



'The Female Rumi' and Feminine Mysticism: 'God's Weaver' by Parvin I'tisami

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ABSTRACT

Parvin I'tisami (1907–1941), the first important twentieth-century woman poet of Iran, was well versed in classical Persian poetry. Her knowledge of English language and education at the American school for girls as well as her father's translations from foreign literature contributed to her appreciation of modern ideas, including women's rights. Unlike some of her contemporaries in the early twentieth century who tried to revolutionize the form of Persian poetry, she expanded the potentiality of poetic language in its traditional forms. I'tisami's profound knowledge of mystical Persian literature and her awareness of gender inequality as well as her familiarity with Western literature, particularly Walt Whitman, contributed to introducing a character in the poem 'God's Weaver', a spider who possessed characteristics of a female and those of a mystic. Through this character, I'tisami formed an association between femininity and mysticism and challenged the patriarchal system, particularly the patriarchal discourse of Persian mysticism and the lethargy of the (mostly male) mystics.

I'tisami: mysticism and women's rights

'Is the poem from Rumi?'

'No, it is from the female Rumi'¹

This conversation occurred between I'tisami and her brother. Significantly, she calls herself 'the female Rumi'. Her poetry indicates her familiarity with mystical Persian poetry, including Sana'i (1080–1131/1141), Attar (1145–1220) and Rumi (1207–1273). The critics' acknowledgement of the mystical aspect of her poetry can be traced back to Bahar's preface to the first edition of her *Divan* in 1935. Islamic mysticism, also known as Sufism, can be read as a response to the strict rules of established religion and the hypocritical adherence to the Islamic rituals. Love and knowledge are two main concepts of mystical literature. 'Love is a way of gaining knowledge about the desired object' i.e. God.² Such knowledge is gained through 'a form of intuitive perception' rather than reason. Here comes annihilation; to be truly in love means to focus completely 'on the Beloved without

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¹ Abu al-Fath I'tisami, 'Nāmi-yi Āqā-yi Abu al-Fath-i I'tisami', in *Divan-i Parvin-i I'tisami*, ed. Heshmat Moayyad (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1365/1986), 276.

² J. T. P. de Bruijn, *Persian Sufi Poetry: An Introduction to the Mystical Use of Classical Persian Poems* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1997), 71.

any regard for one's own well-being'. The lover, at such a stage of self-denial, finds 'the common standards of moral and religious behaviour' irrelevant. 'The most striking feature' of the lover at such a stage is the 'disregard of values and rules of conduct which are sacred to the pious Muslim'³ Such an attitude leads to Qalandarī. The same idea enters mystical Persian poetry through the celebration and vindication of the infamous characters, including the drunkard and the thief. Mystical themes frequently appear in I'tisamī's poetry. For instance, Qalandarī, forms a major theme in I'tisamī's poems, including 'Mast-o Hushyār', 'Dozd va Qāzī', 'Dukkān-i Riyā', and 'Nā-āzmūdih'.⁴ The present paper will discuss other mystical aspects of her poetry too.

Women's involvement with Islamic mysticism has contributed to it. As Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya (714–801), the first female Sufi, is recognized 'for her introduction of the theme of love into the Islamic mystical tradition',⁵ I'tisamī's engagement with mystical poetry has contributed to this tradition through challenging gender boundaries and constraints. Through a close reading of I'tisamī's poetry, the present paper shows how she weaves mysticism to the fabric of her poetry in order to shed light on the modern woman poet's contribution to Persian mystical poetry.

In addition to mystical themes and language, the issue of women's rights was also among I'tisamī's poetic concerns. What follows in this section provides an account of her life and various factors contributing to her poetic career to demonstrate her concern for the issue of women's rights. This will lay the groundwork for examination of the poet's feminist contribution to mystical Persian poetry in the next sections. I'tisamī's father, I'tisam al-Mulk, contributed to her poetic career largely because his writings and translation introduced her to women's rights. He was among the first to publish on the issue in Persian, and his translation of *Tahrir-l-mar'a* (The Liberation of Women) (1899) 'was among the earliest books dedicated solely to the issues of women written or translated in Iran'.⁶ His daughter contributed to the same movement through her poetry, including 'Bāz Īstādih-im' (We Are Still Standing),⁷ 'Nahāl-i Ārizū' (Sapling of Ambition) and 'Ganj-i 'Iffat' (Treasure of Chastity).⁸

The social and political upheavals of Iran, as another influential factor on I'tisamī's poetry, contributed to her interest in the issue of women's rights.⁹ During her short life she witnessed a turbulent period covering some of the most significant events in the history of modern Iran, including the Constitutional Revolution, the 1908 prorogation and bombardment of the Majlis, the First World War, the 1921 coup d'état, and Riza Shah's modernization and autocratic rule. Through witnessing such events she developed sensitivity towards the sociopolitical issues of the nation.¹⁰ Among the developments that took place in this significant period in the history of modern Iran was the change in the attitude

³de Bruijn, 72.

⁴Maryam Musharraf, *Parvin-i I'tisami: Payiguzar-i Adabiyat-i Ni'ukilasik-i Iran* (Tehran: Sukhan, 1391/2012), 197.

⁵Claudia Yaghoobi, *Subjectivity in 'Attār, Persian Sufism, and European Mysticism* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2017), 45.

⁶Behnam M. Fomeshi, *The Persian Whitman: Beyond a Literary Reception* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2019), 68.

⁷Husayni attributed this poem, published in *'Alam-i Nisvan*, to I'tisamī. Maryam Husayni, 'Shi'r-i Fiministi-yi Nuyafatih-i az Parvin I'tisamī', *Nashri-yi Zan dar Fargang va Hunar* 2.1 (1389/2010): 5–22.

⁸Also known as 'Zan dar Iran' (Woman in Iran).

⁹Asghar Dadbihi and Ali Miransari, 'Parvin I'tisamī', in *Da'irat al-Ma'arif-i Buzurg-i Islami* vol. 13, (Tehran: Markaz-i Dā'irat al-Ma'arif-i Islāmī, 1367/1988), 612.

¹⁰Behnam M. Fomeshi, 'Parvin E'tesamī', in *The Literary Encyclopaedia* (2018)

<https://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=14067>

of women towards their position in society. Even when she was a child, she sat by her father while he discussed social and political issues of the country with his friends.¹¹ Considering her father's writings and the post-constitutional context, women's rights would have certainly been one of the issues discussed in such meetings. In the poem 'Dū Maḥzar' (Two Presences), which is a dialogue between a wife and her judge husband, I'tisami criticizes the corruption of the judicial system, highlights the worth of housework, and deems the role of a housewife more significant than that of a judge. This poem is an example of how I'tisami connected women's rights with other social and political issues of the nation. In other poems, including 'Firishtih-yi Uns' (Angel of Affection), she emphasized the education of women. After the decree of Kashf-i Hijāb (unveiling) was issued by Riza Shah on 8 January 1936, I'tisami wrote the poem 'Ganj-i 'Iffat', in which she called chādūr پوشیده (pūsīdih) 'frowsy/tattered' to criticize the traditional view of veiling. The poem considered modesty different from and more important than hijāb and the covering of the body.

Another influential factor contributing to I'tisami's sensitivity towards women's rights was Iran Bethel, the American school for girls in Tehran. In 1921 she went to Iran Bethel, which was established by American Missionaries in 1874. After graduation from the school in 1924, she worked there as a teacher. Studying and teaching at the American school contributed to her knowledge of Western literature and ideas. The school published the journal 'Alam-i Nisvan (The World of Women) for more than a decade. Its aim was to educate Iranian women, familiarize them with the progress of their counterparts in other countries, and encourage them to change the situation of women for the better. Graduates of the school were regular contributors to the journal. A frequent piece in the journal was 'Akhhbār-i Taraqqiyāt-i Nisvān' (News on the Progress of Women). The content of the journal can give one an idea of the teaching materials and opinions expressed in the school. With more than forty sale representatives throughout the country, this journal contributed to the movement of Iranian women nationwide. It also educated the students and graduates of the school, including I'tisami. It was in such an atmosphere that I'tisami, in the graduation ceremony in 1924, gave a speech titled 'Zan va Tārīkh' (Woman and History), on the different situations of women in the East and in the West. She also read 'Nahāl-i Ārizū', the poem she wrote for the graduation ceremony. Both pieces were published in 'Alam-i Nisvan. The content of the poem in support of women's rights and its critique of the patriarchy were so controversial that her father did not include it in the first edition of her *Divan* in 1935 so as not to enrage the clergy and common people.¹² I'tisami has been criticized for too blindly endorsing patriarchy in her poetry.¹³ Poems such as 'Nahāl-i Ārizū' provide counterexamples to such readings of her poetry.

This account of I'tisami's life and various influences on her poetic career demonstrates her concern for the issue of women's rights, manifested in her poetry. I'tisami's profound knowledge of mystical Persian literature and her awareness of gender inequalities as well as her familiarity with Western literature, particularly Walt Whitman, contributed to

¹¹ Musharraf, *Parvin-i I'tisami*, 120.

¹² Jalal Matini, 'Nāmih-hāyi Parvin I'tisami va Chand Nukhtih Darbārih-yi Shir va Zindigāni-yi Vay', *Iranshenasi* 13.1 (1380/2001): 4–5.

¹³ Leonardo Alishan, 'Parvin E'tesami, The Magna Mater, and the Culture of the Patriarchs', in *Once a Dewdrop: Essays on the Poetry of Parvin E'tesami*, ed. Heshmat Moayyad (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1994), 46.

introducing a poetic character that challenges the patriarchal system,¹⁴ particularly, as the present paper shows, the patriarchal discourse of Persian mysticism and the lethargy of the (mostly male) mystics.

Spider in 'God's Weaver': an energetic female mystic

I'tisami's most famous works belong to the *munāziri* (débat) genre. In those poems she creates a debate between 'two emblematic entities opposed to one another in an important character trait'.¹⁵ 'Julāy-i Khudā' (God's Weaver), a poem in rhyming couplets (maṣnavī) with a spider as protagonist, is one such poem.¹⁶ Through her creation of a spider character which possesses qualities of a female and those of a mystic, I'tisami formed an association between femininity and mysticism.

'God's Weaver', a debate between a spider and a lazy person, can be divided into four parts. Part One depicts a scene in which the lazy person looks at the industrious spider. The persona's description of the lazy person starts the poem: 'languid,/weary, and feeble, yet able-bodied'.¹⁷ This character stands in clear contrast with the other character of the poem, a spider 'above the door, warmly at work'. Part One grants the lazy person with just one *bayt* (distich) and devotes the rest to a celebration of the spider. The lazy person's derision of the spider's activity and product forms Part Two. He acknowledges the fine intricacy of the spider's web but derides its fragility. The lazy person goes further and gives the spider some pieces of advice. The spider's response to the lazy person's criticism forms Part Three. This part deals primarily with the value of time and human endeavour to make the best of the limited time one is granted in this short life. Part Four is the culmination of the spider's argument in the previous part.¹⁸ 'Opportunities fly away at lightning speed./.../Many are the days that have no tomorrow./If we let go the cash capital that is today/what shall we do when there's no tomorrow?' This can be read as the riposte to the lazy person's advice to the spider in Part Two: 'Go rest today, there is tomorrow too'. According to Part Four, the active creature is the winner of the debate between a lazy person and a spider.

A close reading of 'God's Weaver' provides the reader with various points suggesting that the spider in this poem is female.¹⁹ She is a 'weaver', 'placed behind the door', working with a 'spindle', 'cooking', and hanging 'drapes'. The spider is described as 'hanging' a پرده (pardih), the Persian term for 'curtain', 'drape', 'respect', and 'hymen', signifying both 'veil' and 'female virginity' and closely associated with femininity.²⁰ 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 the works of

¹⁴Behnam M. Fomeshi, "Till the Gossamer Thread You Fling Catch Somewhere": Parvin E'tesami's Creative Reception of Walt Whitman', *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 35: (2018) 267–275. <https://doi.org/10.13008/0737-0679.2290>

¹⁵Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, *Recasting Persian Poetry: Scenarios of Poetic Modernity in Iran* (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, 1995), 161–62.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷The English translation of 'God's Weaver' cited in this chapter 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.

¹⁸Karimi-Hakkak, 172.

¹⁹Ibid., 165.

²⁰Ali Asghar Seyed-Gohrab. *Laylī and Majnūn: Love, Madness, and Mystic Longing in Nizāmī's Epic Romance* (Brill: Leiden, 2003).

Ferdowsi and Vahshi, one can find references to the spindle as a feminine tool. Furthermore, Rumi, Sanayi and Nizami mentioned the femininity-related characteristics of a spindle to highlight the masculinity-related characteristics of a dagger, mace, spear and arrow, which are the tools of male valour. These poets referred to 'spindle' as a derogatory term, as an insult to men who were lacking in 'manly' characteristics such as bravery and vigour and, as the result, must join the group of 'the feeble sex'.²¹ However, through I'tisami's poetic techniques (which I will return to in the following parts) the 'feminine metaphor of spinning is elevated from the level of mere duty and drudgery to the status of an accomplishment'.²² Among the lazy person's criticism is 'none shall see you behind this door,/none shall call you any kind of artist'. This line highlights the feminine aspect of the spider: a female artist who is 'severely restricted to the domestic sphere and not recognized as an artist by the patriarchal system'.²³

Present in the Persian literary tradition, the spider signifies various concepts. It is seen in classical Persian poetry mostly as the weaver of fine webs and sometimes as the hunter of insects. In the classical usage 'the spider's web most frequently exemplifies the ephemerality of human work'.²⁴ This concept has its root in a Quranic parable in a Surah named '*Ankabūt*', after the spider. The parable compares those who choose protectors other than Allah to a spider, who builds (itself) a house which, according to the parable, is the flimsiest of houses. One can also find references to the positive characteristics of the spider in Islamic texts. For instance, the story of the Prophet Muhammad's emigration from Mecca to Medina in the company of Abu Bakr, a significant event that marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar, has provided the basis for the reputation of the spider as 'an instrument of God's will'.²⁵

In what follows I will show how I'tisami borrowed the mystical characteristics of the spider in Persian literature and turned her spider into 'God's weaver'. After the thirteenth century all Persian poetry, 'has at least a tinge of Sufism to it, if it is not outrightly mystical in intent', and the language of mysticism appears to a Persian reader to be 'intrinsically poetic'.²⁶ One can find the same relation between mysticism and Persian poetry in 'God's Weaver'. The first *bayt* depicting the spider introduces her as گوشه گیر (gūshihgir) (literally translated as 'cornered') signifying 'secluded', 'isolated', 'anchorite', and 'pious'. It is the 'piety and indifference toward worldly pleasures' that made گوشه گیری (gūshihgiri) a desirable characteristic in mystical Persian poetry, in particular in Hafiz's ghazals.²⁷

One can trace Persian poetry's frequent invocation of the indescribable and inexpressible in 'God's Weaver'. This is a frequent theme in Persian poetry where heights or depths of an experience which is beyond description is implied by the injunction مپرس (mapurs) 'Don't ask!', a favourite of Hafiz and subsequently of many other poets.²⁸ The inexpressible

²¹Fomeshi, *The Persian Whitman*, 107. The following lines from Rumi mention the same idea.

²²Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers* (Syracuse state: Syracuse University Press, 1992), 114.

²³Fomeshi, 'Till the Gossamer Thread', 272.

²⁴Karimi-Hakkak, p. 180.

²⁵Ibid., 179.

²⁶Dick Davis, 'On Not Translating Hafez', *The New England Review* 25.1/2 (2004): 311.

²⁷Fomeshi, 'Till the Gossamer Thread', 270.

²⁸Davis, 316.

mystical experience of the spider is implied in the word ‘secrets’ in ‘God’s Weaver’. To unfold the spider’s character in Part One of I’tisami’s poem, the persona refers to the spider’s activity and asserts that ‘Such a merchant will have a profit’ and leaves the nature of this merchandise undescribed. However, to mention the complicated nature of this merchandise the persona continues that ‘in this one web, there are many warps and woofs’. This line refers to the knotty nature of the merchandise, which remains a secret for the reader. In Part Three, where the spider responds to the lazy person’s derisions, she begins with ‘You are not aware of my secrets’. The pronoun ‘you’ can refer to the ignorant lazy person as well as to the reader, who still wonders about the nature of the spider’s strangely beneficial activity.²⁹

Part Three also provides the spider’s explanation of the ‘secrets’ behind her business. She explains that ‘To show the path is God’s, ours the feet’. Therefore, it is a mystical interaction between the spider and God; one may argue that this business is highly lucrative and satisfying since it involves God. This business is exceptional; she does not ‘weave to sell’. She further attempts to describe the business; ‘There is, noble sir, another marketplace/where this commodity is appreciated./A hundred buyers, thousands of gold treasures/do not equal a single glance from an expert’s eye’. This extraordinary business has a unique marketplace with a singular customer, ‘an expert’— a ‘single glance’ from whose eye overweighs a ‘hundred buyers’ and ‘thousands of gold treasures’. The exceptional customer who is the only one to whom the spider provides service is God, and this business is a mystical transaction. This is the secret the lazy person is ignorant of.³⁰ In the following lines the spider refers to the lazy person’s ignorance and his incapability to grasp the nature of such an experience, ‘You did not recognize the drape on the wall, how can you see the veil of secrets?’ This mystical business is such a unique experience that it remains nothing but a ‘veil of secrets’ to anyone not involved in it.³¹ One should also bear in mind the spider’s contentment with whatever God assigns to her; ‘she says that she does not question her allotted share even though she may not have access to the reasons she was assigned such a task; God is her employer and the one who knows the secrets of her craft’.³²

A closer reading of Part Three, which is the spider’s reply to the lazy person, can lead to a better understanding of the mystical aspect of the poem, the explicit references as well as the implicit connotations. It starts with and is replete with mystical messages, some of which are too allusive to be grasped during an initial reading. In Part Three, the spider says that no problem she faces can invalidate this عهد قديم (‘Ahd-i Qadīm) ‘ancient deal’. As an adjective, ‘Qadīm’ means ancient and, as a noun, it is also one of the names of Allah. Therefore, ‘Ahd-i Qadīm’ also refers to the spider’s covenant with Allah. In the same vein ‘Ahd-i Qadīm’ is an illusion to ‘Ahd-i Alast’, which according to Islamic theology, is the original covenant made between God and humankind.³³ The covenant is referred to in the verse 7:172 of the Quran: at the beginning of creation God gathered each and every human being and asked them, ‘Am I not your God?’ to which they replied, ‘Yes, we do so

²⁹Fomeshi, *The Persian Whitman*, 110.

³⁰Karimi-Hakkak, 178.

³¹Fomeshi, *The Persian Whitman*, 110.

³²Karimi-Hakkak, 171.

³³Hellmut Ritter. *The Ocean of the Soul: Man, the World and God in the Stones of Farīd al-Dīn ‘Attār*, trans. John O’Kane with editorial assistance from Bernd Radtke, (Leiden/Boston, MA: Brill, 2003), 352.

testify'. It is in the light of this reading that the spider's line 'We [all] have been the weaver from the beginning;/and so long as we live this is our profession' makes sense. The two key concepts here are 'weaving' and 'the beginning'. 'Weaving', according to this *bayt*, is the common characteristic of everyone, which begins from day one and which lasts until everyone's death. It is, in fact, an allusion to being a servant of God as the result of the original covenant made between God and humankind. And 'the beginning' is an allusion to the very beginning of creation when humankind testified to "Ahd-i Alast". In the same part the spider mentions that her hands are upon دستگاه محکم (*dastgāh-i muḥkam*) 'strong device/machine/apparatus', which Karimi-Hakkak translated 'firm loom'. 'Dastgāh' also means 'kingdom'. Therefore, 'dastgāh-i muḥkam' also refers to God's everlasting power, with which the spider has a covenant.

There is an intricate network of mystical messages in I'tisami's poem. Part One describes the spider as a dexterous 'architect' who makes 'circles in a hundred places', 'angles beyond counting, and "triangles innumerable" without using a "compass" or any "tools"'. It is followed by a question, "Who was teacher to this architect?" This question is left unanswered until the spider, in Part Three, let the reader know of her teacher: "To show the path is God's, ours the feet/giving power and assistance His, determination ours" and "We move along the path He has set us./He is our Master, aware of our work". In the same part the spider refers to God as *dūst* meaning "the friend", which is "a well-known allusion in Persian mystical poetry to God".³⁴ The final part complements the mystical messages of the poem and presents the spider, the weaving creature, as a mystic. Starting with the "mystics" who "have woven some threads together", this part ends with a mystical tone: "The spider, my friend, is God's weaver" [emphasis added]. All of these points and the network of denotation and connotation they create throughout the poem highlight the mystical characteristics of the spider in this poem. It is through the various layers of meaning, including the mystical messages, that "God's Weaver" by I'tisami reminds a scholar of Persian literature of the thought and the style of a prominent Persian mystical poet, Rumi.³⁵ Nevertheless, challenging the mystical Persian poets' emphasis on 'Mardān-i Khudā', i.e. God's *men*, and the consequent exclusion of women,³⁶ the female spider in I'tisami's poem grants women such a position too.

Although I'tisami shows fascination with mysticism in her poetry, she criticizes hollow pretenders of mysticism whose indolence and lethargy are a hindrance to an active energetic life.³⁷ The spider in 'God's Weaver' shows this quality; it is not only a female mystic, but also active, energetic and hard-working: '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'.³⁸ Line two of the poem introduces the spider for the first time; she is depicted 'warmly at work'. The following lines depict the spider as 'having put the spindle of effort to work,/not knowing any path other than action and endeavor'.

³⁴Ibid., 176.

³⁵</Ibl>Abd al-Husayn Zarrinkub, *Ba Karvan-i Hullih* (Tehran: Ilmī, 1370/1991), 367.

³⁶One can find such examples in mystical Persian poetry, including Hafiz and Rumi.

³⁷Musharraf, 106.

³⁸Fomeshi, 'Till the Gossamer Thread', 269.

As I have shown elsewhere, this poem is I'tisami's creative reception of 'A Noiseless Patient Spider', a poem by Whitman, the American poet.³⁹ The energetic and hard-working spider in Whitman's poem 'launch'd forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself,/Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them'. The triple repetition of 'filament' in Whitman's poem reminds one of the triple repetition of 'weave' in the aforementioned *bayt* from 'God's Weaver'. The spider as a symbol of diligence in I'tisami's poem resembles more closely the industrious spider in Whitman's poem than it does the spider in Persian literature more traditionally, where the spider represents qualities other than diligence. 'In Persian literature it is in fact the ant that stands for virtues such as work, endeavour and industry'.⁴⁰

I'tisami found some characteristics of Whitman's 'noiseless patient spider', particularly its tireless endeavour, interesting and brought them into her own poetry to write a *munāẓirih* which is 'presumably the most effective Persian poem celebrating effort and action'.⁴¹ The spider in I'tisami's poem represents a female mystic who is also energetic and vital. I'tisami associates the female spider with همّت (hemmat), meaning 'ambition/endeavour/enterprise', a positive quality most commonly attributed to men in the male-dominated Persian literary tradition.⁴² The 'spindle' in the hands of I'tisami's spider turns into دوک همّت 'the spindle of ambition/endeavour/enterprise'; it is no longer a 'derogatory' term, a source of embarrassment, as it historically has been used within Persian literature. She managed to appropriate the patriarchal language of mystical Persian poetry to propose her version of mysticism, which is feminine.

The form of the poem i.e. *munāẓirih* aligns with the content of the poem, i.e. the celebration of the spider and whatever she stands for. The debate between the spider and the lazy person can be read as one between an energetic female mystic and a lethargic male mystic. The position of the two sides of the debate is not equally convincing. The poem's strategy to 'depict the spider as the concrete manifestation of the ideals of will and determination and the lazy man as inherently illogical' 'affects the structure of the poem's argument, making it less an arena of debate between equally arguable, logical positions'.⁴³ Parts One, Three, and Four glorifies the spider/energetic female mystic and condemns the lazy person/lethargic male mystic. From the very first *bayt* where the reader faces the 'lazy' person, they realize that this is not the character to sympathize with and they look forward to meeting the other character.⁴⁴ They do not need to wait too long as the other character appears in the second *bayt*. The entirety of Part One except for the very first *bayt* is devoted to the spider, who is described as 'warmly at work', 'forward-looking', 'sagacious', and 'proud'. Part One is the poem's 'early conclusion to the debate'; 'taking advantage of her poetic license', the poet easily defeats the lazy person/lethargic male mystic before the debate even starts.⁴⁵ In Part Two the lazy person's arguments are presented. This part is the only instance we hear the lazy person talking and he (ironically)

³⁹Fomeshi, 'Till the Gossamer Thread'; *The Persian Whitman*.

⁴⁰Fomeshi, *The Persian Whitman*, 108. One can find examples of this both in modern and in classical Persian literature such as Sa'di and in children's literature, where the ant serves the didactic function of teaching children about the virtue of tireless endeavour.

⁴¹Heshmat Moayyad, 'Muqaddamih: Dar Zindigī va Shīr va Andishi-yi Parvin', in *Divan-i Parvin-i I'tisami*, ed Heshmat Moayyad (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1365/1986), 22.

⁴²'Hemmat' also means 'aspiration' and 'magnanimity' or as in Nezami's *Makhzan al-Asrar* 'intense meditation'.

⁴³Karimi-Hakkak, 175.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Fomeshi, *The Persian Whitman*.

does not miss the chance to put his foot in his mouth. While he 'assumes the posture of the all knowing man dispensing knowledge, wisdom, and advice', what 'he ends up producing is a body of words which, unlike the spider's web, has no shape, pattern, or structure'.⁴⁶ This part is markedly shorter than the spider's argument in the next part and the 'weakness' the lazy person 'attributes to the spider's web is in fact a description of his own words, the only means by which he has made his existence felt in the poem'.⁴⁷ Part Three is the spider's convincing well-structured argument replete with allusions to her position as an energetic female mystic. And the poem 'closes with a brief passage that seems rhetorically indistinguishable from the spider's response' in Part Three.⁴⁸ Part Four 'may be read as the summation of the spider's defence of herself or as the poet's final observations on the story she has just related'⁴⁹ and this final part is nothing less than the celebration of this character. As one can see, following Part One, the entire poem is a celebration of the spider/energetic female mystic. As the Omnipotent God is the winner of any battles, the spider as God's weaver wins this debate. The *bayt* 'The spider, my friend, is God's weaver;/her spindle turns, but noiselessly' concludes the poem and announces the spider as the winner of the debate.

The energetic Persian spider weaves femininity into mysticism

'Present in a wide range of contexts and in both prose and poetry', *munāẓirih* turned into a vehicle to carry didactic, mostly moral, messages.⁵⁰ It can be traced back to pre-Islamic times. Later, Asadī excelled in this genre⁵¹ and Nizami and Rumi employed it in their romantic and mystic narratives.⁵² In modern times, Bahar, a contemporary of I'tisami, also used this genre. This genre claims the largest portion of I'tisami's *Divan*, where one can find approximately 65 *munāẓirih*s. According to Moayyad, in this genre, she 'surpasses all her predecessors throughout the history of Persian literature both in quality and quantity'.⁵³ She was responsible for reviving *munāẓirih* in twentieth-century Persian poetry. *Munāẓirih*'s exposure to the longstanding tradition of Persian literature provided the poet with predefined characteristics for their characters. I'tisami's poetic originality led her to choose novel characters, including objects and organic material from everyday life which she turned into living entities, whose characteristics had not been previously known in the Persian literary tradition.

It is worth mentioning that even when I'tisami made use of those characters already defined in the Persian literary tradition, her poetic inventiveness frequently granted them new characteristics. The spider in 'God's Weaver' is one such character. From among the concepts the spider used to signify in Persian literary tradition, I'tisami made extensive use of the spider's weaving and its role as an instrument of God's will, as the title 'God's

⁴⁶Karimi-Hakkak, 167.

⁴⁷Ibid., 168.

⁴⁸Ibid., 172.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Fomeshi, 'Till the Gossamer Thread', 271.

⁵¹Musharraf, 139.

⁵²Ali-Asghar Seyed-Gohrab, 'The Rose and the Wine: Dispute as a Literary Device in Classical Persian Literature', *Iranian Studies* 47.1 (2013): 69–85.

⁵³Heshmat Moayyad, 'Parvin's Personality and Poetry', in *A Nightingale's Lament: Selections from the Poems and Fables of Parvin E'tesami (1907–1941)*, trans. Heshmat Moayyad and A. Margaret Arent Madelung (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1985), xi–xxviii.

Weaver' suggests. She entered the spider into a debate, a well-established genre in Persian literature and one she particularly favoured, to introduce her own unique spider, a cross-bred spider that is Persian and Whitmanian at the same time. However, I'tisami's spider is neither Whitman's creature nor that of classical Persian literature.⁵⁴ She granted the spider feminine characteristics and created the mixed-breed spider which possesses an unprecedented combination of characteristics. Introducing such a unique character indicates her outstanding achievement as an innovative poet. Even though inspired by classical Persian poetry, she broke away from its masculine viewpoint and created her own feminine mysticism.

I'tisami never tried to revolutionize the form of Persian poetry as some of her contemporaries, including Nima Yushij (1897–1960), known as the father of modern Persian poetry, did. Nevertheless, she expanded the potentiality of poetic language in the traditional forms,⁵⁵ as she did through creating the character of the spider protagonist in 'God's Weaver'. Through introducing a spider who represents an energetic female mystic, she expanded the potentiality of Persian poetic language and freed some of its energy from the restriction of patriarchal voice dominating the poetic tradition. The spider in Whitman's poem is neither female, nor mystic. However, in her reception of this very poem, 'the female Rumi', as I'tisami called herself, introduces in her own work a spider that shows characteristics of a female as well as those of a mystic, thus, forming an association between femininity and mysticism, which one does not usually find in the Persian literary tradition. Furthermore, she finds the energetic and tireless spider of Whitman's poem particularly beneficial to this poem and grants the Persian spider, never known for tireless endeavour, such qualities in order to create a female mystic who is energetic. She sheds the negative connotation of the feminine term 'spindle', which was the result of a long tradition of male-centred Persian literature, and elevates its status to that of 'the spindle of endeavour'. Then, she enters the spider into a debate with the patriarchal literary tradition. The energetic female mystic spider, which I'tisami creates, challenges male-dominated Persian mysticism, through not only forming an association between femininity and mysticism, but also depicting a femininity different from the dominant one in the Persian literary tradition, a femininity that is energetic and vital.

A note on transliteration

The English transliteration of Persian words follows the JMES style.

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⁵⁴Fomeshi, *The Persian Whitman*.

⁵⁵Musharraf.

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