

## The Nurturing Role of Woman-as-Mother



by Aziza Jafarzade,  
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**F**olklorist and historical novelist Aziza Jafarzade (1921-2003) was convinced that Azerbaijan's true history is to be found in its folklore.

*"For the past 200-300 years, Russia has tried so desperately to change our history and to separate us from the Turkish world. But our 'bayati' (folk poetry) contains our whole history. Azerbaijani folklore is very rich. The truth is that most of it has been created by mothers."*

*The following essay is from Aziza's unpublished manuscript, "Folklore and the Creative Activity of Woman-Mother," written summer 1996. This work was translated from Azeri into English by Gulnar Aydamirova.*

*For more about Aziza Jafarzade's life and works, including the entire Azeri text of several of her historical novels and more than 10 short stories (some also in English translation), search at AZERI.org.*

For centuries the creative work of mothers and women has been viewed as secondary to that of men. The names of our creative women are rarely mentioned in documents except on rare occasions. But it is the creation of Women-as-Mothers that comprises the main core of our folklore. Yet, so few of these women's names are known to us.

Of course, the reasons go very deep, beginning from the fact that traditionally our women have been veiled. In the past, and sometimes even in the countryside today, women's names are not always spoken in the presence of male relatives, much less in front of strangers. Many husbands refer to their wives as "the mother of my kids" or "hey" or "girl" or such things like that.

But there were exceptions. For example, women who lived and created in kings' palaces were not strangers to the male world and, therefore, their names have been preserved. Consider the 12th century poetess Mahsati from Ganja. There were also occasions when women have been considered so heroic and so wise that people did remember their names, and their children, including their sons, took on the woman's name as their own second name, though this practice is traditionally reserved for the father's name.

But, in general, up to the 19th century, it's a rare exception that our historical documents reveal the names of our creative women with the exception of folk poems which we call "bayati". Beginning in the 19th century, we come across some of these women's names; for example, Natavan who was from a family of khans and beys in Shusha (Karabakh), her daughter Fatma khanim Kamina, Heyran khanim from Southern Azerbaijan [now located in Iran] and Parnaz, Pusta Shakir gizi and Zeynab Zarbali gizi.

The situation began to change more profoundly during the 20th century. Women began publishing their works. There were even special women's newspapers like "Ishig" (light).

Woman-as-Mother is not only the author of verbal folklore, but she is the physical creator of her child as well as teacher who informs and instructs her child about the world. Another brings up her child; she is the first doctor who tends to her child. No wonder there are proverbs that acclaim her role:

The mother knows her mute child's language.

**Lalm dilini anası bilər.**

A child finds comfort in its mother's embrace.

**Uşaq ana qucağında ovunur.**

Look at the mother, marry the daughter.

**Anasına bax, qızını al.**

This means that when you examine the deeds of the mother, you will be able to predict the character of her daughter and know what kind of wife and mother she will become.

Agirl with a mother is well spoken of,

Agirl without a mother is much gossiped about.

**Analı qızın adı böyüyər, anasız qızın sözü.**

I forgive you your mother's milk.

**Ananın südü halal olsun.**

This expression is intended to compliment and praise the mother who has raised such a wonderful child. In other words, it means that the milk that the mother gave her child has not been wasted or in vain. It was well deserved. That's why our Prophet Mahammad is quoted as saying:

Heaven lies at the feet of mothers.

**Behişt anaların ayaqları altındadır.**

Woman-as-Mother is the guardian of traditions that have been passed down through the centuries. From this point of view, we can say that even though some women seem conservative, were it not for this "conservatism", we would have lost many of our traditions these days.

Everything that we're going to talk about was created, preserved and presented by women. There's also an expression—"Üzläre çıxardasan" (May you present it)—meaning may you present a work of your own and live to see its success and fruit. In old times, relatives would come to see the dowry that a mother gave to her daughter. Some women would even open the coverlets to see what kind of wool was inside the mattress. If the wool were of inferior quality, the women would be very critical. Therefore, mothers tried to create good dowries for their daughters. There's even a saying: "Swaddle your daughter and make her a dowry," (**Qızını bala, cehizin elə**), meaning that mothers must begin to save and anticipate their daughters' dowries from their infancy.

Usually men were occupied with earning money for their family. If they were tradesmen, they often had to travel to foreign towns for months on end. If they worked in a market, they would come home late in the evenings after work. So it was women who preserved the traditions and passed them on to the younger generation. Folklore isn't limited just to poems, riddles, tongue twisters, bayati, lullabies and elegies. All of our traditions are connected with folklore.

Women knew how to cook various dishes and which spices to use with specific dishes. They have preserved these traditions even to this day. All of these small details, which are related to everyday life are passed down through the generations by women.

## KHONCHA

For example, take the concept of "khoncha" (a bundle of sweets and various token gifts prepared on different occasions). On the occasion of the birth of a child, khonchas are prepared for various people who have



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provided assistance to the mother. For example, the midwife who helped during the birth, the mullah who taught the child, the ashugs (musicians) during the wedding, for the woman who helped prepare the wedding gown.

There were special kinds of khoncha. For example, if an engaged girl went to a wedding party, her sister-in-law or mother-in-law used to send a khoncha there for her. The khoncha traditionally included several different kinds of sweets and cookies along with presents for the girl. The present could be anything depending on the financial ability of the groom's family such as earrings, bracelets, and cloth material. Of course, the ring was never sent along in a khoncha as it was brought and presented during the engagement party. In general, most of the traditions connected with weddings and the dowry are all prepared by mothers. As for fathers, they bought all of these material goods.

## ELEGIES

Funeral ceremonies are also closely connected with women. Usually, it is women who mourn for the dead and sing elegies that they have composed. I'm convinced that the primary authors of most of these elegies are women. Another tradition is that women visit the grave of the deceased person after the 40th day. On that day women visit the grave and take "shorgoghal", "halva-kulcha" and give it out there. In one elegy, women cry on the grave and say: "Everybody is here and we all ask you to come with us."

*Evlari düzülmünan,  
Düzülüb düzülmünan.  
Hamı minnata galib  
Dur gedək biziminan.*

Their houses are in a row,  
They are built in a row.  
Everybody is here to ask you,  
Join us and let's go together.

In another elegy, the Death Angel is admonished to leave as there are people who are mourning for this person.

Sketch of a Khoncha, traditional way of presenting gifts to future brides and other people who are involved with the family.



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*Şirvanın dağları var,  
Meyvəli bağları var.  
Əl saxla, ay Əzrayıl,  
Dahıycan ağları var.*

Shirvan has mountains,  
Fruit gardens,  
Stop, Angel of Death,  
There are people crying for her.

This probably implies that the deceased person has young children. There are also elegies about people who died in distant lands or those who have died of smallpox. In one elegy, people are asked to sing elegies for the deceased person because the mother is mute, meaning that either she can't perform the elegies herself or that she has passed away. Without a doubt, all of these bayati have been written by Women-as-Mothers.

## TONGUE-TWISTERS

Women-as-Mothers are the first educators. For example, if a mother realizes that her child can't pronounce certain difficult sounds in the alphabet, she often introduces tongue twisters to remedy the situation. Here are some examples:

The "q" sound

*A qılquyruq qırqovul, gəl bu kola gir,  
qılquyruq qırqovul.*

Hey, long-tailed pheasant, come and enter this bush;  
hey, long-tailed pheasant.

The "ş" and "s" sounds

*Aşbaz Abbas beş basma tas aş bişirib,  
Pişiya verib;  
Vaxsey o beş  
Basma tas aş,  
Şaxsey o beş basma tas aş.*

Chef Abbas made pilaf in five big pots  
He gave it to the cat,  
Vakhsey those five pots of pilaf,  
Shakhsey those five pots of pilaf.

Note: people say "vakhsey" and "shakhsey" when something tragic happens to them. Shiite Muslims use these terms mostly in relationship to the religious ceremonies held in the month of Maharram when they commemorate the deaths of Hasan and Husein—sons of Imam Ali.

The "k" sound

*"Bir darədə iki kər, kər, kər, kər, kər, kər, kər"*

Two deaf, blind hedgehogs in a valley who have holes in their coats.

Woman-as-Mother often creates special poems while playing with her children. These lines praise her offspring and express her fondest wishes.

**Balama qurban alçalar,  
Bu balam haçan al çalar?**

May cherry plums be a sacrifice to my baby,  
When will my baby learn how to clap?

**Balama qurban ilanlar,  
Bu balam haçan dil anlar.**

May the snakes be a sacrifice to my baby,  
When will my baby learn how to talk?

**Balama qurban inəklər,  
Bu balam haçan iməklər.**

May cows be a sacrifice to my baby,  
When will my baby begin to scrawl?

For a mother, there is no one and no thing more beautiful and dearer than her own child. There's even a famous legend about it. This legend is both humorous while reflecting the greatness of mother's love.

"Once Prophet Suleyman (Solomon) told all of the animals to bring their children to see him. All of the animals arrived on time with their children. The one exception was the beetle who arrived last. Prophet Suleyman asked: "Why did you arrive so late? It's already dark."

The mother beetle replied: "My dear Prophet, I was afraid that someone would cast a spell with the evil eye on my black babies during the sunlight hours."

[Meaning: Beetles are black and ugly. The tale shows that even such an ugly creature is very beautiful in the eyes of its mother]. Mothers are like that. They are ready to sacrifice everything—even the whole world—for their children.

## LULLABIES

Mothers sing lullabies to their children. Again, these lullabies convey their wishes for their children and express their wishes for the future. There are so many lullabies and each of them is connected with some wish. Undoubtedly, there are as many lullabies as there are mothers who sing them.

**Laylay deyiram ucadan,  
Səsim çıxmaz bacadan,  
Allah səni saxlasın  
Çiçəkdan, qızılcan.**

I'm telling laylay [lullaby] loudly,  
My voice wouldn't be heard from the chimney,  
May God keep you away,  
From smallpox and measles.

**Xırdacasan, mazacasan,  
Sən hər güldən tazacasan,  
O gün olsun, ay bala  
Tupur-tupur gəzacasan.**

You are so small and funny,  
You are fresher than any flower,

I wish for the day, my baby  
When you start walking with little steps.

**Başına mən dolanım,  
Mən dönüm, mən dolanım.  
Böyü, boya-başa çat,  
Kölgəndə mən dolanım.**

Let me embrace you,  
Let me fondle you, embrace you  
You grow up, become an adult,  
Let me live under your shadow.

## RIDDLES

As the child grows day by day and begins to crawl and understand more and more. He must be taught about the world that surrounds him. Mother-poet becomes his first teacher. She instructs him in math, biology, zoology and so many other subjects. She also instills in her child a great love for his mother language. She teaches the child many poems and riddles.

**Gedən leylik, Galan leylik.  
Bir qıç üstə  
Duran leylik  
Açması: qapı**

The stork goes. The stork comes.  
The stork stands on one foot.  
[Answer: door]

**Üstü zəmi biçəram,  
Altı bulaq içəram  
Açması: qoyun**

The surface is a cornfield,  
I would reap that.  
And below is a spring,  
And I would drink that.  
[Answer: sheep]

**O yanı qaya,  
Bu yanı qaya,  
İçində  
Sən maya  
Açması: yumurta**

Rock on one side,  
Rock on the other side,  
And yellow embryo inside.  
[Answer: egg]

**O yanı çapar,  
Bu yanı çapar,  
İçində  
Atlı çapar  
Açması: göz**



TOFIO GASKANPRA

Fence on one side,  
Fence on the other side,  
Horsemen ride inside.  
[Answer: eye]

O yarı daş,  
Bu yarı daş  
İçində  
Qırx-əlli baş  
Aqması: hamam

One side is of stone,  
The other side is of stone,  
And 40-50 heads are inside  
[Answer: bath house]

There are many examples in folklore that express the relationships between mother-in-laws and daughter-in-laws. If they are not content with one another, they show their displeasure in folklore verses. In old times, men could have many wives. So one can also see many poems and legends related to this phenomenon.

Often people ask the mullah to "open the Koran" (Quran açğı açdır). This is an expression in Azeri meaning to determine a good day when they want to do something important. For example, if the father wants to begin a journey, or seeks advice in buying or selling real-estate, or in planning a wedding, they would only follow through with their plans after receiving the "Koran's advice."

Especially women are inclined to visit fortune tellers. They also told fortunes themselves using mirrors, water, peas, and rings. This was often done during Novruz. Today, it is still done, especially by young girls.

People also practice another form of fortune telling during Novruz. They make a wish and then they go out of their homes to hear what their neighbors are talking about. If what they hear is good, then the wish should come true. That's why people try to say good things during Novruz and "Charshanba" (the last Tuesday before Novruz, which marks the coming of Spring—March 20-21). If anyone, by chance, happens to overhear them speaking good things, then that person's wish will come true.

Quzum bulağa çıxıb,  
Enib bulağa çıxıb.  
Siz Allah xos söz deyin  
Yarım qulağa çıxıb.

My lamb went to the spring,  
It went down to the spring.  
For God's sake, say good things,  
My lover has gone out to listen to doors.

There are even folklore examples of what women have said while treating and trying to cure their sick children or while burning rue to protect them from the evil eye.

One can find many labor songs in folklore. These are the songs that people of various professions sing while working. And among these songs are some that were sung only by women. For example, songs that women sing while weaving a carpet, or while milking a cow or churning butter.

## BAYATI

I think one of the most significant genres of our folklore is "bayati". The word itself is derived from the name of Bayat tribe. This tribe is one of the Oghuz tribes of Central Asia. Dada Gorgud in "Kitabi-Dada Gorgud" and Fuzuli are also from this tribe. Today, there are several Bayat villages in regions of Azerbaijan such as Aghjabadi, Salyan, Ujar, Shamakhi, Davachi and Guba.

This poetic genre provides a school for learning about our misinterpreted and deliberately distorted history that has yet to been written correctly. The bayati is the most reliable source for researchers. In general, folklore and especially our bayatis reflect our past, our traditions, our life and our philosophical thinking. They are more important and truer than any of our other documents. Bayatis are documents that don't require any seal or signature; they originate from the anguished heart.

Bayati is such a large genre that it has been divided into subcategories and includes lullabies, elegies, history, love, Motherland and honesty. In my opinion, a great number of these bayati have been written by Mother-as-Poets.

Hatred of the enemy is also expressed in our folklore. If only we had learned from it rather than viewing our folklore as old fashioned then we would not have faced so many tragedies these past years. Folklore would have guided us to be wary of certain situations.

Chernishevsky once said: "A woman is so faithful, strong and intelligent in character. But society doesn't use this intellect and, instead, refuses, oppresses and suppresses it. However, if this intellect were not rejected and suppressed, and if it were utilized, human history would develop ten times more."

Women's intellect has been even more suppressed in our part of the world including within our families. Maybe that's why the names of Mothers-as-Poets have rarely been mentioned. Nevertheless, women have always created and written and their creations have been so loved and so often repeated that they have provided the basis for our national folklore. As a consequence, they have played significant roles in the history, language, traditions and philosophical thinking of our nation. ■