

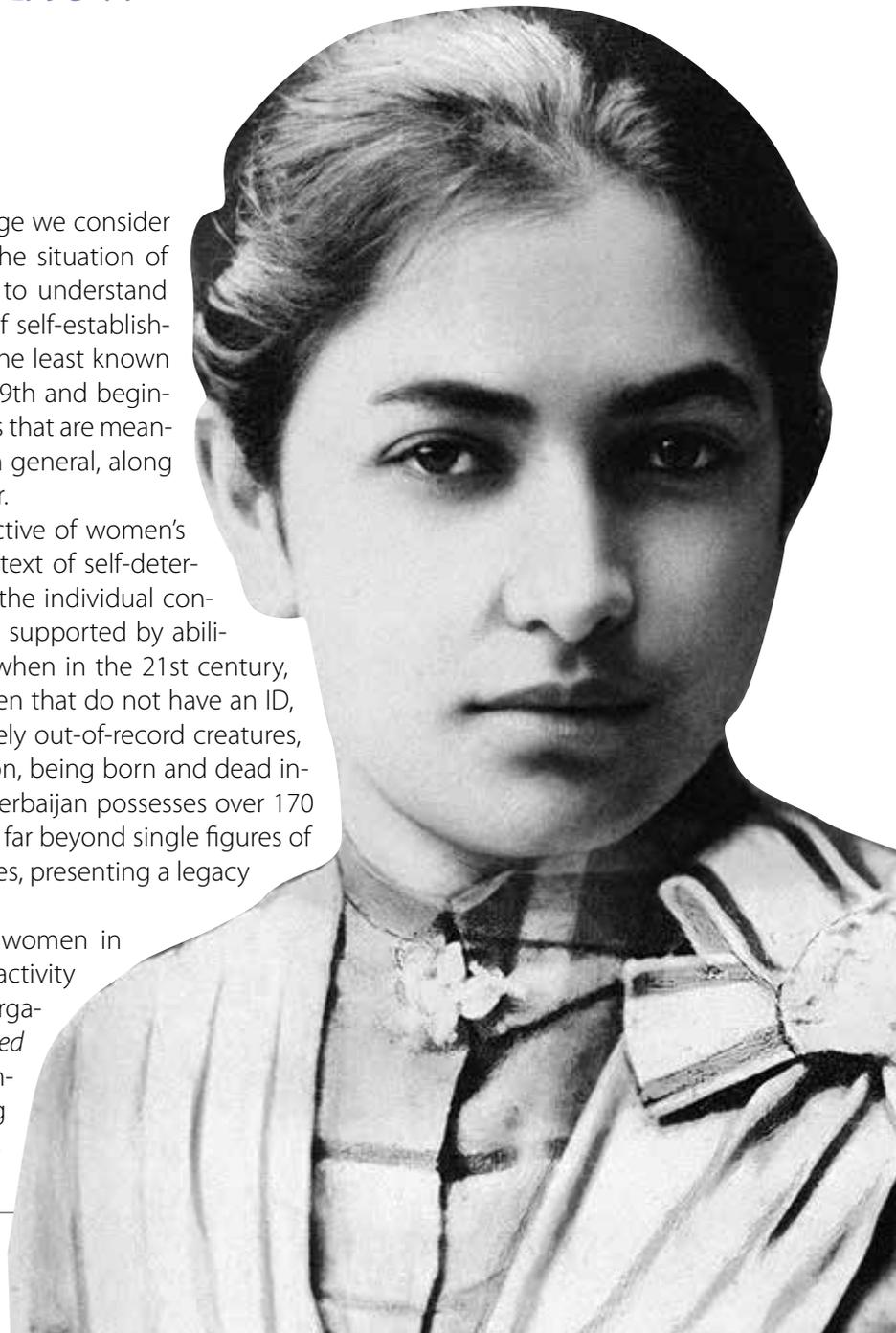
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PROMINENT, PHENOMENAL, AUTHENTIC *History of Azerbaijani Women They Did Not Want Us To Know*

When we speak about national heritage we consider historical developments in which the situation of women is always exemplary, so as to understand the level achieved by the societies in terms of self-establishment and awareness. In this context it is yet the least known fact that the history of Azerbaijan as of mid-19th and beginning of the 20th centuries is rich in occurrences that are meaningful to the entire history of women rights in general, along with the history of Muslim women in particular.

From the contemporary academic perspective of women's studies we evaluate those matters in the context of self-determination and direct involvement, along with the individual contribution and the number of planned actions, supported by abilities to unify around mutual goals. At a time when in the 21st century, in some Muslim countries, there are still women that do not have an ID, being condemned to an entire life as absolutely out-of-record creatures, deprived of access to healthcare and education, being born and dead incognito solely as a part of biological cycle, Azerbaijan possesses over 170 years of history of women activity, which goes far beyond single figures of queens or lucky daughters of leading dignitaries, presenting a legacy of numerous pioneering achievements.

The process of developments related to women in Azerbaijan encompasses such matters as joint activity of Azerbaijani women in non-Muslim charity organizations (*as of 1850-1965 in The Saint Nina based in Tiflis and Saint Ripsime based in Irevan*)(1), involvement of educated women in teaching girls in schools established by their own means in their own houses (*Maral Nabizadeh, Madina*



Qiyasbeyli), teaching activity in private and governmental schools for girls (*Hanifa Abayeva-Malikova was a Principal of the First Secular School for Muslim Girls established in Baku in 1901*)(2), journalistic activity (*Shafiq Efendizadeh started writing in the newspaper "Shargi-Rus" in April, 1903*)(3) in prominent periodicals of the time ("*Hayat*", "*Irshad*", "*Achyg soz*", "*Azerbaijan*", "*Dyabistan*", "*Dirilik*", "*Maktab*") led by male (*Shakhtahinski, Mammadquluzade, Agayev, Huseyinzade, Resulzade*) and female editors (*Hadija Alibayova, Editor in Chief of the newspaper "Ishig" 1911-1912*)(4), professional involvement on the level

of women gained the status of priority. As a result, the number of gymnasiums for women increased to 10. In 1919, women gained unlimited access to *Baku State University* upon its establishment, obtaining the right to study in the same classes together with men.

During the years of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic, there were no women elected to Parliament, yet the data shows that women were present among the staff at the highest level in governmental administration such as Chancellery of the Parliament and the Council of Ministers. As an example, first journalist *Shafiq*

Shafiq Efendizadeh among members of editorial staff of the newspaper "Azerbaijan", 1919



of administrative workers in governmental institutions of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic in 1918-1920, along with a certain number of women who obtained highest degrees and various professions in medicine and pedagogy.

Azerbaijan was the first country in the East where a debate on conceding suffrage to women began, leaving behind some European countries for years in the settlement of gender contradictions. Consequently, women in Azerbaijan received the right to elect and to be elected in 1918, becoming the first women in the Muslim world to be given such a right(5).

Upon the establishment of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic on 28 May 1918, the matter of educa-

ga Efendizadeh worked as an assistant to the head of the office of the parliament, *Leyla Sulkevich*, *Fatma Dagirova* worked in the office of the government affairs, *Gulsum Subkhankulova*, *Ainul Usubbekova* worked in the apparatus of the Ministry of Public Education(6).

Additionally, when we evaluate the matter of women's conditions in Azerbaijan, we can see that, differently from the west, in Azerbaijan this matter was always in the spotlight in parallel with the situation of children in general and girls in particular. Azerbaijani press led in this respect by the *Molla Nasreddin Magazine*(1906-1917; 1921; 1922-1931) was bringing to the attention of society the matter of violence against children, which would show itself in constraint of mothers towards children

Maral Nabizadeh with a group of students, Jabrayil, Garghabazar, 1912



and indulgence by fathers vice versa. Simultaneously, there was another matter of mothers seen as a trigger in the whole life of upcoming generations, while the necessity of saving girls from polygamous and early age marriages was extensively discussed at the forum of Azerbaijani national press as one of the imperative issues. Magazines for children *Dabistan*(1906-1908), *Rehber*(1906), *Maktab*(1911-1918;1920) were published involving prominent pedagogues, authors of textbooks and publicists of the time.

When we look at the aspect of ethnic profiles of prominent Muslim women pioneers in Azerbaijan, we can see that not all of them were Azerbaijani. In fact, we can see Balkarian, Meskhetian Turks and Tatar ladies among them. Yet it is important to emphasise that they were finding in Azerbaijan a convenient and relatively secure environment for professional activities, simultaneously establishing marriages with prominent Azerbaijani intellectuals.

Importantly, all those achievements occurred as a fruit of a pursuit for improvement in women's conditions. They were not a result of planned and financially supported projects by government, as indeed we are talking about Azerbaijan prior to the Soviet times, when as a part of the Russian Empire, the country was subject

Khadija Gayibova (1893-1938) classical pianist, victim of Stalinist repressions

Embroidery lesson at the Tagiyev's first secular school for Muslim girls, Baku, 1911

to extensive limitations of rights versus Muslim population, (which were partially lifted with October the 17th, 1905 Manifesto).

Precisely speaking, during the period from the mid-19th century to 1920, women of Azerbaijan were pursuing their goals differently from Western counterparts. Awareness of the necessity of improvements in women's rights came forward in the form of strong conviction on behalf of Azerbaijani intellectuals(7), which paved the way for urgent changes, resulting in cooperation of intellectual men with their sisters, wives and daughters. Some of those women were silenced, some had to step back or change strategies. One of the men, Molla Ruhulla Axundov (1850-1912), who advocated improvements in the status of women, paid for his beliefs with his life.

Yet to us Azerbaijanis, it is particularly important to acknowledge that all those achievements were undesired in the eyes of a changing political system. As the Russian Empire was falling, Bolsheviks had their own plan based on self prominence in women rights, whilst not hesitating to secure that with a single brand of "counter revolutionary" damnation, the long list of the

legacy of achievements by Azerbaijani society would be ending up in history's rubbish bin.

In this context, when we reach for historical documents and look closely at the fates of prominent figures of Azerbaijani society, we can see that the number of victims of the Communist regime is horrendous. Furthermore, we can see that basically Soviet historiography erased facts of the existence of certain intellectual women. Names and factual details of their activity are still being discovered by Azerbaijani historians since 1990. Therefore, we can definitely state that whatever was present during Soviet times regarding Azerbaijani women was heavily retouched by Soviet propaganda.

When it comes to overall women's studies, we can see a widespread tendency of bringing forward examples of certain female personalities, so as to show that at particular times of late modern history of countries, there were some educated women, presenting certain intellectual activity. Yet in this context, the existence of capable female figures is not enough, as the conditions of obtaining intellectual development, along with how they used their capacity once they were able to reach notable positions, are fundamental. In other words,



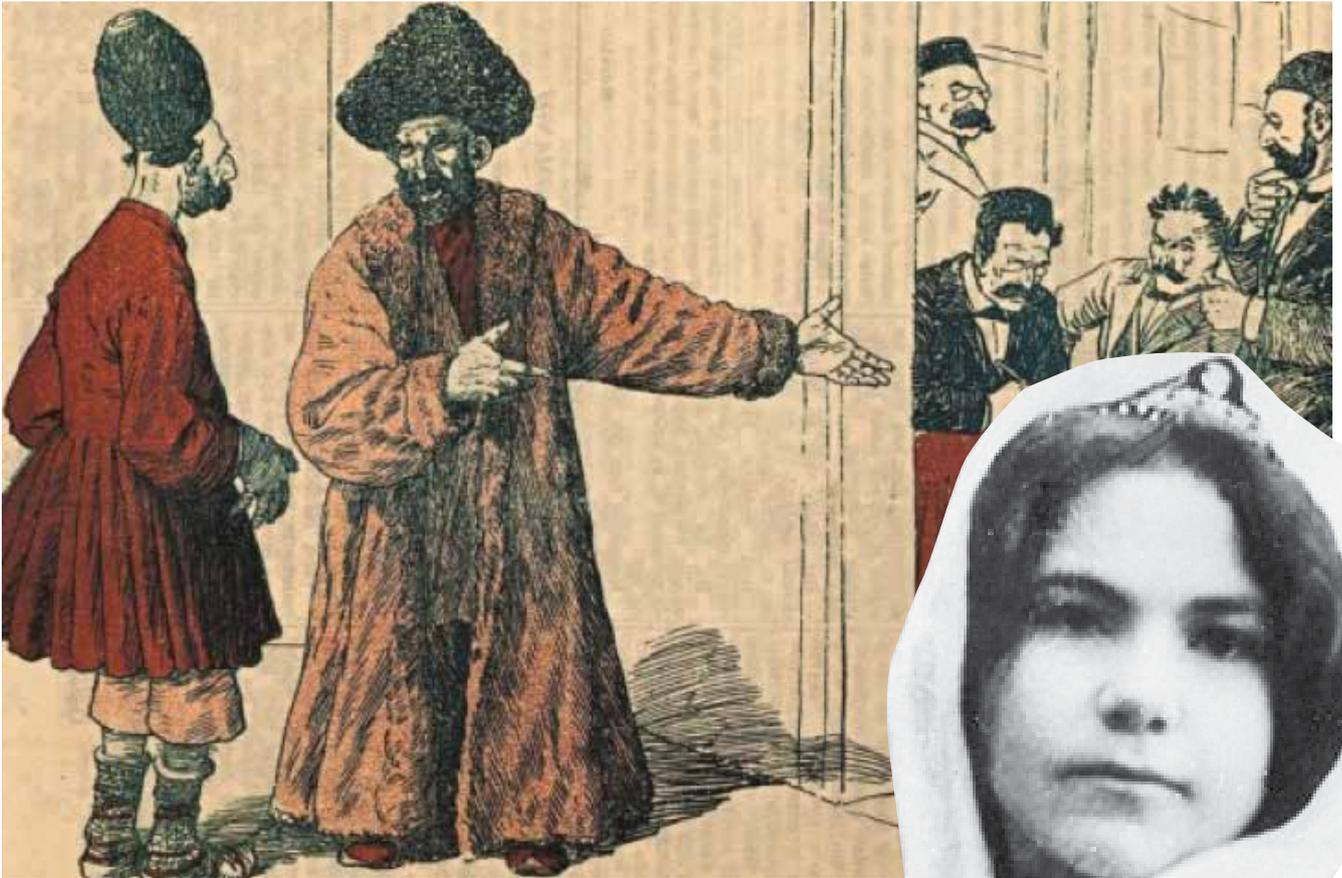
First issue of "Ishig" newspaper

women who had a chance of homeschooling due to particular possibilities of their families, but then withheld all the wealth of their advantageous positions, omitting strenuous solutions in conditions of their female counterparts, are just lucky individual examples of no significant social influence. Attributing such personalities to the overall level of development of society or concealing the problems of women rights with facts of existence of certain educated women is a completely wrong attitude, which shifts towards political manipulations of propaganda and may appeal solely to superficial judgments. To be able to state how significant the contribution of each glorified female personality was, we have to study their individual influence in their societies separately. This is why it is important to emphasise that personalities such as *Hanifa Malikova (1856- 1929)*, *Sakina Akhundzade (1865-1927)*, *Nigar Shihlinskaya (1871/1878-1931)*, *Hamida Javanshir (1873-1955)*, *Shafiqqa Efendizadeh (1882-1959)*, *Maral Nabizadeh (1889-1967)*, *Madina Qiyasbeyli (1889-1938)*, *Khadija Gayibova (1893-1938)*, *Sona Akhundova (1898-1971)*, to mention just a few, were legitimately efficient in their actions, leading in terms of their personal stories and individual impact on society. ❀



Society of Muslim Women of the Caucasus, Tbilisi, 1910

“They say they are Muslims too”. Cartoon in “Molla Nasraddin” magazine. Early 20th century



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Sona Akhundova (1898-1971) poetess, mother of composer Qara Qarayev