

Tamta Bokuchava

G. Tsereteli Institute of Oriental Studies

MUSLIM REFORMERS IN TBILISI – THE CASE OF THE MAGAZINE 'MOLLĀ NASREDDIN'*

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In the early 20th century, a group of artists and intellectuals reinterpreted a Middle Eastern folklore figure to construct a reformist and anti-colonial Muslim discourse with a strong emphasis on social and political reform. Their periodical *Mollā Nasreddin* touched tens of thousands of individuals in the Muslim world through folklore, visual art, and satire, changing the mindset of an entire generation.

The newly founded journal soon assembled the most advanced team of Azerbaijani intellectuals. Along with the editor, Jalil Memedqolizādeh, famous writers and poets such as Alakbar Sabir, Abdulrahimbey Hakverdiyev, Ali Nazmi, Aligulu Gamkusari, Mamed Said Ordubadi, Omar Faik Nemanzadeh, Salman Mumtaz and others were published on the pages of the magazine under different pseudonyms.

Mollā Nasreddin was not the organ of any particular political party, though the editor and nearly all its staff were partial towards social democracy. Most of the writers and poets belonged to the Shi'i Muslim community, which was also the journal's primary audience. However, the co-founder Ömar Fāeq was a Sunni Muslim, and the two principal artists, Schmerling and Rotter, were Christian and Jewish, respectively.

Contributors belonged to different social classes. Some came from working class families, but most lived a more middle-class life when they joined *Mollā Nasreddin*. Editor Jalil Memedqolizādeh, aka Mirza Jalil (1866–1932), was an author, playwright and one of the founders of the School of Critical Realism in Azerbaijani literature. Ömar Fāeq Nemānzādeh (1872–1937), co-founder and associate editor, was an experienced journalist who had studied in Turkey. Mirza Jalil's wife, Hamideh Khānum (1873–1955), was a pioneering advocate for women's rights. Another notable contributor was Mirza Alakbar Taherzadeh Saber (1862–1911), a famous Azerbaijani-language poet of the 20th century. The illustrations were made by Joseph Rotter, Oskar Schmerling, and Azim Azimzadeh.

Jalil Memedqolizādeh was born in 1866 in Nakhichevan. First, he enrolled in a church school and at the age of thirteen he moved to the public school of Nakhichivani, where he learned the Russian language. In 1882, he enrolled in the Transcaucasian Teachers' Seminary of Gori, which had a very significant impact on the formation of his worldview. After finishing school in 1887, he started working as a teacher in a rural school in Yerevan province. In 1903, Jalil Memedqolizādeh started working in the local Azerbaijani newspaper

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Shagri Rus (East of Russia) in Tbilisi.¹ In 1905, together with Omar Faik Nemanzadeh and with the financial help of Meshedi Alaskar Bagirov, they bought a printing house, and in 1906, they started publishing a satirical journal - *Mollā Nasreddin*. The magazine's name was largely dictated by the fact that the name of a well-known and beloved folk hero was often used when it was considered undesirable to refer to the original name of the author of an article.

Omar Faik Nemanzadeh was born in the village of Agara in the Meskheti region of Georgia in a family of Sunni farmers. In 1882, at the request of his mother, he went to study in Fatih madrasa in Istanbul. Shortly, he asked his uncle to send him to the reformist *Darüşşafaka* (Darüşşafaka - a combination of high school and college), where Omar Faik Nemanzadeh received a relatively modern, secular education. For several years, he worked in the post office of Galata and got involved in the Young Turks movement. Fearing arrest, he soon returned to the South Caucasus, where he spent the following years working in various cities, Shemakha, Ganja, Tbilisi, etc. When they decided to publish the journal, they applied for the license only in the name of Mirza Jalil, because Omar Faik Nemanzadeh had been arrested several times during this period and was known for his radical views. He published articles in the magazine under forty pseudonyms, including *Mollā Nasreddin*, which he shared with Mirza Jelil. Most of the uncompromising articles published in the journal belong to Omar Faik Nemanzadeh.

Alakbar Taherzadeh Sabir was born in 1862 in Shemakha, Shirvan province. He received his education at the New Method School, founded by the poet Azim Shirvani, where he also started writing poems. Sabir was a popular poet, orator, and worked as a eulogist at religious ceremonies. At an early age, he visited a significant part of Central Asia (Samarkand, Bukhara) and the Middle East (Iran, Iraq) with his brothers and mother, which gave him an idea of the social life of the region. After returning to Shemakha, he married his wife and started a soap business, but he did not stop writing poems. The Russian Revolution of 1905 was an important milestone in his work. Alakbar Sabir actively returned to writing poems on social topics, which significantly enriched his writing style. The years 1906-1911 are considered to be the most successful in his work when he actively collaborated with *Mollā Nasreddin* journal along with other Azerbaijani-language publishing houses. He signed the poems published in the magazine with various satirical pseudonyms, such as "Hop Hop", "Pillar of Religion", "Weeping laughter", "Old Uncle", "Old Iranian" and "Scholar".²

Alakbar Sabir is considered a revolutionary of Azerbaijani literature. In terms of satirical techniques, Sabir uses almost all the forms and methods that his predecessors used. He uses qasideh and ghazel, mathnavi and ruba'i equally in his works. Sometimes he parodies a famous poem, or, more precisely, he takes the first line and writes a poem of parallel structure.

Tiflis, where *Mollā Nasreddin* was published and most members of its staff lived, was home to multiple diasporic communities with sophisticated artistic cultures. The city's entrenched artistic reputation protected the writers and artists of *Mollā Nasreddin* and

¹ Janet Afary & Kamran Afary, *Mollā Nasreddin and the creative Cauldron of Transcaucasia*, 2019, British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 82-85.

² J. Afary and K. Afary, *Mollā Nasreddin*, 101

provided them with a safe space to explore their creativity. As Mirza Jalil noted, the journal could not have been published further south, closer to Baku and the Iranian border, where a larger Muslim community would have shut down the radical periodical. Even in Tiflis, Mirza Jalil and Ömar Fâeq had to be extremely careful. Their print shop was located in the Armenian community, and Mirza Jalil's residence was in the Georgian sector of the city, sheltering them from the occasional outbursts of the more traditional classes of their own community.³

From 1906 to 1912, around 370 issues of *Mollā Nasreddin* were published in Tiflis. The paper began with a modest weekly printing of 1,000 copies on 7 April 1906, but in a month, was printing 25,000 copies per week.⁴ In this most radical stage of the paper, *Mollā Nasreddin* lambasted politicians, landowners, and clerics of the South Caucasus and revealed the heartrending lives of women and children who suffered from the indignities of a highly patriarchal culture.

These articles were followed by periodic attacks on the editor from both the tsarist authorities and Iranian and Transcaucasian Shi'i clerics, leading to censorship, occasional closures, and even confiscation of the paper on the Iranian border.

³ Hamideh Khanum Javanshir, *Awake : a Moslem woman's rare memoir of her life and partnership with the editor of Molla Nasreddin, the most influential satirical journal of the Caucasus and Iran, 1907-1931*, Translated by Hasan Javadi and Willem M Floor, 2016, Washington DC : Mage Publishers, 74-77

⁴ J. Afary and K. Afary, *Mollā Nasreddin*, 64