrounding of a more individualized and perceptible beloved.

An illuminating antecedent appears in the poems of Mirza Abutaleb Khan. Although his European journey belongs to the earlier Qajar period, his treatment of the female beloved anticipates a problem that becomes more acute later in the century. Here the beloved is no longer merely an abstract and inaccessible figure; she is a woman with specific physical features whom the poet describes with care. In one poem, composed in praise of an English woman of whom he remarks, "I have seen no one with lips and teeth of such beauty" (Mirza Abutaleb Khan, 1973: 93), he writes:

تا شد ز باده لب او کامیابْ حرف / در جان گوش نشئه دهد چون شراب حرف

یک ساعت است نشئه می لیک زان لبان / نشئه دهد همیشه به هر شیخ و شاب حرف (همان: ۹۳)

Once his lips have found delight in wine / his words intoxicate the listening soul like wine.
The intoxication of wine endures but for an hour / the words from those lips intoxicate young and old forever. (Mirza Abutaleb Khan, 1973: 93)

Or, encountering the daughter of a notable in Wales, he remarks: "Miss Cockrell, in the beauty of her stature and cheeks, taunts the virgin houris," and he composes a ghazal in her praise:

لب است این ای صنم یا باده ناب / که عقل و هوش را برده از تاب
ز درمانم بکش ای همنشین دست / شفایم منحصر در آن دو عناب... (همان: ۱۱۰)

Is this your lip, O idol, or pure wine / that has robbed me of reason and sense?
Do not try to cure me, O companion / my only remedy lies in those two jujubes.
(Mirza Abutaleb Khan, 1973: 110)

In these poems, the beloved possesses a feminine identity, and the poet stabilizes this identity through explicit reference. Deeper reflection on Abutaleb's poems, however, reveals the transition from abstraction to concreteness at a more complex level as well. In another poem describing a different English woman, he writes:

پرتویی از نور اعلا دیده‌ام / روح قدسی آشکارا دیده‌ام
بی‌مدینه قدس، مریم یافتم / بی‌سواد جده حوا دیده‌ام
کس به جز نامی ندید آن هم به قاف / من میان شهر، عنقا دیده‌ام
معنی عصمت مجسم با ملک / آمده در لبس عبری دیده‌ام (همان: ۲۴۳–۲۴۴)

A ray of the Highest Light have I seen / the Holy Spirit made manifest have I seen. Without Jerusalem, I have found Mary / without Jeddah, I have seen Eve.

None has seen more than its name upon Mount Qaf; / I have seen the Anqa in the heart of the city.

Chastity itself, embodied in angelic form / clad in Hebrew garments, have I seen. (Mirza Abutaleb Khan, 1973: 243–244)

In these verses, sacred archetypes such as Mary and Eve, figures that religious imagination had located in unrepeatable, sacred history, are suddenly seen in the form of a real, earthly woman. This carries two simultaneous movements: it bestows sanctity upon the earthly beloved while de-sacralizing those very symbols, bringing them down to the level of lived experience. The move extends the logic traced in the travelogues: just as houris were embodied in the streets of London, Mary and Eve are now encountered in the figure of an English woman. The beloved is no longer anticipated in the afterlife; she is found in the streets of the modern world.

This theological displacement is a linguistic strategy for bridging the gap between the desiring horizon (earthly, equal love) and the old language (built for asymmetrical, otherworldly love). The poet, by drawing on sacred symbols, lends a borrowed divinity to his earthly beloved.

The collision between abstraction and reality in Abutaleb's poems leads to the negation of the established models of the beloved in classical Persian literature. He continues:

در جمال لیلی و شیرین بسی / شاعران را شعر غرا دیده‌ام
بس مقال عزه و عذرا و ویس / در بر و حفظ برایا دیده‌ام
کافرم گر زان که چون «لیدی پالم» / بانویی در «یرپ» و «اشیا» دیده‌ام
با وجودش ذکر این مهبانوان / جز کهن‌افسان یکی نادیده‌ام (همان: ۲۴۴)

On the beauty of Layla and Shirin / many a splendid poem have I heard.
Many tales of Azzeh, Azra, and Vis / have I seen preserved in people's hearts and memories.
May I be an infidel if, beside "Lady Palm," / I have seen such a lady in Europe or Asia.
Beside her, the praise of all these moon-faced beauties / seems to me no more than an ancient fable. (Mirza Abutaleb Khan, 1973: 244)

By setting legendary beloveds such as Layla, Shirin, and Veis alongside the concrete figure of "Lady Palm," he formulates a kind of opposition between the ideal model and tangible experience. In this comparison, the mythical beloveds appear less vivid and more remote from lived experience when set against objective reality. More fundamentally, the comparison reverses the traditional direction of authority. In classical Persian poetry, legendary beloveds functioned as the paradigmatic measure against which earthly beauty was evaluated. Abutaleb inverts this hierarchy: the concrete English woman becomes the criterion, while Layla, Shirin, and Vis survive only as faded literary memories.

The point here is that Abutaleb, for all the subtlety he employs in describing the new beloved, still still works largely within the old semiotic system; he is building a new edifice

with old materials. This very effort implicitly demonstrates why the old system can no longer continue to function without intervention: if, to describe "Lady Palm," he is compelled to reuse sacred symbols and pre-existing metaphors, then this language is increasingly strained as a vehicle for the new experience of love. Malkom Khan, moving a step further, openly ridicules this very crisis, not in poetic practice but at the theoretical level.

Some intellectuals, among them Malkom Khan, directly target the metaphorical network itself and subject it to criticism:

> "I read a hundred volumes of their works and found not a single fresh idea. Wherever my eye fell upon a page, Joseph was lost in the well-pit of the chin, and it was the heart-moth that melted in the fire of love. It was a serpent that coiled upon the beloved's cheek, and at the top of every line, having drained the Cup of Jamshid, they were setting the arrows of the lashes upon the bow of the eyebrow and stealing the ball of the hearts of the heartless with the polo-club of the tress."(Arianpour, 1972: 321)

These metaphors are presented by Malkom Khan as so overused that they no longer possessed the capacity to signify new experiences. Malkom Khan's ridicule therefore functions not merely as literary criticism but as an act of delegitimizing the inherited semiotic system. By exposing these metaphors as exhausted clichés, he weakens their authority as vehicles for representing love.

Yet the question Malkom Khan leaves unanswered is: what can be put in place of this worn-out semiotic system? And it is precisely in this unanswered question that the depth of the crisis becomes apparent. The practical attempts of poets to escape this impasse yielded varying results, but the common feature of these attempts, regardless of their success or failure, is their contribution to the weakening of the old system from within.

Abolqasem Lahuti, in his poem "To the Daughters of Iran," undertakes a revision of inherited similes and modes of expression in a direct language. He begins the poem with these lines:

من از امروز ز حسن تو بریدم سر و کار / گو به دیوانگی‌ام خلق نمایند اقرار

(لاهوتی، ۱۳۵۸: ۲۷۲)

> From this day on, I have severed all ties with your beauty / let the world proclaim me mad (Lahuti, 1979: 272)

This formulates a kind of distancing from the established patterns of the past. He then continues:

بعد از این، از خط و خالت نهراسد دل من / ز آنکه با حسن تو کارم نبود دیگر بار (همان: ۲۷۲)

> Henceforth, my heart shall no longer fear your down and mole / for your beauty no longer holds any claim upon me (Lahuti, 1979: 272)

The same approach is pursued further:

تا کی از زلف تو زنجیر نهم بر گردن / تا کی از مژه تو تیر زنم بر دل زار

به سر انگشت تو تا چند زنم تهمت قتل / یا به مژگان تو تا چند دهم نسبت خار

چند گویم که رخت ماه بود در خوبی / چند گویم که قدت سرو بود در رفتار (همان: ۲۷۳)

> How long shall I call your tresses chains around my neck? / How long shall I call your lashes arrows piercing my weary heart?

How long shall I accuse your fingertips of murder / or liken your lashes to thorns? How long shall I compare your face to the moon / how long your stature to the cypress? (Lahuti, 1979: 273)

In these lines, Lahuti challenges the established associations of traditional aesthetics: tress and chain, lash and arrow, face and moon, stature and cypress. Yet the subtler crisis lies in his demand that inherited beauty cease to govern poetic value: the signified shifts without a fully formed new signifier taking its place. “Deed” and “knowledge” replace “beauty” as abstract demands, but they do not yet possess an equally developed poetic image-system. This negation without a complete substitution may not build a new language, but it exerts considerable weakening force. By repeating his successive “how long” questions, Lahuti exposes the metaphorical network not as natural and self-evident but as a historical convention that can be viewed from the outside and criticized. That estrangement itself marks a decisive weakening of the old order.

Fakhr Ozma Arghun, for her part, pursues a different path in the same direction. In clear harmony with Lahuti and Malkom Khan, while discrediting the worn-out classical metaphors, she extends the scope of her negation to the superficial manifestations of modernity as well:

جمال زن نه همین زلف پرشکن باشد / نه عارض چو گل و غنچه چون دهن باشد
نه ژوپ اطلس و نه جامه کرپ ژرژت / نه کفش برقی و نه چین پیرهن باشد
بکوش ای زن و بر تن ز علم جامه بپوش / خوش آن زمان که چنین جامه‌ات به تن باشد (حجازی، ۱۳۸۲: ۱۵۳–۱۵۴)

A woman’s beauty is not but her clustered tress, / nor is it a cheek like the rose and a mouth like the bud.
Not satin pleats, nor a dress of crêpe Georgette, / not shiny shoes, nor the folds of a blouse.
Strive, O woman, and clothe your body in knowledge; / blessed the moment when such a garment is upon your body.
(Hejazi, 2003: 153–154)

In the first line, aligned with Lahuti’s critique, Fakhr Ozma frees beauty from the grip of clichéd elements of classical literature; in the second line, she also challenges the manifestations of superficial modernism. But what distinguishes her poem from Lahuti’s pure negation is her strategy of substitution: “clothe your body in knowledge.” The word “garment” (jameh), which in the tradition signified the veil and the covering of the body, here acquires an entirely new content. “Knowledge” takes the place of “body.” Rather than representing a complete linguistic innovation, this metaphorical substitution demonstrates the growing instability of inherited signifiers. "Garment" no longer signifies the veil but knowledge, revealing that traditional signs had become sufficiently detached from their earlier meanings to accommodate entirely new semantic content. Such resemanticization weakens the internal coherence of the older semiotic order.

Thus, late Qajar poetry did not produce a fully developed new language of love but progressively weakened the inherited one. The concretization of the beloved, the delegitimization of older objects, the reconfiguration of relationships, and the critiques advanced by Malkom Khan, Lahuti, and Fakhr Ozma each undermined the

authority of the older semiotic order without yet replacing it with a stable alternative.

This is the "ground-clearing" described at the outset of the study: late Qajar poetry, rather than immediately building a stable new language, progressively disabled the self-evidence of the old one. This disabling became one condition of possibility for subsequent innovation. The crisis of representation in this period is therefore not simply an end but an opening—one that helped clear the way for the linguistic and imagistic experiments of Persian poetry in the following decades, even though the late Qajar period did not itself witness their full realization.

Conclusion

By examining the poetry and related discourses of the Qajar period, with particular attention to transformations that become acute in its later decades, this study has argued that the affective and aesthetic changes of this historical juncture cannot be reduced to a simple substitution of new models for old ones. What emerged was a structural "moment of weakening" in the order of representing love. This normative instability developed on an already unsettled terrain: before the Western horizon became a powerful evaluative reference, the literary tradition had already experienced a crisis of authority through the Bazgasht-e Adabi (Literary Return) movement. The resulting intra-systemic erosion affected the literary field on three intertwined levels: object, relationship, and language.

At the first level, the analysis showed that, under the pressure of an external gaze and the gradual internalization of the "natural/unnatural" moral criterion, the male beloved increasingly lost normative legitimacy within reformist discourse. At the same time, woman became increasingly privileged as the legitimate love object. Travel writing made women's public presence newly imaginable, while reformist critique represented their domestic seclusion as a source of social enfeeblement. This displacement also placed the structure of the relationship under pressure: prior acquaintance, mutual inclination, companionship, and fidelity increasingly challenged a hierarchical and denial-based model, allowing the horizon of the "wife-beloved" to take shape.

The redefinition of the amorous relationship was not confined to male intellectual discourse. The works of women poets, particularly Zhaleh Qaem-Maqami and Shahdokht Malayeri, articulated the human and affective costs of the unrealized bond between love and marriage, while their demands for fidelity and spiritual comfort formulated key requirements of a more reciprocal relationship. These conceptual and relational tensions ultimately appeared at the level of language as well: the metaphorical network of Persian poetry, refined for an abstract beloved and a relationship structured by distance, was increasingly strained by new signifieds. Attempts to escape this impasse—from Abutaleb's grounding of sacred images to Malkom Khan's satirical cataloguing of worn-out clichés, and from Lahuti's negation of inherited metaphors to Fakhr Ozma's metaphorical redefinition—functioned collectively as mechanisms of weakening rather than as the construction of a fully stabilized new language. In doing so, they diminished the self-evidence of the inherited semiotic order and created space for later innovations.

At the level of overall assessment, the theoretical value of this study lies in shifting attention from the "final product of change" to the mechanisms through which an inherited order loses its authority. The late Qajar period should therefore be understood neither as a failed phase nor merely as a liminal interval, but as a historically productive threshold in which a cultural system becomes less able to defend the assumptions that had previously organized it. The focus on elite literary and intellectual texts inevitably limits the study's ability to represent the lived experience of broader social groups and the practical or ritual dimensions of love, including transformations in family custom. Likewise, the relationship between this literary weakening and concurrent political developments—especially the Constitutional Revolution—requires separate investigation. Future research may extend this framework to fields such as music, theater, and family law. Seen in this light, the apparent incompleteness of late Qajar transformation becomes historically significant: the weakening of inherited literary authority helped create conditions under which many later innovations in Persian poetry, including those associated with Nima and the modernist tradition, could become possible.

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