

Outdated Humanism and Literary Authority as Threats to the Popularity of Ahmad Shāmlu's Poetry

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ABSTRACT

Shāmlu belongs to the few poets of the modern Persian poetry, who can be called neoclassical, namely, those whose work has a distinctive character and who are influential in the history of modern Persian literature. These special characteristics of Shāmlu's poetic features together with his socio-cultural and political vision as manifested in his poems had excessively allowed for his oeuvre to be popularized, forming a large crowd of admirers who even tried to mythologize his character and art. Shāmlu's enthusiastic admirers, moreover, insist that his poetry is everlasting and even immortal. This article claims that critics should not function as judges of history, declaring a contemporary work of art as an immortal artefact. To this light, the article will argue that Shāmlu's innovation in poetry is not just linguistic, but rather an element that signifies his intellectual superiority. Moreover, the article examines two characteristics of Shāmlu's poetry, which could probably endanger the popularity of his poems with future generations. It, therefore, first explores the authoritative position of the poet vis-à-vis his audience; and then examines the special relationship of humans with nature.

INTRODUCTION

In the modern Persian poetry, Ahmad Shāmlu is best seen as a neo-classist whose poetry bears a distinctive structural quality, allowing for the work and at once the poet to emerge as historico-literary markers. The elements that had pushed Shāmlu's poetry to such literary significance are as follows:

- Shāmlu is one of the few poets with a distinctive language of his own. While some scholars find Nimā Yushij as the progenitor of modern Persian poetry, Shāmlu belongs to a minor crowd with a rather personal and particular language and lingual authority. Shāmlu's take on language, the sort which is regarded as a combination of the 4th and 5th century prose (Barāhani, Qāleb-e she'r-e Shāmlu, p. 895) with contemporary features and even slangs and colloquial discourse (Rezvani, pp. 179, 185-187), appears as one of the accepted poetic languages of the modern Persian poetry. Considering the notable number of current modern Persian poets who had borrowed from "linguistically authoritative" poets, one can understand Shāmlu's lingual efficiency as his lingual authority to which many later modern poets subscribed.

Moreover, Shāmlu was the poet whose lingual structure had the highest rate of subscribers.

- Shāmlu appears as a poet with intuition and insight. Although all poets in particular as all human beings have insight and intuition, especially vis-à-vis what the world is and how it works, Shāmlu emerges as a poet whose oeuvre practically engages with such concerns. More importantly, one can always find the continuation of his worldview in almost all of his works crafted throughout his life and at different stages, highlighting his fixed critical engagement with similar concerns throughout his literary life. Eventually, such critical prowess concentrates and then materializes in the form of poems, inviting other scholars to escape critical marginalia and scattered reasoning.
- Shāmlu's poetry exhibits a notable amount of creative artistry. Any positive artistry in poetry can be appreciated only if it has literary underpinnings. In other words, a poem must prove to be *one*, otherwise its intellectual themes cannot materialize. Like other major poets, Shāmlu is at first a creative poet, with artistic abilities that allow for his insight and intellectuality to come to

fruition. One, for instance, can discuss Shāmlu's skill in using various forms of poetry, creating the sound of poetry with unconventional methods (*ibid.*, pp. 187-190), and to transfer the desired message via diction and symbolism (Mortezā Kākhi in: *Az Bāmdād ...*, p. 403).

Shāmlu's poetic features, of which we counted only three, together with his socio-political vision as manifested in his poems had excessively allowed for his oeuvre to be popularized, forming a large crowd of admirers who even tried to mythologize his character and art.¹ The socio-political quality of Shāmlu's poetry had made him a symbol of political perseverance, socio-cultural presence in trials and tribulations and reliability in the contemporary history of Iran.² It is by the mythologizing spirit of the same crowd of admirers that Shāmlu and his oeuvre were reinvented to match, and at times transcend, the literary aura of some of most notable literary figures of Persian literature. Mahmud Dowlatābādī, for instance, regarded Shāmlu as "a man like Hafiz" (Dowlatābādī, p. 30). He continues: "[you] Dawn³, [you] sensation of a hidden genius of a nation that only fleetingly had the chance to exhibit its qualities, and [you] the shiniest star" (*ibid.*). Javād Mojābi notes,

It is quite notable that Shāmlu could address this necessary paradox, which gives him some social attributes and weight as he fights tyranny to improve the quality of life; and at once his work has a voice that is very personal that narrates the personal dimensions of life; the combination of these two would provide Shāmlu with the same quality and stature that would match Mowlānā's messianic eminence (Javād Mojābi in: *Bozorg shā'er az negāh-e shā'erān*, p. 27).

Zyā Movahhed is the other scholar who believes,

In Persian literature we almost always have literary lovers (most apparent in Hafiz's relation with other poets); these lovers are not real; nor has there ever been a romantic relationship. Poets as Hafiz himself argues, "kiss the face of the Moon from the distance". One can find sonnets from Hafiz that are rife with word-play. For instance,

This beautiful mark you are leaving on the face of
the lover
Will discredit a notebook full of flower
My tears that hidden behind my eyelids
Will flow down and be seen by everyone.

These lines have nothing but word-play. There is no romantic relationship and emotions. [...] and yet can be read as Shāmlu's most emotional poems that a man can produce (Zyā Movahhed in: *Dar mesrā'i kutāh beh bolandā-ye abadyat ...*, p. 357).

Shāmlu's enthusiastic admirers, moreover, insist that his poetry is everlasting and even immortal. Seyyed 'Ali Sālehi, for instance, notes that "this wise old man has reinvented and redefined love and epic for the next one hundred generations after him" (Sālehi, p. 338). Jamshid Barzegar notes, "not just yesterday, but today and all tomorrow, the past generation and my generation and after it, will find Shāmlu unique just as much as Ferdowsi and Hafiz and Nezāmi and Nimā (Āftāb rā gu keh barnayāyad ... , p. 105). Manuchehr Ātashi

too finds Shāmlu's poetry an "eternal template" (Ātashi, p. 62). While one should disregard eternity as an attribute of any work of art as well as any intellectual product, let alone Shāmlu's, as all matter is subject to termination, and thus assigning immortality to Shāmlu's poetry will take us one step beyond exaggeration and praising nothing but hyperbolic faux bravura, immortality and endurance appears as a quality on which Shāmlu's contemporaries can't pass a conclusive judgement.⁴ Only history can tell whose works remain influential and for how long they remain significant among their audience after the artist's death. Without doubt, if history's direction was in line with comments of an artist's admirers there would be thousands of Divans as influential as Hafiz's.

One can examine the endurance and immortality of artworks only cautiously and by considering mere possibilities. This article too has a careful examination of Shāmlu's poetry, exploring the two elements that might challenge his poetry as an immortal construct, and gradually decrease the popularity of his works. Whatever the result of this research, it must be noted this exploration is essentially based on possibilities and cannot function as a judgement or an authoritative condition. Moreover, this article neither intends nor hopes to deprecate Shāmlu's literary genius in any form and as it is clear from the early stages of this article, I have respected Shāmlu as one of Iran's notable literary figures of modern Persian poetry. This article, therefore, aims to provide a rather different look at Shāmlu's art from those hyperbolic accounts offers by his fanatic admirers who blend fair literary criticism with exaggerated narratives of immortality. In other words, this article is structured to remind us the ways in which we can be fair and logical while praising historical and literary geniuses such as Shāmlu.

Dogmatic readings and commentaries on Shāmlu's oeuvre as examined previously have made a fair reading of the same material essential. There are other notable factors that had made examinations like this article essentially needed critiques, inviting a wider and larger crowd of scholars to have a deeper and more analytical look at Shāmlu's genuine oeuvre.

Shāmlu's status as a literary genius in the contemporary Persian literature coupled with a wave of admirers who praise his work even at times of criticism has literally either banned critics from offering proper criticism or softened their critiques, forming a eulogistic commentary on his messianic social and personal character. This has formed what I shall call 'escape critique' in Iranian society, introducing criticism even among literati as negative commentary. Hence, Shāmlu's swarm of admirers and critics share one concept: critiquing his work is tantamount to an act of cultural disparagement and disrespecting his legacy. The other reason that had stopped the emergence of proper criticism has been the poet's reactionary attitude toward his works being critiqued, as he personally negated any form of criticism throughout his life. Critics who had read and commented on his works were either orally repudiated or formally abjured in the form of written responses by the poet, pushing them to muffled marginalia.

Finally, the number of critiques on Shāmlu's poetry, compared to his social and cultural presence, is very meager. Generally, all critiques address the form and the language of the work; in other words, one can hardly find any critical reading of the content. This, therefore, shows that either critics were either blinded by Shāmlu's social and cultural stature, imposing a self-induced sense of silence on them, or couldn't afford to find any fault with the content and the ideological pattern of the work. One more fact has contributed to the poverty of the content critique of Shāmlu's lyric works: The critique of Shāmlu's poems comes mainly from the literati. Rarely have there been any instances in which a notable philosopher, historian, or sociologist has studied Shāmlu's works from the perspective of his own discipline. Such an investigation, of course, would have been based on the content of Shāmlu's poetry, in contrast to literary critiques, which, for the most part, take into account only formal aspects. The present article, which expresses critical opinions about the content of Shāmlu's lyrics or Shāmlu's view and thinking, may be a step in the right direction, towards correcting the approach to critical engagement with Shāmlu's lyrical heritage and towards reviving the content critique of it.

SHĀMLU'S VANTAGE AND HIS AUDIENCE

The first element that could mar the longevity of a work of art, especially in Shāmlu's case, is the stance the artist takes vis-à-vis his audience and how he communicates with them. Shāmlu finds himself as an all-knowing individual and at once as the one who commiserates with those who neither know nor understand their world; and yet again feels responsible for saving this ill-informed crowd. This mentality dominates Shāmlu's poetry yet with a spectrum of presence, vacillating between sympathy and pure sense of superiority, the latter of which being the dominant frame of mind:

I wish I could
 For a moment I wish I could
 On my shoulders
 Lay this swarm of people,
 Showing them corners of this world
 So they could see with their own eyes
 Where their actual sun rests
 And believe me.
 I wish
 I could!
 (Shāmlu, Marsyeh-hā-ye khāk, p. 658,
 "Bā cheshm-hā ...")
 A loud song is coming from
 The sky
 With its reechoed sound, brothers!
 I'm staying here to say that
 Although I am far from where I should be
 I am a rebellious prisoner of my own life
 Without me,
 The sun passes over the paddy fields of Zirāb⁵ valley
 Lonesome and heart-broken.
 (Shāmlu, Ebrāhim dar ātash, p. 732, "Gharibāneh")

At the same time Shāmlu sees himself as the victim of the same people whom he wants to save:

I shouted:
 "O, passenger!
 Why did whom in the chains of fortune, whom I loved
 terribly,
 Struggled so hard with me?
 What should I do with them?"
 (Shāmlu, Lahzeh-hā va hamisheh, p. 442, "Vasl 3")
 This is how he sometimes gets disturbed and insults them:
 Your love calms me down.
 It also horrifies me
 Because this herd was not worth to me
 To die without knowing you.
 (Shāmlu, Āydā: Derakht va khanjar va khātereh!, p. 530,
 "Shabāneh 6")
 Oh, you people on the death's door!
 That your hideous hopes
 Make you feel alive again!
 I do not speak of demise
 [Or of you –who are the outset of inexistence
 And are dragging the horrors of a century
 Full of unhappiness and unshamedness
 Like a female dog
 Bearing the tang of her femininity.] -
 I speak of the vain hope
 That postpones your death which is your saviour:
 "- What if the passenger you are waiting for
 Would've returned back halfway along the road?"
 (ibid., p. 532, "Shabāneh 7")
 Even the direct audience of Shāmlu's poetry were not
 safe from his aggression:
 What's the reward for this quest at the price of my life?
 What's the achievement of this path?
 Singing a song
 To the deafs
 And bringing the blinds
 Some colorful dolls out of a mended sack as souvenirs?
 (Shāmlu, Madāyeh-e biseleh, pp. 954-955, "Tavāzi-ye
 radd-e momtadd-e ...")
 In a totalitarian society of Iran wherein people tend to
 mimic every authoritative discourse, the pivotal position
 Shāmlu considers for himself with respect to his audience
 had served his art by reinventing his poetry as a discourse
 that empowers the masses; hence, the rise in the number of
 admirers who follow any lingual authority and literary au-
 tonomy. Nevertheless, the same level of authoritarianism
 prevalent in Shāmlu's poetry not only would repel any intel-
 lectually mature reader but make his art more artistically im-
 penetrable and thus less of an art. Yet, in a world that adver-
 tises individualism and enables people to indulge in egoism
 by claiming more rights of various kind on a daily basis, if
 one discusses Shāmlu's commanding discourse and autono-
 mous literature it will be easily predictable for the number of
 his admirers to shrink, even regarding such a discourse as a
 barrier that had rid the art of its artistry.
 In critiquing the modern Persian poetry and its dis-
 course, Shāmlu's lingual vantage has been examined as an

autonomous superiority. The first scholar who recognized such a case of lingual superiority was Rezā Barāhani who regarded Shāmlu's language as "the one with messianic features", perhaps owing much to Shāmlu's efforts to translate the old and new testament (Barāhani, Qāleb-e she'r-e Shāmlu, p. 905). However, the examples provided here and many others found in Shāmlu's works direct us to one concept, that it is the poet who has pampered his artist and messianic vision in such case of a lingual authority, and that discourse is nothing but a symptom of this vision rather than the cause. Shāmlu talks in a "prophetic" mode for he believes in his prophetic role. In "Lowh", a poem from his *Āydā: Derakht va khanjar va khātereh!* (pp. 578-587), Shāmlu enacts the role in a play lest the audience forgets his role or doubts in his capacity. In this poem, the poet descends from a ladder into darkness and waits in a foyer, preaching the large crowd. He holds a clay tablet and invites people to submit to its commandments. The people, as having been repetitively depicted in religious fables and parables, represent and embodied ignorance and lack of knowledge and thus disobey his request. In this respect, the poet's prophetic efforts, whose teaching are not celestial but rather very earthly, fail instantly. A few lines in "Va hasrati 4" from *Marsyeh-hā-ye khāk* depict the poet as a messiah fighting for his people:

I lived with anger and controversy.
And when the judges
Condemned humanity
To prove their absolute justice
And the kings
Beheaded the condemned
To display their power,
I consoled the moribund.
(p. 670)

It would be difficult to conceive that future generations will be as submissive and dependent as previous generations in believing in poets' messianic call to submission.

THE MAN AND NATURE IN SHĀMLU'S POETRY

The second feature which might mar interest in Shāmlu's poetry through time is the relationship between the man and nature. Humanism has rightly been considered as one of the most notable elements in Shāmlu's poetry. Years ago Barāhani noted that "Shāmlu has given his poem to man" (Barāhani, *Namāyandeh-ye vāqe'i-ye she'r-e emruz*, p. 864). Mohammad Mokhtāri too wrote that Shāmlu has "dedicated his poetry to praising human, especially geniuses" (Mokhtāri, p. 272). Sepānlu believes "Shāmlu has provided man with his social poetry" and finds "humanism" as Shāmlu's "grand legacy" (*Sāhebnazarān darbāreh-ye Shāmlu miguyand*, p. 34). Mahmud Mo'taqedi also claims that in "Shāmlu's poetic legacy is a mixture of insight and love to human" (Mo'taqedi, p. 534). Indeed, Shāmlu has examined humans nature and their conditions more than anything else, reminding the man of their actual sacred significance. The grave difference between the actual state of the man especially as depicted in Iran and the way it is being narrated in Shāmlu's poetry highlights the poet's detailed perception of humanity: in Shāmlu's poetry the man cannot be disrespected

nor can any insult be forgiven; yet, in reality, the basic rights of humans are being "sold for the price nothing" (Shāmlu, *Ebrāhim dar ātash*, p. 746, "Eshārati").

Shāmlu's perception of man, despite its appreciative state, in comparison to the poet's perception of nature provides a radical vision of the relationship between the man and nature that will degrade our perception of his poetry through time. In other words, Shāmlu's puritanical perception of the man and his angelical condition will only depict nature as his throne, if not possession, the sort which can be treated in whatever way deemed fit by the owner. Shāmlu's human can be considered as the sole objective of creation of the world, the absence of whom will only rid the world of any potential meaning:

In the absence of human
There shall be no character for the world
(Shāmlu, *Madāyeh-ebiseleh*, p. 928, "Tarjomān-e fāje'eh")

This imagined form of man is neither responsibility for his habitat nor for its inhabitants; rather, it seems that until his mid-career as a poet Shāmlu could only perceive of man based on his ability to usurp and tame the surrounding nature. This is a nature that can't be further belittled:

Is the man not a miracle?
The man ... a devil that dethroned God, enslaved the world and tore apart all prisons! – destroyed all mountains, broke all the seas, devoured all fires and vaporized all waters!
(Shāmlu, *Havā-ye tāzeh*, pp. 271-272, "Ghazal-e ākharin enzevā 1")

[...] he rose in pride and claimed: now me!
The man! King of the earth!
And all animals were scared of his shriek and the pride which was embedded in his scream dominated all animals [...].
Then all the soil and hills submitted to the man, and the mountain submitted to the man, and the sea and waters submitted to the man [...] and all animals submitted to the man, and all that in waters and earth and heavens became his, and he became the ruler of all the waters and earths, and the world became his [...].

Then he turned the earth and left his mark on the face of all the waters and rivers, and conquered everything, and recreated the world in one instant [...].
(Shāmlu, *Āydā: Derakht va khanjar va khātereh!*, pp. 542-543)

Gradually, Shāmlu balances his stance, perhaps due mostly to contemplating on social and political hardships, and considers the value of man in appreciating social and cultural values. The miracle of the man now lies in something other than conquering the world:

Make miracles happen
As you are able to make miracles happen
.....
And justice
Is the final miracle.
(Shāmlu, *Tarāneh-hā-ye kuchak-e ghorbat*, p. 831, "Khatābeh-ye āsān, dar omid")

Yet until the very end the poet ties his poetics to human relationships, and relinquishes having any sense of responsibility for other living beings. In his final book of poetry,

Hadis-e biqarāri-ye Māhān, again he counts the creation of man as the sole objective of creation:

You are human

.....

Existence

Measures itself and its meaning with you.

(pp. 1029-1030, "Āshti")

And nature is regarded as ignorable and worthy of attention:

You are not the ocean

Reflective of an internal darkness.

Nor are you the mountain

Representing a barren rigidity.

(*ibid.*, p. 1029, "Āshti")

In this respect, in spite of all the man-induced catastrophic destructions and at turn of the century, and in spite of all the extinctions caused by human, the poet still regards human as a heavenly gift to the world, expecting the world to appreciate such a gift:

Neither just nor fair

Was the world a place to be

Before we appear in to be.

We considered the far-fetching justice

And beauty came to be the remaining solace.

(Shāmlu, *Dar āstāneh*, p. 983, "Na 'ādelāneh na zibā bud ...")

It is needless to say that Shāmlu appears to be quite unfamiliar or unaware of such ecocritical concerns founded in the 1960s in the west and developed quite rapidly in the world. Under such ecocritical circumstances, the modern man finds his presence as a growing threat to the existence of the world he had inhabited, understanding the fact that his existence is in a direct reciprocal relationship with the environment, and his responsibility to save it.

Shāmlu's perception of the position of man in the realm of existence and the relationship between the man and nature sounds ancient and debatable not only in the face of the 20th-century theories but also superficially and in their face-value; they are inherently pre-modern. It is in the pre-historic time that the man found himself as the center of the universe and worthy of all praises, advocated by Plato who found no value for other living beings. Aristotle's vision wherein the man and the earth were considered as the center of the universe easily highlights the egoistic nature of pre-modern man. Moreover, the belief that the creation of man was the sole objective of creation owes its existence to such Aristotelian vision.

With the onset of modernity and a rising state of science, and from the moment the man realized the depth and grandness of universe on the one hand and the diminutive size of the earth among galaxies on the other, and from the moment the theory of evolution was introduced and familiarized the man with other species as his kinsmen, the man became humbler, breaking the distance between his perception of his existence and that of his surroundings. The catastrophic environmental consequences of industrialization too imposed a rather critical understanding on human's responsibility for his surrounding and life, even though he has not yet refrained from his environmentally destructive habits.

The concluding remarks direct our attention to the fact that Shāmlu's perception of a possible relationship between the man and the surrounding nature only echoes an ancient vision that situates the man as the core of all creations, owning all that is and can be; this perception is far from not only any 21st century mentality but also any ideological commands – even the Marxist- Leninists who believed in the destruction of camps for the sake of man's progress have reconsidered their visions. Hence, it is quite predictable that this anthropocentric perception of existence worsens through time, damaging Shāmlu's poetry and art as a result. It is not the case of how future generations will disregard Shāmlu's perception of the relationship between the man and nature as an outdated model as we now read many historical narratives and enjoy them per se; rather, it is the case of literary and cultural anachronism, introducing Shāmlu as an artist who has lost the battle of temporal awareness to his contemporaries. Shāmlu's vision of the man and his relationship with nature is atavistic and incongruous at best, and hence unacceptable; time will only make it more incongruous and out of place.

In "Dar āstāneh" from the same-titled volume of poetry, it seems Shāmlu is rejecting his old visions and perceptions by way of introspection, re-examining his previous frames of mind vis-à-vis nature and its relationship with the man:

My tied hands were not free to embrace any open view

Every bird and every song and every spring

Every harvest moon and every other morning

Every mountain and every tree and every other human.

(pp. 974-975)

In the same collection of poems, we also encounter "Kholāseh-ye ahvāl", a poem from the last years of Shāmlu's life, which reflects the poet's serious doubts about the value of man:

I consumed the air,

I consumed the ocean,

I consumed the planet,

I consumed God

And left nothing,

Not even a reason to curse me.

(p. 976)

CONCLUSION

Literary values in the form of cultural artefacts and social legacies hidden in every artist's artistic work should not discourage critics from providing a logical critique of such works, replacing the art of criticism with hyperbolic faux eulogies. Most importantly, critics should not function as judges of history, declaring a contemporary work of art as an immortal artefact. Shāmlu's poetry is not an exception either. He is, without a doubt, one of the most notable literary figures in the modern Persian poetry with an exemplary artistic caliber in various layers. Nevertheless, like other notable artists, there are features that might affect his artistic legacy through time. Introducing the artist as even a supernatural being with superior faculties on the one hand, and falsifying the relationship between man and nature on the other are two of such features. Shāmlu's messianic language has never been hidden from anyone interested in literature. Moreover, depicting a propri-

etorial relationship between the man and nature, disregarding the irrefutable significance of nature has become an inseparable literary element in Shāmlu's poetry with a multiplicity of examples. It is entirely possible to predict how future generations of readers as current generations would reject not only the hypothetic case of artist's superiority to his audience but also his deprecating attitude toward nature and the role it plays in human's development. Regardless of these claims, it is history's function as an unbiased judge to identify the appealing factors in Shāmlu's poetry for the generations to come.

END NOTES

- 1 In fact, it can be argued that the socio-political aspect of Shāmlu's poetry contributed not less to his fame and popularity than the literary quality of his works.
- 2 However, it should be noted that Shāmlu's socio-political commitment was not limited to his lyrical works but went well beyond his literature. Amongst other things, he spent many years as a journalist, enhancing Iranians' political awareness, and was arrested after the military coup in 1953 for his political activities. Shāmlu's courageous public political statements in difficult historical moments are still present in the memory of his followers and decisively shape his public image in Iran.
- 3 Bāmdād (Dawn) was the pen name of Shāmlu.
- 4 In all fairness, among Shāmlu's admirers, there were those who had a much more credible description of him after his passing, examining his life and oeuvre logically. Mohammad Qā'ed, for instance, in "Mardi keh kholāseh-ye khod bud" (The Man Who was his Own Summary), explores different aspects of Shāmlu's life, be they positive or even socially detrimental, providing a reliable portrayal of the poet. Sadly, however, the number of such fair commentators fades in comparison to the fanatic admirers.
- 5 A town in the north of Iran.

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