



MA'ĀYEB AL-REJĀL

MA'ĀYEB AL-REJĀL (“Faults of men”), a treatise written in 1894 by Bibi Kānom Estarābādi/Astarābādi as a counterargument to the anonymous *Ta'dib al-neswān/Ta'dib al-nesā'*, a tract on how to discipline women, published in the mid-19th century. According to Ruhangiz Karachi, the author of *Ta'dib al-neswān* is most probably Kānlar Mirzā Eḥtešām-al-Dawla (d. 1861, a son of Faṭḥ-'Ali Shah). *Ma'āyeb al-rejāl*, although not published until 1992, must have had a fair circulation at the time; four manuscript copies, including one written by the author herself (Majles Library, Ms. 8984), exist in archival collections (e.g., Malek National Library and Museum Institution, Ms. 6297).

Bibi Kānom begins her text with a brief autobiography explaining her social and educational background, and two poems in praise of Nāṣer-al-Din Shah and the crown prince Moẓaffar-al-Din. The book ends with a detailed continuation of the autobiographical statement and a poem in praise of the grand vizier (pp. 88-96). The text is composed of two sections: the first one (pp. 52-65) is a direct, wittily angry response to *Ta'dib al-neswān*; and the second part (pp. 66-94), addressed directly to other women (“my sisters,” as she calls them), contains advice and warnings about men, in particular as husbands. Bibi Kānom explains her choice of the title, *Ma'āyeb al-rejāl*, in these ironic terms: “This lesser one does not consider herself worthy of disciplining men, so she has written *Ma'āyeb al-rejāl* in response to *Ta'dib al-neswān* to make their vices evident; perhaps they will give up trying to discipline women and go after disciplining and training themselves” (p. 48). The expression “this lesser one” (*in kamina*) is commonly used in this period as a self-abnegating



self-reference by women writers. Such ironic subversions of traditional cultural references to women are a consistent feature of Bibi Kānom's prose throughout her text.

Bibi Kānom interweaves the prose of the text of 40 manuscript pages with some sixty different verses of classical poetry and a number of her own occasional verses. She engages in retelling stories within the main text and sharpens her satire with the use of street-smart songs (*taṣnif*) and *baḥr-e ṭawils*. She skillfully combines the narration of pornographic tales with interpretations of the Qur'an and Traditions (e.g., see Bibi Kānom, p. 49). Asides from allusions to the Traditions attributed to the Prophet Moḥammad and to *Nahj al-balāgha* (collections of sayings, letters, and speeches attributed to Imam 'Ali b. Abi Ṭāleb), on nineteen occasions she quotes, in full or in part, verses from the Qur'an. Drawing at once on Islamic sources and Persian poetry, polite and coarse language, oral and written traditions, Bibi Kānom produces a text grounded in several cultural contexts, moving with ease from a prophetic tale to a street joke and to a classical verse of advice. Whereas in later 20th-century literature these various historical-literary sources largely bifurcated into secular versus religious, polite versus vulgar, and modern versus traditional, in *Ma'āyeb al-rejāl* we have a text drawing from and connected to them all. Moreover, as a text conceived in a female homosocial space and addressed to other women, it connects the reader to the language of that cultural space, a language of feminine transgressive irony that was later to be re-scripted as vulgar and rejected as backward.

Ma'āyeb al-rejāl is a consistently and remarkably female-centered text. While Bibi Kānom's narrative, rhetorical, and inter-textual ties with classical literary and religious sources transfer the authority of past culture to her text, her particular re-writings and re-interpretive gestures produce a highly subversive and innovative text. Whether she is dealing with a classical poet such as Sa'di or with Qur'anic verses and prophetic narratives, Bibi Kānom refers to them dismissively, satirizes them, or openly polemicizes against them if she finds them misogynous. Yet she does not hesitate to draw upon them to back up women's cause. Moreover, in discussing verses and sayings that are often simply dismissed as misogynous, she frequently re-interprets them subversively. For instance, she quotes the first hemistich of the verse "Just this one art is enough for women / To sit and give birth to male lions," which is often cited as prime example of misogyny in classical literature, and uses it to give credence to her own subversion of male-female hierarchy: "Just this one



art is enough for women, that men, even if they reach the heavens, have been given birth by women to and fallen out of them” (p. 55).

Bibi Kānom uses many of the same religious tales, Qur'anic verses, proverbs, and classical poetry that are employed by the author of *Ta'dib al-neswān*. However, while *Ta'dib al-neswān* draws on these to confirm the traditional normative concepts regarding women, by her ironic and at times subversive narration, Bibi Kānom engages in a double challenge. She rebukes the author of *Ta'dib al-neswān* at the same time that she opens possibilities for positive re-scripting of traditional images of women.

Asides from the significance of the text as a woman's response to a popular misogynous tract, the text is also important because of its moment of composition at a time that women's literacy was on the rise and women were beginning to publish in more public domains, such as newspapers, a process that had enormous repercussions in changing women's language.

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