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“Till the Gossamer Thread You Fling Catch Somewhere”: Parvin E’tesami’s Creative Reception of Walt Whitman

Behnam Mirzababazadeh Fomeshi

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NOTES



“TILL THE GOSSAMER THREAD YOU FLING CATCH
SOMEWHERE”: PARVIN E’TESAMI’S CREATIVE
RECEPTION OF WALT WHITMAN

THE WORK OF Parvin E’tesami (1907-1941), the first major twentieth-century woman poet of Iran, has sometimes been criticized for too blindly endorsing patriarchy¹ and for choosing “the calm niche of traditional poetry” rather than “fishing for new ideas.”² Parvin’s poem “God’s Weaver” (1941)—a poem familiar to most Iranian readers of poetry—provides a reply to those criticisms. Throughout her work, Parvin borrowed freely from multiple sources, including classical Persian poetry, the fables of Aesop and La Fontaine, and her father’s translations from Western literatures.³ But the resulting work remained distinctly her own: “Even when borrowed, elements are infused with a spirit and mood completely of Parvin’s own.”⁴ Just as her father used his knowledge of foreign languages to transfer cultural and literary elements from other traditions into Persian society, Parvin did the same thing through her creative reception of Walt Whitman’s “A Noiseless Patient Spider.”

A number of critical studies have investigated the relationship between Parvin’s poem and various texts that inspired or influenced it. Abdolhossein Zarrinkub wrote that this poem reminds readers of Rumi’s thought and style.⁵ Other critics have suggested that the piece was inspired by American journalist Arthur Brisbane’s work as translated by Yusef E’tesami and published in his *Bahar*. These critics argue that the poem “is based” on an article entitled “Azm va Neshat-e Ankabut” (“The Spider’s Determination and Vivacity”), a translation into Persian of an editorial by Brisbane.⁶

As Maryam Mosharraf rightly mentions, however, Parvin scholarship has so far ignored the Iranian poet’s knowledge of English.⁷ In his study of the relationship between Parvin’s poem and Brisbane’s essay, Karimi-Hakkak says he did not attempt to “locate Brisbane’s [original] essay since Parvin did not know English and could not have

read it herself.”⁸ But in fact among the most influential factors on Parvin’s work is her experience at Iran Bethel, the American school for girls in Tehran.⁹ Learning and teaching English there contributed to her knowledge of Western literatures and modern ideas. Mosharraf is the first critic to mention the relationship between Whitman and Parvin’s poem.¹⁰ I want to develop Mosharraf’s insight by examining “God’s Weaver” in relation to Whitman’s “A Noiseless Patient Spider” in order to begin to illuminate this yet unexplored creative reception.

Parvin would most probably have come across Whitman in her student days in the American school. Devoid of the “controversial” elements that Whitman’s poetry is (in)famous for, “A Noiseless Patient Spider” was one of his more commonly anthologized poems. Unlike some of his explicitly sexual poems, this poem may have been considered “appropriate” for the Iranian girl students, and it was probably available to the students of Iran Bethel. In encountering this poem, Parvin discovered some interesting and fresh characteristics in Whitman’s spider, in particular its tireless endeavor and its isolation, and imported them into her own poetry.

Through her versification of fables Parvin preserved the long Persian tradition of advisory and didactic poetry in twentieth-century Iran. Belonging to the *monazereh* genre, her most famous works create a dialogue or debate between what Karimi-Hakkak calls “two emblematic entities opposed to one another in an important character trait.”¹¹ “God’s Weaver,” a poem in rhyming couplets (*masnavi*) with a spider protagonist, is one such debate. The first part of the poem depicts a scene in which a lazy person looks at a spider busy at work. The poem starts with the persona’s description of a lazy person who is “languid, / weary, and feeble, yet able-bodied.”¹² This character contrasts the other character of the poem, a spider “above the door, warmly at work.” In the second part, the lazy person criticizes the spider, its activity, and its product, providing the spider with some advice such as “Go rest today, there is tomorrow too.” In the third part, the spider responds to the lazy person’s comments. The fourth part of the poem can be read either as the spider’s concluding remarks or as the persona’s moral lesson; this part deals mostly with the importance of human endeavor to make the most out of the limited time

one possesses.

One of Whitman's more commonly anthologized poems, "A Noiseless Patient Spider" is, according to James Perrin Warren, a "clear experiment in analytic form, balancing two five-line stanzas in a web of description and analogy."¹³ The first stanza deals with a series of images depicting a spider trying hard to attach the first filament to build a connection. In the second stanza the poet addresses his own soul. He is trying hard to build "the bridge" between his poetry and his future readers to ensure his immortality. Paul Diehl demonstrates how Whitman's revisions in the final version of the poem, particularly in punctuation, intensify the sense of spider/poet trying to catch its "gossamer thread" somewhere.¹⁴ By examining Whitman's poem in relation to Parvin's "God's Weaver," we can see how Whitman's spider's thread traveled through time and space and eventually latched onto a twentieth-century Persian woman poet.

The spider in "God's Weaver" has a number of connections with "A Noiseless Patient Spider." The spider in Whitman's poem is depicted as active, energetic and hard-working: "It launch'd forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself, / Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them." These lines can be compared to the spider's description of itself in Parvin's poem: "We have seized every opportunity we have had / to weave, and weave, and weave." The triple repetition of "weave" refers to the perseverance and tireless endeavor of the spider just as does the triple repetition of "filament" in "A Noiseless Patient Spider." Whitman's spider is "noiseless"; similarly, the spider in "God's Weaver" "gave lessons without speech and words" and "her spindle turns, but noiselessly." The spider in Whitman's poem is "patient," and Parvin's spider demonstrates the same quality to calmly accept frustration and disappointment: "We who have spent a lifetime inside the veil / have learned patience in the face of adversity: / one moment it is the broom, another it is dust and the wind, / this ancient struggle never gets old. / We are not afraid of fate and fortune." Finally, the spider in Whitman's poem is "isolated," just as the persona in "God's Weaver" describes the spider as "گوشه گیر" (*gushhegir*), signifying "isolated" and "secluded."

In both poems, the spider clearly represents the poet. The spider

in Whitman's poem, longing tirelessly for the connection, represents Whitman himself, who tries to capture the attention of readers through "the ductile anchor" of poetry in order to ensure his own survival and immortality. One can trace a comparable association between the spider and the poet in "God's Weaver." Starting from the very title the spider is called a "weaver," and weaving is the metaphor that drives the whole poem. In Persian "بافتن" (*baftan*) can refer to both the acts of weaving and of using language. The association can be traced back to ninth-century Persian poetry.¹⁵ Neither this nor the image of a spider as a weaver is Parvin's innovation, but her linking the two concepts and introducing a spider to stand for a poet is her original contribution to Persian poetry. Reading the poem in the light of this finding leads us to see how the persona/poet of "God's Weaver" is Parvin herself.

The spider as a symbol of effort and action in "God's Weaver" has much stronger connections with the energetic, and hard-working spider in Whitman's poem than it does with the spider of Persian literary tradition. In classical Persian poetry, the spider is seen primarily as the weaver of intricate webs and secondarily as the hunter of insects. In classical usage, "the spider's web most frequently exemplifies the ephemerality of human work."¹⁶ However, Persian culture also has a positive view of the spider as an instrument of God's will. And, in Persian tradition, the "spider's unattractive shape has also provided the basis for moralizing on the insignificance of worldly beauty or the relative merits of beauty in comparison with other human faculties."¹⁷

There is no doubt Parvin's spider inherited mystical characteristics from its Persian predecessors. After the thirteenth century all Persian poetry has been at least tinged with Sufism, and the language of mysticism appears to a Persian reader to be intrinsically poetic.¹⁸ It is no surprise, then, to find Parvin's spider having the qualities of piety and indifference toward worldly pleasures that tie the creature to medieval Persian poetry, particularly Hafiz's ghazals. Parvin's spider, after all, is "God's weaver," and, as her spider tells us, "We move along the path He has set us. / He is our Master, aware of our work." But, within this mystical framework, Parvin imports some key elements of Whitman's more secular spider.

As mentioned earlier, “God’s Weaver” is a *monazereh*, which has been called “presumably the most effective Persian poem celebrating effort and action.”¹⁹ Present in a wide range of contexts and in both prose and poetry, the *monazereh* can be traced back to pre-Islamic times. After the introduction of Islam in Persia, the *monazereh* remained popular. In the medieval period Nezami and Rumi inserted it in their romantic and mystic narratives.²⁰ In this genre, argues critic Heshmat Moayyad, Parvin “surpasses all her predecessors throughout the history of Persian literature both in quality and quantity.”²¹ *Monazereh*’s exposure to the long tradition of Persian poetry provided Parvin with characters who possessed predefined characteristics. As a sign of her inventiveness as a poet, she sometimes chose objects and organic material from everyday life and turned them into living entities—including a needle, a thread, an onion, or garlic—whose characteristics had not been previously defined in the Persian poetic tradition.

Even when Parvin utilized characters already known in the Persian tradition, her originality frequently assigns them new characteristics, and the spider in “God’s Weaver” is one such character. Out of the five traditional concepts a Persian spider could signify, Parvin focused on the insect’s weaving and on the spider as an instrument of God’s will, as suggested in the title of the poem. The Persian poet then entered this arachnid into a debate, a common technique in Persian poetry and one she favored herself, to create her own unique spider—one that combined characteristics of Whitman’s spider with some characteristics of a Persian spider to produce a cross-bred spider that is part Persian and part Whitmanian. This new spider is Parvin’s most distinctive poetic innovation.

While there is no reference to the gender of the spider in “A Noiseless Patient Spider,” the spider/poet in “God’s Weaver” clearly represents a woman. She is a “weaver,” “placed behind the door,” working with a “spindle,” and hanging “drapes.” The spider is described as “hanging” a “پرده” (*pardeh*), the Persian term for drape, signifying both “veil” and “female virginity” and closely associated with femininity. The spider is also described as “having put the spindle of effort to work.” The spindle is traditionally associated with women.

In classical Persian poetry such as that by Ferdowsi, Asadi, and Nezami, one can find reference to the spindle as a feminine tool in contrast to a dagger, mace, spear, and arrow, which are manly tools. In part two of Parvin's poem, the lazy person tells the spider, "none shall see you behind this door, / none shall call you any kind of artist." In these lines the feminine aspect of the spider—a female poet who is severely restricted to the domestic sphere and not recognized as an artist by the patriarchal system—is highlighted.

The poem's debate between the spider and the lazy person can be read, then, as a debate between a female poet/Parvin and the patriarchal system. The debate is not between two equally convincing positions that allow the reader to choose. Parts one and four of the poem belong to the persona/Parvin, where she expresses herself more openly in celebrating the spider/Parvin and condemning the lazy person/patriarchal system. From the very first line, where readers meet the lazy person who "fell into a corner languid, / weary, and feeble, yet able-bodied," they have no difficulty identifying which character should be sympathized with. Except for this very first *bayt*, the entire opening part of the poem is devoted to the spider/female poet. In part one, Parvin offers an early conclusion to the debate; taking advantage of her poetic license, she easily defeats the lazy person/patriarchal system before the debate has even really started. Following part one, the whole poem is the celebration of the spider/Parvin against the lazy person/patriarchal system. The spider is the dominant character and ultimately the winner who concludes the entire debate. The concluding part of the poem, which culminates with the spider/Parvin as "God's weaver," is the celebration of this character. Just as God, the Omnipotent, is the winner of any fight or competition, whoever is associated with Him—including His weaver—must win the debate.

As her brother once claimed, Parvin may have been too busy composing her own poetry to have paid much attention to the pioneering modernists of Persian literature, Nima and Hedayat.²² Nevertheless, Parvin's embrace of an American literary character and her use of that character to speak for the personal feelings of the poet herself challenges the idea that she limited herself to her Persian literary heritage and that she was an impersonal poet. God's weaver is a mid-twenti-

eth-century Iranian spider that has its roots in quite different sources, some of which were clear to the contemporary readers of the poem and others of which are discussed here for the first time. Parvin found the image of the spider in Whitman's poem—a noiseless, patient, isolated, tirelessly working creature—particularly relevant to her own condition as a woman and her activity as a poet in mid-twentieth-century Iran, and she employed this spider in her debate with the patriarchal structure.

Despite all the connections between the two spiders, a significant point of divergence remains. Whitman's spider has ambitions to connect to the universe using its "gossamer thread," whereas Parvin's spider is satisfied to keep doing what she perceives to be her God-given mission in life. This divergence might signal the difference between the male psyche of a pioneering American poet and the condition of being a woman poet and heir to a poetic tradition dominated by men for a thousand years that has left little room for a woman to entertain notions of reaching out to an unknowable universe.²³

Parvin's social concerns for the women of her society, along with her concerns for herself as an intellectual woman in a patriarchal society, led her to invent a mixed-breed spider that could become a spokeswoman for mid-twentieth-century Iranian women in general and for herself as a female poet in particular. The birth of the spider-woman-protagonist of "God's Weaver" was the result of the interaction between many forces—including, but not limited to, Parvin's personal situation as a female poet, her poetic inventiveness, Persian poetic traditions of *monazereh* and mystical poetry, Iranian society, and, last but not least, the active arachnid in Whitman's "A Noiseless Patient Spider." This interplay of texts and contexts forms Parvin's creative reception of an American poem into Persian poetry.

NOTES

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1 Leonardo Alishan, "Parvin E'tesami, The Magna Mater, and the Culture of the Patriarchs," *Once a Dewdrop: Essays on the Poetry of Parvin E'tesami*, ed. Heshmat Moayyad (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 1994), 20-46.

2 Fereshteh Davaran, "Impersonality in Parvin E'tesami's Poetry," *Once a Dewdrop*, 74.

3 Yusef E'tesami (1874-1938), a form-oriented translator and literary journalist, trained his daughter in Arabic and Persian literature. He translated some forty works from French, Turkish, and Arabic into Persian and encouraged Parvin to write poetry based on those translations. He was familiar with the contemporary cultural issues of the world and was the first to introduce Esperanto to a Persian audience. He translated into Persian *Tahrir al Mara'a* (1899) by the Egyptian writer Qasem Amin (1863-1908) on the freedom and rights of women and published it in Tabriz. He was among the first to publish on the issue in Persian, and this book is the earliest dedicated solely to women's issues written or translated in Iran.

4 Heshmat Moayyad, "E'TEŞĀMĪ, PARVĪN," *Encyclopedia Iranica*, available at www.iranicaonline.org.

5 Abdolhossein Zarrinkoub, *Ba Karvan-e Holle* (Tehran: Elmi, 1991), 367.

6 Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, *Recasting Persian Poetry: Scenarios of Poetic Modernity in Iran* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1995), 173; Heshmat Moayyad, "Parvin's Personality and Poetry," *A Nightingale's Lament: Selections from the Poems and Fables of Parvin E'tesami (1907-41)*, translated by Heshmat Moayyad and A. Margaret Arent Madelung (Lexington, KY: Mazda, 1985), xi-xxxviii; Margaret Arent Madelung, "Commentary," *A Nightingale's Lament*, 202-227; Gholamhossein Yusefi, *Cheshme-ye Roshan* (Tehran: Elmi, 1990), 417; Maryam Mosharraf, *Parvin E'tesami: Payegozar-e Adabiat-e Neokelasik-e Iran* (Tehran: Sokhan, 2012), 189. Arthur Brisbane (1864-1936) was a wildly popular journalist in the United States, whose editorials in the *New York Journal* and *Evening Journal* had a vast readership and a huge influence on the development of American editorial writing.

7 Mosharraf, *Parvin*, 31.

8 Karimi-Hakkak, *Recasting*, 304.

9 In 1921 Parvin went to Iran Bethel, a school for girls in Tehran established by American missionaries in 1874. After graduation from the school in May 1924, she worked there as a teacher for two years.

- 10 In the preface Mosharraf wrote to the book-length translation of Whitman into Persian by her mother, Mansureh Bakvai, she mentioned this point. Maryam Mosharraf, "And in the beginning was the Word," in Mansureh Bakvai trans., *Bargha-ye Alaf: Gozide-ye She'r-e Walt Whitman* (Tehran: Lian, 2016), 7-17.
- 11 Karimi-Hakkak, *Recasting*, 161-162.
- 12 The English translation of "God's Weaver" cited in this essay is from Karimi-Hakkak, "Appropriation: Parvin's 'God's Weaver,'" in *Recasting Persian Poetry*, 161-182 which offers a partial translation of the poem. A complete translation is available in *A Nightingale's Lament*, 63-68.
- 13 James Perrin Warren, "Style," *A Companion to Walt Whitman*, ed. Donald D. Kummings (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 377-391.
- 14 Paul Diehl, "A Noiseless Patient Spider": Whitman's Beauty—Blood and Brain," *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 6 (Winter 1989), 117-132.
- 15 Karimi-Hakkak, *Recasting*, 164.
- 16 Karimi-Hakkak, *Recasting*, 180.
- 17 Karimi-Hakkak, *Recasting*, 179.
- 18 Dick Davis, "On Not Translating Hafez," *New England Review* 25 (2004), 313.
- 19 Heshmat Moayyad, "Moghaddame: Dar Zendegi va She'r va Andishe-ye Parvin," *Divan-e Parvin*, ed. Heshmat Moayyad, (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 1986), 8-31.
- 20 Asghar Seyed-Gohrab, "The Rose and the Wine: Dispute as a Literary Device in Classical Persian Literature," *Iranian Studies* 47 (2013), 69-85.
- 21 Heshmat Moayyad, "Parvin's Personality and Poetry," xix.
- 22 Abolfath E'tesami, "Name-ye Aqa-ye Abolfath E'tesami," *Divan-e Parvin*, 274-276.
- 23 I owe this reading to Professor Karimi-Hakkak's comment on my manuscript.