



**MUSLIM REFORMERS IN TBILISI - THE EXAMPLE OF THE "  
MOLLĀ NASREDDIN" MAGAZINE**<sup>20</sup>

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**Abstract**

In the early 20th century, a group of artists and intellectuals reinterpreted one of the most famous folkloric figures of the Middle East, Mollā Nasreddin. In doing so, they sought to shape a reformist and anti-colonial Muslim discourse that focused on social and political reform. Through folklore, visual art, and satire, the periodical *Mollā Nasreddin* influenced tens of thousands of Muslims and changed the thinking of an entire generation. The authors came from a variety of social backgrounds. Some came from working-class families, but the majority were middle-class. Editor Jalil Mammadguluzadeh, also known as Mirza Jalil (1866–1932), was an author, playwright, and one of the founders of the critical realism school of Azerbaijani literature. Omar Faig Nemanzadeh (1872–1937), co-founder and editor, was an experienced journalist who had studied in Turkey. Mirza Jalil's wife,

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<sup>20</sup> Afary & Afary, 2019: 82-85 The article was prepared within the framework of the project (#FR-8081) funded by the Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation of Georgia

Hamida Khanum (1873–1955), was an advocate for women's rights. About 370 issues of *Mollā Nasreddin* were published in Tbilisi from 1906 to 1912. On April 7, 1906, the magazine was launched with a modest circulation of 1,000 copies, but within a month it was printing 25,000 copies per week. *Mollā Nasreddin* criticized the politicians, landowners, and clergy of the South Caucasus; It emphasized the oppression of women and children in a patriarchal society.

**Keywords:** Mollā Nasreddin; Tbilisi; Mirza Jalil Mammadguluzadeh.

### **Introduction**

In the early 20th century, a group of artists and intellectuals reinterpreted one of the most famous folkloric figures of the Middle East, Mollā Nasreddin. In doing so, they sought to shape a reformist and anti-colonial Muslim discourse that would focus on social and political reforms. Through folklore, visual art, and satire, the periodical *Mollā Nasreddin* influenced tens of thousands of Muslims and changed the thinking of an entire generation.

The newly founded magazine soon brought together the most advanced group of Azerbaijani intelligentsia. Along with the editor, the magazine's pages under various pseudonyms published such famous writers and poets as Mirza Ali-Akbar Sabir, Abdurrahim bey Hagverdiyev, Ali Nazmi, Aligulu Gamgusar, Mammed Said Ordubadi, Omar Faig Nemanzadeh, Salman Mumtaz and other writers. The authors belonged to various social strata. Some were from working-class families, but the majority were middle-class. The editor, Jalil Mammadguluzadeh, also known as Mirza Jalil (1866–1932), was an author, playwright and one of the founders of the school of critical realism in Azerbaijani literature. Omar Faig Nemanzadeh (1872–1937), the co-founder and editor, was an experienced journalist who had studied in Turkey. Mirza Jalil's wife, Hamida Khanum (1873–1955), was a women's rights activist. Another notable contributor was Mirza Ali-Akbar Sabir (1862–1911), a prominent 20th-century Azerbaijani

poet. The illustrations for the edition are by Josef Rotter, Oscar Schmerling and Azim Azimzade.

### **Methodology**

The current paper aims to describe Muslim, particularly Azerbaijani reformer's life and work in Tbilisi in the early 20th century through the example of the periodical publishing of *Mollā Nasreddin*. The paper relies on different research articles, monographs, and original *Mollā Nasreddin* issues as well. The paper uses qualitative research methods to analyze collected data and narrative research that is more suited for analyzing and understanding societies, cultures, and peoples. In this framework various data were collected, categorized and analyzed. The paper also employs an inductive approach, which is sufficient for drawing conclusions on an individual fact basis.

### **Discussions**

Jalil Mammadguluzadeh was born in 1866 in Nakhchivan. First, he was enrolled in a church school, and at the age of thirteen was transferred to the Nakhchivan city school, where he learned the Russian language. In 1882, he enrolled in the Transcaucasian Teachers' Seminary in the city of Gori, which had a very significant impact on the formation of his worldview. After graduating from school in 1887, he began working as a teacher in a rural school in the Yerevan province. In 1903, Jalil Mammadguluzadeh began working in Tbilisi, in the local Azerbaijani newspaper "*Shagri Rus*" (East of Russia)<sup>21</sup>. In 1905, he and Omar Faig Nemanzadeh, with the financial assistance of Meshedi Alaskar Baghirov, acquired a printing house and, in 1906, began publishing the satirical magazine *Mollā Nasreddin*. The name of the magazine was largely dictated by the fact that the name of a well-known and beloved folk hero was often used when it was considered not preferable to refer to the author in the article.

Omar Faig Nemanzadeh was born in the village of Agara in Meskheti into a family of Sunni peasants. In 1882, at the request of his mother, he went to study in Istanbul, in the Fatih Madrasah. Soon he

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<sup>21</sup> Afary & Afary, 2019: 82-85

asked his uncle to send him to the reformist Darüşşafaka (a symbiosis of a high school and a college), where Omar Faig Nemanzadeh received a relatively modern, secular education. For several years he worked at the Galata post office and became involved in the Young Turk movement.<sup>22</sup> Fearing arrest, he soon returned to the South Caucasus, where he worked in various cities for the next few years, including Shamakhi, Ganja, Tbilisi, etc. When it was decided to publish the magazine, the license application was submitted only in the name of Mirza Jalil, because Omar Faig Nemanzadeh had been arrested several times by this time and was known for his radical views. He published articles in the magazine under about forty pseudonyms, including the name Mollā Nasreddin, which he shared with Mirza Jalil. Most of the articles with radical views that were published in the magazine belong to Omar Faig Nemanzadeh.

After the Bolshevik Revolution, Omar Faig Nemanzadeh stopped working for *Mollā Nasreddin's* magazine and began working for the non-Bolshevik Musavat Party, which became one of the leading political parties in the newly formed Azerbaijan Democratic Republic. After Mirza Jalil's death, Omar Faig Nemanzadeh returned to Georgia, to Agara, but in 1937 he was arrested and executed on charges of espionage for Turkey.<sup>23</sup>

Jalil Mammadgulizadeh's wife, Hamida Khanum Javanshir, made a great contribution to the development of the magazine, its gender policy, and its position against the oppression and violence against women. The magazine mostly survived and achieved success thanks to Hamida Khanum's intellectual and financial support. Hamida Khanum Javanshir was born in Karabakh. Before the conquest of the region by the Russian Empire, the Javanshirs were its rulers, but in the second half of the 19th century they were an ordinary Russified Muslim aristocratic family, where the men studied at the St. Petersburg Military Academy and served as officers in the Russian army. Hamida Khanum

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<sup>22</sup> Cəfərov, 2010

<sup>23</sup> Afary and Afary, 2022: 114

was educated at home, where she was taught to read and write in Russian, and after the death of her first husband and father (1903), she took charge of the family and the farm. She met Mirza Jalil in Tbilisi when she came to publish her father's literary works. Here, on the advice of Mirza Jalil, she founded a friendly society of Muslim women, which quickly managed to open the first elementary school for Muslim girls. Mirza Jalil and Hamida Khanum saw each other as progressive thinkers and a support for each other. The vast majority of *Mollā Nasreddin's* articles dealt with the rights of Muslim women, including issues that affected Hamida Khanum and the other women in his life. Often, it was the lives of Hamida Khanum and other successful, independent Muslim women that provided the highest goal that Mirza Jalili compared to the lives of traditional Muslim families living in the South Caucasus.<sup>24</sup>

After their marriage, Mirza Jalil and Hamida Khanum continued to live largely separately. Hamida Khanum continued her work in Kahrizli (Karabakh), while Mirza Jalil continued to work in Tbilisi. Several times a year, Mirza Jalil visited her husband in Karabakh and spent time with him in Shusha.<sup>25</sup> After the marriage, Mirza Jalil received the necessary financial support from Hamida Khanum and was able to devote himself entirely to the periodical publication. This marriage was also important for Hamida Khanum, which, on the one hand, allowed her to maintain her independence and, on the other hand, to be more involved in public life and make a significant contribution to the protection of women's rights. In Shusha and Tbilisi, Hamida Khanum organized performances, benefits, and other events to raise funds, which she later used to support the education of poor children. She established close ties with the Armenian women's community, and together they tried to establish friendly relations between the opposing ethnic communities. Mirza Jalil, in turn, supported Hamida Khanum's initiatives in journal articles, where she often criticized those members

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<sup>24</sup> Afary and Afary, 2022: 93-97

<sup>25</sup> Javanshir, 2016: 43-51

of society who did not participate in charitable donations and called on the wealthy part of society to become more generous in charity.

After the death of Jalil Mammadguluzadeh, Hamida Khanum actively tried to popularize his works, translating and publishing them. In 1939, she became a member of the Azerbaijani Writers' Association and wrote memoirs about her life together with Mirza Jalil. This work can be considered the most comprehensive history of the lives of Mirza Jalil and Mollā Nasreddin. It reveals much about their contemporary marriage. It shows that despite her husband's unconditional support for her and his work, she maintained her own voice, vision, and independence, both during and after their twenty-five-year marriage.

Mirza Ali-Akbar Sabir was born in 1862 in Shamakhi, Shirvan province. He received his education at the New Method School founded by the poet Azim Shirvan, where he also began writing poetry. Sabir was a popular poet and orator and performed as a lute at religious ceremonies. At an early age, he visited a significant part of Central Asia (Samarkand, Bukhara) and the Middle East (Iran, Iraq) together with his brothers and mother, which gave him an idea of the social life of the region. After returning to Shamakhi, he married and began producing soap, although he did not give up writing poetry. The Russian revolution of 1905 caused an important turning point in his work. Ali-Akbar Sabir actively returned to writing poems on social topics, which significantly enriched his writing style. The most successful years in his work are the years 1906-1911, when he actively collaborated with the magazine *Mollā Nasreddin* along with other Azerbaijani-language publishing houses. He signed the poems published in the magazine with various satirical pseudonyms, such as "hoopoe", "Pillar of Religion", "Tearful Laughter", "Old Uncle", "Old Iranian" and "Scientist".<sup>26</sup>

He became the target of considerable criticism for his poems published in *Mollā Nasreddin*, which also affected his soap production. In 1908, he opened a school of the New Method, but here again he was

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<sup>26</sup> Afary and Afary, 2022: 101

severely criticized for its modernist curriculum. In 1910, he was forced to move to Baku, where he worked as a teacher and edited periodicals such as *Tazeh Hayāt* and *Haqiqat*. Soon he fell ill and returned to Shamakhi, where he died of kidney failure in 1911.

Ali-Akbar Sabir is considered a revolutionary of Azerbaijani literature. In terms of satirical techniques, Sabir uses almost all the forms and methods that his predecessors used. He uses qasideh and ghazel, mathnavi and ruba'i equally in his works. Sometimes he parodies a well-known poem, or, more accurately, he takes the first line and writes a poem of parallel structure.

Many of the poems were satirical monologues, expressing a personal opinion or a scene of a private conversation between two people, for example, between a husband and wife or between a landlord and a worker etc. Against the backdrop of workers' strikes and the strengthening of the protest movement in the South Caucasus and Iran, Sabir published a poem that was an appeal from the wealthy class to the workers of Baku. Sabir also often published poems that had the character of private conversations, for example, about a man who was tired of his wife and four children and wanted to take a second wife, but his first wife was against it; An old woman who gave her young daughter-in-law a warning about her own finances and emotional state, because men were not trustworthy; A wedding night from the perspective of a fifteen-year-old girl who begs her mother not to let her seventy-year-old husband into the bridal chamber.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to being a progressive poet who spoke to the class, gender, and ethnic concerns of the Muslims of the South Caucasus, Sabir wrote more than twenty poems about Iran and the Young Turk Revolution. His poems about Iran, especially those about the Siege of Tabriz, were passed down orally among Azerbaijani revolutionaries.

Abdurrahim bey Hagverdiyev was born in 1870 in Shusha into a noble family but had a rather difficult childhood due to the separation of his parents. At first, he grew up with his father and stepmother,

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<sup>27</sup> Mollā Nasreddin, 2005

after his father's death, his guardianship was entrusted to his uncle, and at the age of 10 he moved to live with his mother and stepfather, where he was taught to read and write. He studied at a German-style school in Tbilisi, after which he was enrolled in the Department of Transport Engineering in St. Petersburg. From the age of fourteen, Hagverdiyev began writing plays. While working in St. Petersburg, he translated several Russian plays into the Azerbaijani language. He also wrote the first epic tragedy written in the Azerbaijani language, *Dagh-ilan Tifag*, The Disruption of Unity. In 1906, Hagverdiyev was elected to the Duma of the Russian Empire. One of the six representatives of the Muslim community. In 1918, he was also elected to the Parliament of the Democratic Republic of Georgia as a representative of the Muslim community. At the beginning of his work at the magazine *Mollā Nasreddin*, he was the most prominent figure in its editorial staff.

*Mollā Nasreddin* did not represent a political party or union, although almost its entire editorial team was distinguished by social-democratic sentiments. Most of the writers and poets employed by the magazine were of the Shiite faith, as were the majority of the readers of *Mollā Nasreddin*, although the magazine's co-founder, Omar Faig Nemanzadeh, was Sunni, and the two main illustrators, Schmerling and Rotter, were Christian and Jewish, respectively.

Tbilisi, where the magazine *Mollā Nasreddin* was published from 1906 to 1912, was home to many diaspora communities, with a rather sophisticated culture. The majority of the magazine's staff also lived here. The city's established artistic reputation protected *Mollā Nasreddin's* writers and illustrators, providing them with a safe space for creative development. As Mirza Jalil noted, the magazine could not have been published further south, closer to Baku and the Iranian border, where the larger Muslim community would have shut down a radical periodical publishing. Even in Tbilisi, the editorial staff of *Mollā Nasreddin* had to exercise the utmost caution. The magazine's printing house was located in the Armenian community of the city,

while Mirza Jalil himself lived in a Georgian neighborhood, far from the Muslim community.

From 1906 to 1912, approximately 370 issues of *Mollā Nasreddin* were published in Tbilisi. On April 7, 1906, the magazine was launched with a modest print run of 1,000 copies, but within a month, 25,000 copies were printed per week.<sup>28</sup> *Mollā Nasreddin* criticized the politicians, landowners, and clergy of the South Caucasus; it emphasized the oppression of women and children in a patriarchal society.

The eight-page, weekly magazine had full-page lithographic color illustrations and presented a well-balanced mix of text and illustrations. The issue of *Mollā Nasreddin* mainly contained the following types of articles and columns: caricatures and illustrations, discussions, satirical stories, feuilletons, personal and official statements, humorous poems, telegrams, a mailbox.

The illustration on the cover of the first issue is called “Awakening”. *Mollā Nasreddin* awakens the “sleeping nations of the East”.<sup>29</sup>

*Mollā Nasreddin*, unlike other publications of the time, primarily addressed the less educated Azerbaijani population, who were often under Turkish, Russian, or Iranian influence. According to Mirza Jalil, his magazine was a product of its time, when the majority of the population was illiterate, ruled by the Russian and Persian empires, under the guidance of religious leaders. The texts were written in simple language, and the illustrations were easy to understand. They often dealt with clerics, whom the magazine's authors considered enemies of education and secular society.

*Mollā Nasreddin* represented a synthesis of progressive ideologies. He equally criticized the tsarist bureaucracy, Muslim religious institutions, landowners who overtaxed the peasants, and the wealthy strata of the population who did not do enough charity. He criticized the imperialist powers for their territorial conquests in the Middle East and North Africa. In the social and cultural arena, *Mollā Nasreddin*

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<sup>28</sup> Afary and Afary, 2022: 64

<sup>29</sup>Mollā Nasreddin, 1988.

called for greater rights for Muslim women, modern schools, and education in the Azerbaijani language.<sup>30</sup>

The magazine was originally published in Azerbaijani Turkish, which was of great importance to its editors. As a result, it became accessible to the Turkish-speaking population living in Iran and to Azerbaijanis. The publication paid special attention to the so-called "intellectuals", who were so immersed in the Russian language and culture that it was humiliating for them to speak Turkish. In the first issue of the magazine, Mollā Nasreddin writes: "Now, I have finished my speech, and I have only one apology. Please forgive me, my Turkish brothers, for addressing you in Turkish. I know that it is shameful and indicates human ignorance, but sometimes it would not be so bad to remember the old days when mothers would speak to us in our native language while rocking the cradle."<sup>31</sup>

The publication of *Mollā Nasreddin* coincided with the educational movement in Azerbaijan. A few years earlier, private bilingual Russian Azerbaijani schools had emerged following Gasprinsky's new method of educational reform (Jadidism). The new literary movement had three components: the introduction of new method programs into existing schools and the construction of new schools; the creation of evening adult education programs; and the establishment of teacher training programs to cope with the expected influx of new students.<sup>32</sup> As a result of these efforts, literacy rates in the South Caucasus, especially in Baku, rose substantially after 1906. Mirza Jalil and Sabir were strong supporters of the new method and Gasprinsky. An illustration by Schmerling shows Gasprinsky, holding his magazine *Tarjomān*, being attacked by two mullahs who accuse Gasprinsky of "heresy" and claim that his new pedagogical methods contradict Sharia law.

The reformers demanded bilingual education, where most of the instruction would be in Azerbaijani. What they found difficult to

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<sup>30</sup> Slavs and Tatars, 2011: 53

<sup>31</sup> Mollā Nasreddin, 1988

<sup>32</sup> Tağizade, 2021

agree on was whether the new written language, Azerbaijani or Turkish, should be based on. Since Azerbaijani had not yet been standardized, and a certain part of the population had received an Ottoman education, there were quite a few supporters of introducing Ottoman Turkish as the native language.<sup>33</sup> Mirza Jalil, like most of the editorial staff of *Mollā Nasreddin's* magazine, believed that, even though Azerbaijani was very close to Ottoman, it could not be replaced by Ottoman Turkish under any circumstances. Azerbaijanis could barely express themselves even in their own language, and Persian and Ottoman languages were certainly no way out of this situation.

*Mollā Nasreddin* was particularly critical of the middle and upper classes of the population, who had completely switched to the Russian language. “The state may not allow us to learn our native language in state schools, but what prevents us from speaking Azerbaijani with children or in public places? Why do we give our children Russian names or allow them to change Azerbaijani names to Russian ones, so that when you come to a friend’s house and call his little girl Monavar, she frowns because she prefers the name “Varia.”<sup>34</sup>

These articles were followed by periodic attacks on the editor by both the tsarist authorities and Shiite clerics in Iran and Transcaucasia, which led to censorship, occasional closure, and even the confiscation of the newspaper at the Iranian border.

The magazine's active criticism of the clergy, its secular outlook, and its active support for women's rights were also associated with certain risks. Jalil Mammadguluzadeh and his magazine were constantly threatened. In 1907, the Ottoman consul in Tbilisi complained to the ruler of the Caucasus about caricatures published in the magazine, which depicted the Ottoman Sultan. As a result, the magazine *Mollā Nasreddin* was forbidden to publish illustrations on this topic. (The magazine did not publish anything about the Ottoman Sultan until the Young Turk Revolution). The magazine was also in the spotlight in

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<sup>33</sup> Swietochowski, 1985

<sup>34</sup> Mollā Nasreddin, 2002

Iran. An entire session of the Iranian parliament was dedicated to an article published in one of the issues of *Mollā Nasreddin*. An Iranian parliamentarian, criticized in the magazine for inappropriate behavior, tried to justify himself to the audience.<sup>35</sup> Despite everything, Jalil Mammadguluzadeh felt largely safe in Tbilisi. He said that if the publishing house had been in Baku or Yerevan instead of Tbilisi, his office would have been raided, and he would most likely have been killed.<sup>36</sup>

The bloody clashes of 1905 between ethnic Armenians and Azerbaijanis soon became a cause of conflict in Baku and Tbilisi as well. Given that Mollā Nasreddin's printing house was located in the Armenian quarter of Tbilisi, two young writers of the magazine almost got involved in one of the clashes. The situation was saved only by the fact that the printing house was restored at the time with the help of two Armenian craftsmen. This event had a strong influence on Mirza Jalil and Omar Faeq and may have contributed to their strong support for ethnic harmony between Muslims and Armenians. They also tried to show that both groups were victims of Russian imperialism and the "divide and rule" policy.<sup>37</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Jalil Mammadguluzadeh, through the magazine *Mollā Nasreddin*, made a great contribution to Azerbaijani culture and helped develop critical realism in educated Azerbaijani circles. It accurately described the domestic and economic situation in the Caucasus at the beginning of the 20th century and ridiculed backwardness and illiteracy. The current Republic of Azerbaijan sees *Mollā Nasreddin's* magazine as an early expression of Azerbaijani identity. However, Iran also claims ownership of the magazine. Iranian historians emphasize the historical and religious ties between Transcaucasia and Iran, the

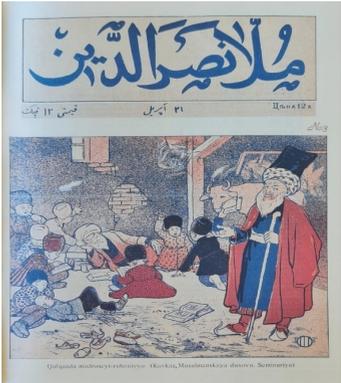
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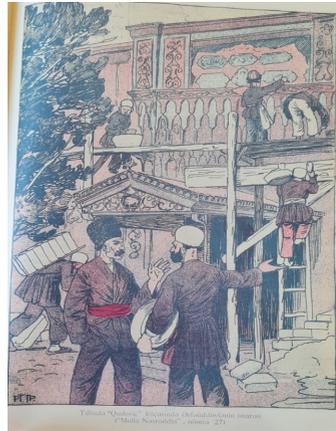
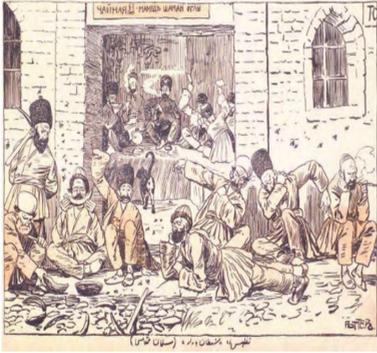
<sup>35</sup> Afary & Afary, 2016:127

<sup>36</sup> Javanshir, 2016: 127

<sup>37</sup> Swietochowski, 1985

Persian roots of Sabir and Jalil Mammadguluzadeh, as well as the magazine's heightened focus and a kind of nostalgia for Iran.





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