Performance as Feminist Historiography

An Interview with Gita Hashemi on Zandokht Shirazi and Early Radical Feminism in Iran

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In July 2020 the transdisciplinary artist, curator, and writer Gita Hashemi presented *Zan-i keh Mikhaham* (*The Woman I Want*), an online performance that offered a reading of the early radical feminist Zandokht Shirazi's writing.[1] Hashemi left Iran in the mid-1980s, after the Islamic Cultural Revolution, because Tehran University's School of Fine Arts expelled her for "anti-Islamic activities." Eventually landing in Canada as a refugee, and based now in Toronto, she has been creating works in new media, installation, performance, social practice, and publishing for the past thirty years. Hashemi's work focuses on marginalized histories. She draws on rigorous research, which she sees as an intervention in contemporary politics, often using language and text as visual and performative elements. Since her 2008 piece *Ephemeral Monument*, Hashemi has been known for using calligraphic writing in live performances, an artistic method that she brought to a truly monumental scale in her durational project *Grounding*, which won the 2017 Ontario Association of Art Galleries' Best Exhibition of the Year Award.[2] Accompanied by archival visuals and sounds, *Zan-i keh Mikhaham* brought together a cross-generational and cross-border group of Iranian women, including the retired professional athlete Azam Eskandar, the artists Ghazal Partou and Azadeh Pirazimian, the children's book commentator and seller Farigees, the graduate student Leila Moslemi Mehni, and the theater and performance studies scholar Marjan Moosavi. Although she is relatively unknown today, Zandokht—the pen name for Fakhr Al-Molouk Zandpour, born in Shiraz Iran in 1909—was an exemplary figure among a generation of feminist women who worked hard for Iranian women's rights at the

JMEWS • Journal of Middle East Women's Studies • 17:2 • July 2021
DOI 10.1215/15525864-8949499 • © 2021 by the Association for Middle East Women's Studies

cusp of the twentieth century and whose activism laid the groundwork for the women's movement that followed. This interview developed out of an online conversation with the artist conducted in September 2020. In the wake of Iran's #MeToo (من هم#) movement, Hashemi's historical perspectives on feminist histories take on a new significance.

Nazli Akhtari: Let's talk about the inception of *Zan-i keh Mikhaham*. What brought you to Zandokht? What got you interested in the archives of Zandokht Shirazi as a source for artistic exploration?

Gita Hashemi: I'd like to start by adding a little more information about Zandokht. She started publishing her poems and essays when she was still in her teens in periodicals inside and outside Iran, such as *Estakhr*, *Habl ol-Matin*, *Sur-e Israfil*, *Chehreh Nama*, and *Ayande Iran*. Her pen name, Zand-dokht, "daughter [*dokht*] of Zand," is a revision of her given last name (Zandpour, "son of Zand"). Later she changed it to Zandokht, meaning "daughter of woman" (*zan*). She taught in a girls' school for a while but left teaching because of pressures by conservative clerics and bureaucrats. However, in her own words, she did not sit idle; she founded Anjoman-e Inqilab-e Nisvan (the Association for Women's Revolution) in Shiraz in 1927. The association lasted about a year. First the government forced them to remove the word *revolution* from the name; then it prevented their activities in various ways. Some clerics denounced Zandokht, and she was forced to move to Tehran. Between 1931 and 1932 she published *Dokhtaran-e-Iran* (*Daughters of Iran*), which was one of the more radical and critical women's journals of its time. After only seven issues *Dokhtaran-e-Iran* closed due to lack of funding. She tried a few times to publish it again but was not successful. She died in Tehran in 1952, utterly marginalized and poor.

Zan-i keh Mikhaham is a live online multivocal performance in Farsi of a remixed text of Zandokht's poems, letters, and articles as well as some archival records covering the years 1928 to 1939, which represent both the years that were the height of her work and those for which we have records. I staged the twenty-seven scenes of the piece independently and without institutional involvement in July 2020 with the participation of a cross-border and cross-generational group of Iranian women. This project has, in a way, been in formation for twenty-five years and is a continuation of my previous projects about twentieth-century Iranian history, particularly *Of Shifting Shadows*, *Grounding*, and *Barayandegan* (*Emergent*), which focus on women's personal narratives as feminist interventions in historiography.

I first read about Zandokht while I was researching for *Of Shifting Shadows*, a nonlinear interactive narrative about women's participation in the 1977–79 revolution, in which I was a direct participant and witness.[3] That piece tells the story of my generation. I was in my mid-teens when I became an organizer in strikes and protests in my school. Soon I was recruiting and connecting with other student

activists in the citywide movement. Less than a decade later, living in exile, I realized that the presence of secular women like me on the streets and in the political and cultural campaigns was underdocumented and barely acknowledged in the Iranian historiography of the time. On the one hand, there was the official IRI [Islamic Republic of Iran] propaganda that completely covered up the presence of secular women. On the other, the dominant male-centered ideology ignored women's active participation as revolutionary agents.

I came across the name Zandokht Shirazi in the book *The Women's Rights Movement in Iran*, by Eliz Sanasarian (1982), which is still the only book dedicated specifically to this topic. In it there was a short paragraph about her, [explaining] that she had founded the Association for Women's Revolution in Shiraz in 1927 and published a magazine called *Daughters of Iran*. That deeply shocked me. I grew up in Shiraz and heard a lot about the social and political history of the city from my parents, who were contemporaries of Zandokht. I read history books, and, during the short period known as the "Freedom Spring," I was active in a leftist women's organization. Yet I had not heard or read anything about Zandokht, her organization, or her publication, and, I am sure, neither had any of my comrades. I realized that the same historical omission that had taken place and prevailed in the case of women of my generation had also taken place with regard to women of previous generations, to the extent that their absence/erasure in historical narratives had become natural.

Particularly significant for me was, and [still] is, the continuity of this erasure of women's agency across political regimes. It's very important to know that independent women's organizations started during the Constitutional Revolution (1905–11), and thrived and proliferated in the last decade of the Qajar period and the first decade of Pahlavi rule. In the 1920s and 1930s there were women's associations in Tehran, Rasht, Isfahan, Qazvin, Mashhad, Tabriz, Arak, and Shiraz. These are the ones that we know of. They ran schools for girls and literacy classes for adult women; opened libraries; organized lectures, concerts, and theatrical plays; and published journals for women. They even organized street actions. They networked across the country and with women's organizations outside Iran. In 1932, at the height of their activism, they organized the Second Eastern Women's Congress in Tehran, which was attended by representatives from Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, India, Iraq, Turkey, and Japan. Four decades later, why did my generation of activists know close to nothing about this movement and the women activists and mobilizers? Because they were systematically erased from historical narratives. What we knew about women in the 1920s and 1930s is reduced to Reza Shah's modernizing campaigns, part of which was Kashf-e hijab (mandatory unveiling) in 1935. A story that, although about women, still has a male protagonist!

The truth we didn't learn from history books was that Reza Shah systematically undermined women's independent organizing in a variety of ways and eventually banned most of them. The 1932 Congress was a watershed. Although women's

associations had organized the gathering, on the opening day the government moved the events to a government hall, and a man who was initially supposed to be only a translator became a speaker, spewing conservative propaganda, much to the dismay of the organizers.[4] Some of the women walked away and held parallel meetings in private homes. Within a year, pretty much all of these women's organizations were banned. Eliz Sanasarian, Parvin Paidar, and Michael Amin have documented the tensions and confrontations between the state and women's organizations. Much of what is considered to be Reza Shah's achievements regarding women's "awakening" and rights, such as the establishment of public girls' schools, had in fact been started by these groups and were part of the demands they issued to the government. Many of their key demands, which did not include mandatory unveiling but included women's enfranchisement, family law reforms including custody rights, and so on, were not met. Yet for decades before the 1977–79 revolution the anniversary of Kashf-e hijab was celebrated as Women's Day in Iran, portraying Reza Shah as their savior.

Zan-i keh Mikhaham, like my previous work, stands as a challenge to this male-centered history and historiography. Here we meet, through Zandokht's own words, a historical woman who campaigns for women's rights and works toward empowering women. Her political consciousness and self-awareness are not born of any top-down government initiatives. In fact, in many of her poems and writings she explicitly criticizes politicians alongside religious authorities:

> The statesmen of Iran say that "we love our homeland"
> I see nothing but disloyalty in these fake lovers
> Those who claim to be the guardians of religion and the people's guides
> I see them not the least god-fearing and justice minded.[5]

She also challenges the king:

> Now that the Iranian girl will go to the West
> Should she be unaware of issues and unfamiliar with books? What is this?
> O, wind, tell this to our crowned king
> Without women's participation, what good are election rights?

Finally, she puts forth women's emancipation as the foundation of the nation's betterment:

> If there is no uprising among the masses of women
> What good is passion and revolution for the nation?

Encountering Zandokht, we have no choice but to rethink our historical and cultural imaginary.

NA: The constellation of voices in *Zan-i keh Mikhaham* personally stood out to me. Your voices echoed in a space that befittingly was "a room of one's own" due to the public health crisis that kept us in our own (living) rooms. You brought in collaborators from different generations and cross-border experiences to read excerpts of Zandokht's writings. Tell us about the conversations in rehearsals and behind the scenes, and what might have come into your discussions around generational gaps and diversity of experiences.

GH: Let me give a picture of the group first: the six participant-performers included two in their midthirties, two in their forties, one in their late fifties, and one in their early eighties, representing four generations with distinct sociohistorical experiences and memories. There were two artists, a retired competitive athlete, a children's educator, a PhD student, and a newly appointed university professor. One of them was in Iran, one in the United States, and four in Canada. Only one of them was born and raised in Tehran. The others were from different provinces, and their class origins were also very diverse. Thus the group represented a wide cross section of Iranian women. None of them considered themselves women's rights activists or even necessarily feminists. As women who already enjoy some social and personal power, they did not immediately acknowledge that their gender significantly marked their experiences. For the younger participants, it was hard to readily see threads that connected their experiences to Zandokht's.

As a performance-art piece, *Zan-i keh Mikhaham* is not about *acting* but about *being* and *becoming*. Because the participant-performers gave their voice to Zandokht, the process had to operate on them at a very deep level that could parallel the personal empowerment process that Zandokht herself had to undertake and that she brought to her sociopolitical work. For me, it became really important to focus on the emotional layers of the text, because that's where people can find connections across generational and geographic divides. About 60 percent of our time together was dedicated to remembering and sharing our experiences as women in a safe space. We also recalled the lives of women that we knew, our mothers, and grandmothers, and aunts, and so on. Methodologically, this is akin to feminist consciousness-raising and empowerment projects. These conversations were emotionally very intense and demanding. It became clear that, regardless of the specifics of our stories, we all had experienced patriarchal violence, whether through sexual assault at home and physical violence on the street or in dealing with a system that reduces us to dependents of fathers and husbands and limits our educational and professional opportunities. Even when something was not in our own direct personal experience, such as forced marriage, we accessed intergenerational memories and witness stories. The generational and geographic diversity of our experiences made it possible for us to work through both the traumatic and the empowering experience, and to establish shared understanding and empathy with one another and with Zandokht. This became part of the performance. Near the end,

between the final two scenes, each participant-performer gave a personal story and explained how it connected to Zandokht. This was one of the most moving moments for all of us.

NA: One of my favorite moments in *Zan-i keh Mikhaham* was the rupture that happened in language when one of the performers, Azadeh Pirazimian, gave her story in the Gilaki dialect. This moment was a reminder of nationalist discourses and public imagination that erases ethnic and religious minorities in Iran. As someone who reads early feminist texts in Farsi for pleasure, I see a genealogy of women writers who are elite and hail from urban Farsi-speaking backgrounds. Their writings and ideologies often align with the nationalist project in disenfranchising ethnic and indigenous experiences. Some of these texts, including excerpts that I heard from Zandokht, blame women for not participating in labor and social and economic production. This is particularly striking because these texts overlook the labor women have always voluntarily or involuntarily undertaken in managing households and raising children as well as the fact that working-class women have always had to work. Women living in small towns (*zanan-e rousta neshin*) have always farmed, harvested, and raised cattle. Indigenous women (*zanan-e ashayer neshin*) have been active participants in indigenous social and economic networks. Knowing these early texts well, I wonder what your observations about Zandokht's work are in comparison to her contemporaries who engaged with similar topics on women's participation in labor. How do these texts include or exclude marginalized ethnic and indigenous women in Iran? What other limitations do you see in these early texts?

GH: Yes, Azadeh's monologue in Gilaki was profoundly moving for all of us, too, and a decision that we arrived at through the process of developing personal stories for inclusion in the performance. The inspiration for it came directly from Zandokht's text and through a conversation between Azadeh and me about identity and language. Of course, next to recognizing the exclusions and injustices we experience as women, we had to acknowledge other layers of exclusion and injustice and explore their intersections.

I understand the impulse and analysis in your question, but I think you are overgeneralizing. It is important to remember that we don't yet have a comprehensive archive of women's writings from this period. Even the National Library in Iran has only four out of the seven issues of *Daughters of Iran*. Most of the texts we are familiar with and have access to are from a few women writers who were better known and well connected and who survived Reza Shah's assault on women activists.

Zandokht's writing is from the period when Iran was being reimagined as a monolithic nation. During both the Qajar and Safavid periods, there was no such imagination; rather, there was an acknowledgment of ethnic and linguistic multiplicities in Iran, even in the name itself. We had the Mamalek-e Mahroose-ye Iran

(Protected Domains of Iran), not Iran. It's after the Constitutional Revolution, and as part and parcel of Iranian modernity, that Iran becomes a singular domain. This was of course heavily pushed [for] in the Pahlavi period in order to establish the power of the central government.

Zandokht can't be but a woman of her time. As we critique the discourses of that time, it is important to remember that (a) developing awareness about power dynamics and exclusionary practices has been an incremental process everywhere, and (b) Western colonial interventions affected ethnic relations in Iran as in many other places. That said, compared to her contemporaries, Zandokht exhibits a greater awareness of class, ethnic, and linguistic diversity. For example, in the founding program of the Association for Women's Revolution, item 8 is *hefz-e hoghoogh-e khademeh-ha* (defending the rights of female servants) and item 16 calls for the government to provide employment opportunities for low-income women. In one of her poems, which I assume is addressed to urban women, she calls on them to "work like tribal women and not accept the chains of slavery" (choun zan-e eliat-i bekoushid / jameh-e bandehgee ra napoushid, quoted in Basari 1968: 74). She also repeatedly acknowledges women's domestic labor and berates men for using women as "slaves and chattel."

In the masthead of *Daughters of Iran*, she declares a 10-percent discount for "people in parts of Iran where Farsi is not the spoken language." This is the only publication of that period, or any period actually, that I have seen that makes such a declaration. We could read this as an attempt to promote Farsi as the dominant language, but I think differently. Zandokht is too radical for that. An example of her radicalism is the use of colloquial language, regional dialects, and street idioms in some of her poems. So I choose to read the discount as her way of acknowledging linguistic multiplicity in Iran, and her attempt to address the disadvantages that non–Farsi speakers suffer. It is important to remember that, being born and raised in Shiraz, Zandokht would have been intimately familiar with Turkic-speaking Qashqayis and Luri-speaking Bakhtiyaris. Moreover, she boasts of being a descendant of the Zand dynasty, which was a Luri tribe. Even if her immediate family didn't speak Luri, it is quite conceivable that there were people in her extended family, her clan, who did. Of course, here I am imagining what is missing in the scant biographical information we have of her. In any case, it was actually that line in the masthead that gave us the opening we needed to break and challenge the overall language uniformity of her writing, which Azadeh did beautifully by repeating a line from Zandokht's poem in Gilaki.

NA: It also seems that, from early on, women's writings in Iran have drawn from and worked in tandem with transnational feminist solidarities. We see references, in early texts, to women's movements in France, Turkey, and Southwest Asia and North Africa, for instance. You worked on this topic before and have firsthand experience

of the Iranian women's movement during the 1977–79 revolution. The Iranian women's movement has been an ongoing process. Yet we continue hearing various critical perspectives on emerging waves and movements in relation to the efficacy of a normative Euro-American international feminism in the Global South. How do you view these transnational and international coalitions as they have formed and shifted throughout time, starting in early texts such as Zandokht's poems and writings and perhaps extending to the contemporary moment?

GH: I think we need to speak of these in specific historical and local frames. If we issue wholesale statements, we fall prey to patriarchal thinking and end up discounting and undermining women's agency. The longest scene in *Zan-i keh Mikhaham* is part of a speech that Zandokht gave on the opening night of the first theatrical performance women were allowed to attend in Shiraz following intense lobbying by the Association for Women's Revolution. In it she presents an inventory of gains made by women in different parts of Iran and in other places in the world to mobilize women in the audience. The list includes China, Turkey, the Caucasus, Afghanistan, India, Egypt, South Africa, Japan, Norway, Greece, England, and Germany, in that order. I included this long passage precisely because it shows the absence of a dominant or normative Euro-American feminism in Zandokht's thinking. It is interesting that the United States wasn't even in her list, even though American missionaries were present and ran some of the girls' schools in Iran, and in Shiraz they operated an important hospital.

I think this was a dynamic period in local and transnational feminism, and most of the activists of this time did not think of themselves as following imported Western models and programs. Rather, they were looking at much broader fields, as the passage I mentioned shows. Zandokht saw herself and Iranian women in dialogue with, and as part of, a global women's revolution, and at the same time she was well aware of the local differences and specificities. The program of the Association for Women's Revolution addressed the specific issues and circumstances of women in Iran, and that is what a pragmatic document has to do. At the same time, some of her writing, particularly her poetry, displayed an awareness of gender as a category that transcends borders: "Dar awyeleh-e bashar sahim and zanan / tashkil be tanha nashavad az mardan" (Women are shareholders in the human family / That is not made of men alone).[6]

Reza Shah's suppression of the independent women's movement, through the appropriation and deradicalization of their goals and the absorption of some of their activists in the state's centralized aparati, including Kanoon-e Banovan, which became Sazman-e Zanan (the Women's Organization) under Pahlavi II, were all part of the systematic erasure that has led to the erroneous claims that feminism in Iran was imported and top down. Interestingly, both Islamists and royalist-liberals share this view that negates women's agency and a feminism indigenous to Iran. To

understand the contemporary dynamics, it is absolutely critical to repopulate our historical imagination with women. I have tried to do this in my projects, including *Barayandegan* (*Emergent*), which looks at the generation between mine and Zandokht's, born in the late 1930s and the 1940s.[7] This generation was educated and entered the emerging middle-class labor force in large numbers, and irreversibly changed sociocultural norms and dynamics. In the audio portraits that are part of the project, we hear women, in their own voices and words, whose feminisms and struggles against patriarchal constructs were motivated by the injustices they experienced in their day-to-day lives.

This generation and their achievements were also erased from the dominant histories. Their members are, thankfully, still active, including in creating national and transnational networks of feminist solidarity, as my generation of activists has also been doing. When women of these two generations took to the streets against mandatory veiling in March 1979, it was because we saw that measure as the beginning of a reactionary and oppressive regime. It is quite telling that mandatory veiling was one of the first policies Khomeini instituted, less than a month after his return to Iran, and that women and their allies were the first group to resist the Islamist regime through street protests. When we discover and learn about the indigenous roots of our feminisms and that our activism is rooted in our local histories and realities, the grounds on which we can form coalitions and networks will become clear to us.

NA: Over the years, your work has explored the overlaps between history and memory, political and personal, archival and digital, text and performance, most famously in your compelling work on embodied calligraphy. If we were to trace a thread through your work or an impulse that has animated your artistic practice, what would it be?

GH: I like *impulse* better because it is variable and nonlinear. *Thread* is too linear a concept. Maybe the thread is that I have consistently followed the impulse to resist fragmentation and categorization. I think these are patriarchal processes that colonize us, our imagination, and actions. We tend to fragment and categorize things because it makes them easier to package and sell. Around the same time that I was revisiting my history and making *Of Shifting Shadows*, I arrived at a formula that has guided not just my art practice but my being and operating in this world: "The personal is poetic, the poetic is political, the political is personal." For me, these are not merely overlapping domains; rather, they are facets or modalities of a unified whole. That's why my work keeps jumping established disciplinary and conceptual boundaries. For me, every text is a performance and every performance is a text; every history is a compilation of memories that, being recorded in some way, becomes a memory. This is why, since the early 1990s, I have been creating digital

archives and digitizing analogue archives. My projects, including those involving embodied writing, are simultaneously digital, archival, personal, political, textual, and performative. In their content, methodology, and effect, they are, inextricably, remembrances and histories as they take place in real and virtual times. *Zan-i keh Mikhaham*, for example, engaged participant-performers in a historical/archival/political narrative through processes that drew on personal experiences and memories. The text itself was a performance, and the performance was a text that remixed six voices that were distinct because of their individual linguistic histories and generational and geographic identities. The work drew from an archive and itself has become a living archive. The consensual and generative dimensions of the work are very important. They are what I aim for.

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Notes

1. For more on this project, see zandokht.subversivepress.org.
2. For more on *Ephemeral Monument* (2008), see ephemeralmonument.subversivepress.org. For more on *The Book of Illuminations* (2012), see illuminations.subversivepress.org. For more on *Grounding* (2017), see grounding.subversivepress.org.
3. For more on *Of Shifting Shadows*, see shifting.gitaha.net.
4. For more information about this event, see Weber 2008.
5. This and the following poems are included in the performance text in the original Farsi; the translation is by Gita Hashemi.
6. Translated by Gita Hashemi from Zandokht 1927: 16.
7. For more on this project, see www.emergent.gitaha.net.

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