
Hajizade, B. (2024). Against the background of revolutions, religious fanaticism, and pressures – satirical magazine (Iranian period of “Molla Nasreddin” magazine). *Culture and Arts in the Context of World Cultural Heritage. Klironomy*, 9, 7–19. Ostrava.

DOI: 10.47451/her2024-10-01

The paper will be published in Crossref, ICI Copernicus, BASE, Zenodo, OpenAIRE, LORY, HSLU, J-Gate, ASCI, Academic Resource Index ResearchBib, ISI International Scientific Indexing, ADL, JournalsPedia, Mendeley, eLibrary, and WebArchive databases.



Bayram Hajizade, Ph.D. in Art History, Professor, Honoured Art Worker. Baku, Azerbaijan.

Against the Background of Revolutions, Religious Fanaticism, and Pressures – Satirical Magazine (Iranian Period of “Molla Nasreddin” Magazine)

Abstract: Azerbaijani cartooning evolved in close connection with European and Russian satirical literature and media, adapting to the local cultural environment and developing both national and international artistic forms. It occupies a unique place in the history of world caricature, positively influencing the formation of satirical press and graphics in Central Asia, Tatarstan, Crimea, the Caucasus, and especially Iran, and has played an invaluable role in the advancement of political satire. The research adheres to the principles of historicity and chronological sequence, utilizing historical-comparative and art analysis methods. It highlights the contributions of Azerbaijani satirical media, writers, publicists, and especially cartoonists, from the perspectives of enlightenment, national revival, progress, and freedom. The study analyzes cartoons that carry a deep social and political weight, educational content, psychological impact, national color, sarcasm, reproach, and criticism. The scientific and theoretical study of Azerbaijani caricature—an essential part of global visual art—alongside research into the artists who contributed to this field, the genre’s modern popularity, and its recognition within society, underscores the importance of this art form and confirms the relevance of this topic. Our main goals in this research are to: undertake a deeper study of Azerbaijani caricature and its sphere of influence; conduct fundamental research into this genre; assess the role of the satirical press in advancing the art of caricature; identify the key features of national caricature traditions; and analyze the work of artists in this field, with particular focus on the publication of the satirical magazine “Molla Nasreddin” in Tabriz in 1921, which boasted a rich tradition of caricature. Additionally, we aim to highlight the positive impact and prestige of “Molla Nasreddin” on Iranian satire, emphasize the press’s role in the development of caricature, and outline the main stages of this evolution in chronological order. The research covers the various forms and stages of development within satirical graphics and caricature, examining the content, form, style, and artistic techniques of caricatures published at that time. The creativity and works of Seyid Ali Behzad, Molla Nasreddin’s leading artist, are also a focal point. The research’s scientific novelty is underscored by the problem’s formulation, demonstrated through solid evidence and analysis.

Keywords: Molla Nasreddin, caricature, satirical graphics, an artist, publication, press, creativity, community.

Introduction

One of the key issues facing contemporary art is the research and systematic exploration of the caricature genre, which is an integral part of fine art. Examples of paintings containing elements of sarcasm, irony, grotesque, reproach and criticism could be found in the Azerbaijani miniature painting as early as the 15th and 16th centuries. Interest in satirical press in the Azerbaijani society, whether during tsarist Russia and the Soviet era, or in the years of

independence, the popularity of the caricature genre, the successes achieved in this field in the modern era, made the deeper study and research of this art relevant as a separate research object.

The study of the history of caricature from a scientific and theoretical perspective allows us to trace the creative contributions of artists in this field, assess the role and significance of the satirical press in popularizing the art of caricature among the public, and recognize its development as an independent genre. Examining the historical trajectory and stages of Azerbaijani satirical press and satirical graphics, defining their historical and artistic traditions, and evaluating their evolution in alignment with the current era is also essential.

The scientific novelty of this research lies in its unique problem statement. For the first time, the study examines the development of Azerbaijani caricature art, highlighting its integration of artistic elements from European and Russian fine arts at a national level, and its role in shaping the satirical press of neighboring countries. The influence of the Azerbaijani satirical press and graphics on Iranian satire, as well as the significance and impact of the “Molla Nasreddin” satirical magazine in the Middle East, particularly in Iran, is also noted. The research provides credible evidence to explain the magazine’s role in the evolution of the caricature genre and outlines the major stages of this process. Additionally, works by Azerbaijani and Iranian artists, including cartoons and satirical paintings published in periodicals, are included, evaluated, and analyzed from an art historical perspective.

The main objective of the research is to explore the period of “Molla Nasreddin” satirical magazine’s publication in Tabriz in 1921, and to define and characterize its role in the development of Iranian satirical graphics. To achieve this objective, the following tasks were undertaken:

- demonstrate the role of the press in the development of satirical graphics and caricature art, identifying the influence of Azerbaijani satirical press and the unique features of national caricature traditions;
- uncover the impact of “Molla Nasreddin,” the first satirical magazine in the Muslim East, on the satirical graphics and press of neighboring nations, particularly Iranian society, and emphasize the magazine’s broad reach and influence.
- explain the challenges, religious fanaticism, obstacles, and intense pressures faced during the publication of “Molla Nasreddin” magazine in Tabriz in 1921;
- identify the thematic diversity, content, form, style, and distinct artistic techniques in the satirical drawings and cartoons published in “Molla Nasreddin”; analyze the cartoons on various topics by Seyid Ali Behzad, the magazine’s leading artist, and illustrate the forms, manifestations, and developmental stages of these works.

The object of the research is the satirical press, specifically artist Seyid Ali Behzad’s satirical paintings and cartoons, while the subject focuses on the role of “Molla Nasreddin” magazine in the development of Iranian satirical graphics.

Results

The degree of study

In the early twentieth century, Azerbaijani satire, shaped through interactions with European and Russian satirical press and graphics, significantly influenced the formation and growth of the satirical press among the peoples of the Near and Middle East, Central Asia, the Volga region, Crimea, the Caucasus, and especially Iran. Researchers from Europe, Azerbaijan, Iran, Russia, Türkiye, and beyond have provided valuable insights and commentary on this topic. In their works, scholars have recognized the influence, serious satire, and extensive reach of Azerbaijani media, particularly the international significance of “Molla Nasreddin” magazine. International significance and sphere of influence of “Molla Nasreddin” magazine.

English scientist E. Brown, German scientist V. Brands, French scientists A. Bennigsen and S. Quelqueger, Polish scientist V. Zayonchkowski, and Iranian scholars M. A. Tarbiat, A. Dehkhoda, and A. Khayampur, along with Turkish scholars F. Koprulu, H. Qadri, S. Rafioglu, A. Govcha, and A. Atesh, and many other notable scientists and specialists, have contributed valuable perspectives on “Molla Nasreddin,” known for its sharp satirical focus. Their research highlights significant ideas and insights on the Azerbaijani satirical press and literature of the 20th century. Above all, they emphasized the magazine’s profound impact on Iranian political satire, as well as on the satirical press and graphics of Central Asia, Crimea, Tatarstan, the Volga region, the Caucasus, and beyond (*Alasgarova, 2011, p. 49; Hajizadeh, 2019, p. 300*).

Prominent poets from South Azerbaijan, such as Azeroglu, Afrashta, Ali Fitrat, Mir Mehdi Etimad, Mir Mehdi Cavushi, and Ibrahim Zakir, among others, regarded “Molla Nasreddin” as a major literary institution and drew inspiration from its legacy (*Mustafayeva, 2019, p. 102*). In his work *History of Iranian Press and Literature*, English scientist E. Brown provided a bibliographic overview of newspapers and magazines published in Azerbaijan and Iran, noting that Molla Nasreddin magazine served as a significant model for the Iranian press, particularly for satirical publications. While discussing publications such as Azerbaijan, Sure-Israfil, Bahlul, Ay Molla Ami, Bugalamun, and Hasharatul-erz, among others published in Iran in either Persian or Azerbaijani, he emphasized that these outlets drew inspiration from Molla Nasreddin. Brown included 11 cartoons from Molla Nasreddin in his study, which depict the social and political life of Iran, demonstrating that the magazine responded to Iranian social and political events more boldly and directly than local publications. These cartoons illustrated the magazine’s unique ability to present these events to readers with striking clarity and honesty.

It should be noted that the book resulting from the study by publicist Muhammadali Tarbiat, a prominent intellectual of his time, was translated into Persian and published in Tehran in 1958 by Muhammadli Abbasi (*Browne, 1914, p. 482*).

In his article titled “Molla Nasreddin and the Russian Muslim Satirical Press until 1917,” French scholar A. Bennigsen equated Molla Nasreddin magazine with the satirical publications of the French Revolution. Bennigsen provided details about the magazine’s staff and examined its influence on the satirical press of Muslim communities. He highlighted key elements that elevated Molla Nasreddin to a prominent level: its integrity, uncompromising stance against superstition and fanaticism, and its defense of truth. The article also featured the well-known cartoon “Freedom in the Caucasus” (*The Journal “Molla Nasreddin”, 1906, No. 8*), which depicted

the peasants' struggle against the ruling classes (*Bennigsen, 1962, pp. 505-520; Akhundov, 1968, pp. 351-352*) (*Figure 1*).

Researcher Nazim Akhundov, in his book *Azerbaijani Satire Journals*, notes: "In recent years, several publications in England have made efforts to inform readers about Molla Nasreddin and Azerbaijani satire of the twentieth century. The article 'The Journal Molla Nasreddin and Its Influence on Political Satire in Revolutionary Persia, 1905–1911', published in London's *Central Asian Review*, offers insights into Molla Nasreddin's artistic and political directions, its satirical impact, and its historical significance." (*The Journal..., 1960, pp. 14-23; Akhundov, 1968, p. 348*) The article also drew upon the studies of Aziz Sharif and V.B. Klyashtorina.

In the first part of the article, which incorporates A. Sharif's studies, a brief overview of the magazine's history and its contributors is provided. The second part highlights the main aspects of "Molla Nasreddin" magazine's influence, along with the broader impact of the 20th-century Azerbaijani satirical press on Iranian political satire. It also characterizes the socio-political climate in Azerbaijan in the early 20th century and illustrates the core features of the ideological struggle between the democratic and bourgeois press. The article discusses the political nature of the divergence of views and the professional and ideological conflict between the literary movement "Fuyuzat" and the adherents of "Molla Nasreddin." Additionally, the article recognizes the contributions of "Molla Nasreddin" magazine's staff members.

Rahim Baggal Asgari, a renowned cartoonist and Head of the Iran Cartoonists Association, writes about the legacy of the "Molla Nasreddin" school, its influence on Iranian satirical graphics and press, and the continuation of its traditions today: "Molla Nasreddin" was not just an ordinary magazine; it was a socio-political revolution and a significant cultural event for the entire Middle East." Inspired by "Molla Nasreddin", numerous newspapers and magazines were established across various Iranian cities, including Azerbaijan, Hasharatul-erz, Anjuman, Naleyimillat, Mujahid, Shurai-Iran, Siratul mustaqim, Musavat, Istiglal, Bugalamun, Muhakimat, Ittifagi-Karigaran, and Saadat in Tabriz; Tofiq in Tehran; Faryad in Urmia; Najat in Khoy; Nasime Shomal in Rasht; and Kashkul in Isfahan, among others. In the following years, the spirit of Molla Nasreddin continued to resonate in publications such as Golagha, Keyhan Cartoon, Khorjin, Fokahin, Persian Satire, Cartoon and Satire, and Joval-Donuz. While many of these magazines are still published today, the influence and traditions of "Molla Nasreddin" are vividly present in the Tabriz Caricature Museum, Tehran Caricature House, the magazine Iran's Caricature, the journal Karikareh, and in international cartoon contests held in Iran (*Hajizadeh, 2019, p. 144*).

Certainly, the ideas mentioned above are entirely valid. In fact, these newspapers and magazines published in Iran extensively covered historical events related to the various stages of the national liberation movement of the Iranian people, expressing solidarity with revolutionary developments worldwide. Throughout their existence, these media organizations drew from the experience of Azerbaijan's democratic press, particularly the satirical magazine "Molla Nasreddin," and frequently adopted its methods of advocacy and resistance.

1921–Tabriz Period of the "Molla Nasreddin" Magazine

The Russian Revolution of 1917, along with coups, wars, complex political circumstances, social contradictions, and societal issues, were widely covered in the media. Amidst this turbulent backdrop, “Molla Nasreddin” magazine, under the editorship of Jalil Mammadguluzade, was also compelled to halt its publication in 1917. Poet and publicist Aligulu Gamgusar, one of the magazine’s editors, commented on this: “We do not intend to close “Molla Nasreddin,” nor would we ever consider it; only the current unfavorable times have led to the temporary suspension of the magazine’s publication.” (*Newspaper “Basirat”, 1915*) Despite these “unfavorable circumstances,” Mammadguluzade worked relentlessly to revive the magazine, conducting meetings and seeking funding and financial support. Eventually, he decided to move to Tabriz, Iran, in 1920, with the hope of resuming Molla Nasreddin’s publication. Notably, Mammadguluzade’s relocation to Tabriz in South Azerbaijan coincided with the first months of Soviet rule in Northern Azerbaijan. This move reflected both his own hesitations at the time and his longstanding support for the national liberation movement of Azerbaijanis in Iran. Throughout its history, “Molla Nasreddin” actively advocated for the Sattar Khan movement (the Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 1905–1911), supported the people’s movement, and backed the democratic struggles in South Azerbaijan, particularly the uprising led by Sheikh Mohammad Khiyabani. Mammadguluzade’s brother, Mirza Alakbar Mammadguluzade, who served as the magazine’s agent in Tabriz from 1913 to 1917, was a prominent member of the Sattar Khan movement and provided direct support to Sheikh Mohammad Khiyabani (*Akbundov, 1959, p. 210*).

J. Mammadguluzade’s arrival in Tabriz was met with great joy by democratic forces and the progressive members of the local population, as Mirza Jalil held significant influence in Iran, particularly in Tabriz. In her memoirs, Hamida Khanum, J. Mammadguluzade’s wife, described how hundreds of people from Tabriz visited Mirza Jalil daily and treated him with respect and reverence.

From the day he moved to Tabriz, J. Mammadguluzade began preparations to resume the publication of “Molla Nasreddin” magazine, holding meetings with various individuals regarding this endeavour. In response to the city governor and his advisers, who suggested publishing the magazine solely in Persian, Mirza Jalil replied, “I began publishing “Molla Nasreddin” in the Azerbaijani language fifteen years ago. Just as in Caucasian Azerbaijan, Iranian Azerbaijan is home only to Azerbaijanis. Here, only a few people speak Persian. I publish “Molla Nasreddin” not for them, but for the people. Even the Russian government permitted me to do this; yet you do not” (*Mammadguluzade, 1967, p. 120; Akbundov, 1959, pp. 214-215*).

The “efforts” of the city governor, Mukhbirussaltana—known for his ruthlessness, cruelty, and uncompromising stance against revolutionaries—played a significant role in the eventual closure of “Molla Nasreddin.” J. Mammadguluzade had long been aware of Mukhbirussaltana’s hypocritical approach toward the liberation movement. Mukhbirussaltana was depicted mockingly in a cartoon titled “Private (Personal)-Beginning-Azerbaijan,” published in the 24th edition of “Molla Nasreddin” in 1910, where he appears as a monkey with a rope around his neck, controlled by the “authority” of Tehran. It is likely that Mukhbirussaltana knew of this cartoon, and we would not be mistaken in suggesting that it may have contributed to the magazine’s closure.

In addition to the ruling authorities, local clergymen also opposed Mammadguluzade's efforts, leaving his appeals regarding the magazine's publication unanswered. With religious fanaticism prevailing in Iran, much of the population was influenced by clerics and superstitious mullahs. Moreover, government and official bodies viewed Mammadguluzade as a Bolshevik from Soviet Azerbaijan. "Molla Nasreddin" had been banned in Iran since 1906, and cartoons such as "Welcoming Mullah Nasreddin on the Iranian Border" (1906, No. 8), "The Two-Act 'Sina' Assembly in Iran" (1907, No. 27), and "Amara Quarter in Najaf" (1908, No. 3) led to a fatwa calling for Mammadguluzade's death (Christoph, 2011, p. 114; Slavs and Tartars, 2017, p. 117) (Figure 2).

Despite living under constant threats and facing real danger almost daily, Mammadguluzade remained undeterred. He continued to petition the ruling authorities for permission to publish the magazine. After a long delay, permission was granted, with the condition that main articles be printed in Persian. However, even after this hard-won agreement, challenges such as securing a printing house, lithography, paper, and experienced artists persisted. It is worth noting that during that period, only one government newspaper was published in Tabriz, with a circulation of just 100 copies. Printing facilities and lithography were in poor condition (Mammadguluzade, 1967, pp. 120-121; Javanshir, 2023, p. 292).

Once Molla Nasreddin's publication was approved, J. Mammadguluzade invited Azerbaijani artist Seyid Ali Behzad to collaborate with the magazine. Finally, on February 6, 1921, the first issue of Molla Nasreddin was released in Tabriz. However, immediately after its release, on February 7, Mammadguluzade received an order signed by the city governor mandating the magazine's official closure. The authorities, the city's wealthiest residents, and, of course, the clergy exerted considerable "power" to shut down Molla Nasreddin. Religious figures and clerics tried to discredit the magazine, even issuing special fatwas labeling Mammadguluzade a "kafir" (infidel) and threatening him with death. Muhammad Gasim Ordubadi, a clergyman known for his radical views, wrote: "Those who prepare such magazines and work for them are clearly infidels, and purchasing or supporting such a magazine is worse than aiding Ibn Ziyad. It is forbidden to read or listen to it." (Akbundov, 1959, pp. 219-220) Another similar fatwa declared, "They want Muslim women to walk around without hijabs like infidel women and behave as they do. How can one pay for, read, or even listen to such a magazine?" (Azerbaijan SSR, Academy of Sciences, Republican Manuscript Foundation, Inv. No. 8793).

It is worth noting that clergymen in Azerbaijan, Central Asia, and other Eastern countries had issued similar fatwas against "Molla Nasreddin" on multiple occasions. Information about these fatwas was published repeatedly in the magazine's issues from 1906 to 1917.

After the magazine's publication was halted, J. Mammadguluzade and prominent educational figures in Tabriz made significant efforts to print a second issue. Together with respected public figures Haji Ali Shabustari and Mohsun Khan Sartib, Mammadguluzade met with the city governor to request permission to resume the magazine's publication, which was eventually granted. Notably, all cartoons in this issue were created by Seyid Ali Behzad, the Azerbaijani artist.

Variety of Themes in Seyid Ali Behzad's Works

Having extensive experience collaborating with artists, Mammadguluzade provided new ideas to Behzad, working closely with him on the theme and plot of each cartoon. These caricatures exposed the widespread hunger, poverty, unemployment, and corruption in Iran, as well as the indifference and greed of “men of God”—clergymen, officials, and influential figures who exploited the public’s illiteracy.

With J. Mammadguluzade’s guidance, Seyid Ali Behzad quickly mastered the nuances of the caricature genre and achieved notable success in this field. J. Mammadguluzade’s wife, Hamida Khanum, wrote about Behzad in her memoirs: “He studied in Italy and served as a court painter for the former Shah of Iran. His name was Seyid Muhammadali, and his pen name was Behzad.” (*Javanshir*, 2023, p. 292; *Hajizade*, 2008, p. 205) However, various captions appeared beneath the cartoons in Molla Nasreddin’s Tabriz issues, including “Behzad,” “Seyid Ali Musavvirzade,” and “Musavvirzade Seyid Ali Behzadi.” All of these captions likely refer to the same artist—Seyid Ali Behzad.

Based on available sources, it can be said that Azerbaijani artist Seyid Muhammadali Behzad (Musavvirzade) lived in Tabriz, advanced his art education in Tbilisi, Moscow, Paris, and Rome, and served as a court painter for a time. In 1907, he collaborated with the satirical magazine *Azerbaijan*, and in 1921, when “Molla Nasreddin” was published in Tabriz, he worked as the magazine’s leading artist.

The illustrations created by Seyid Ali Behzad for “Molla Nasreddin” reveal his skill in achieving clarity of plot through accurately rendering local characters and crafting multi-figure compositions. Behzad’s use of hatching in his caricatures sometimes resembles the style of Josef Rotter, yet his unique style is unmistakable. The coloring in his caricatures is minimal and conventional, likely due to lithographic limitations. Nevertheless, each of Behzad’s cartoons published in the magazine stands out for its artistic quality. In short, Behzad’s collaboration with Molla Nasreddin in Tabriz is a valuable chapter in the history of Azerbaijani national art (*Najafov*, 1977, pp. 20-21).

Despite the sharp satire and painful humor in the Tabriz issues, Molla Nasreddin’s publication became a significant event in Tabriz and Iran as a whole. The main articles and feuilletons for these issues were written by J. Mammadguluzade himself, published under the pseudonyms “Dali,” “Hardamkhayal,” “Sarsaggulubey,” and others. During the period known as Molla Nasreddin’s “Tabriz Period,” a total of eight issues with 18 cartoons were published.

For the magazine’s first issue, Behzad illustrated a caricature titled “Bikarkhanei-dovlatiyi-bazari-Shafi”, based on Mammadguluzade’s feuilleton “Singles’ Quarter,” which criticized idle officials who collected state salaries without performing any work. The authorities, indifferent to the plight of thousands of unemployed beggars on the streets of Tabriz, “supported” these officials because they were always ready to defend the Shah and his subordinates. In this caricature, a clerk holding 4,000 tomans is depicted with a beggar behind him, watching in horror as he extends his hand, silently pleading for money to buy bread – a symbolic representation of the poverty-stricken people in Tabriz (*Figure 3*).

Irony and bitter humor are masterfully intertwined in Behzad’s cartoons, such as “In the Bazaar of the City of Tabriz, the Second Capital of the Country of Iran” (*The Journal...*, 1921, No. 4), “Evidence of Mayors’ Effort and Anxiety...” (*The Journal...*, 1921, No. 5), and “Keep the

Koran in a Pure and Clean Place” (“In the Streets of Tabriz”) (*The Journal...*, 1921, No. 8), which portray beggars, unemployment, and street anarchy, highlighting state officials’ indifference to these issues. Other notable cartoons include “Teachers Should Cut Their Hair and Put on the Aba” (*The Journal...*, 1921, No. 2), “I Bow to You, Animal of God” (*The Journal...*, 1921, No. 4), and “The Missionary Madrasa” (*The Journal...*, 1921, No. 6), which depict the hardships faced by unpaid teachers, the violation of their rights, and the poor conditions in madrasas. Additionally, irony and bitter laughter match together in the cartoon “I Have Come with All My Faith and Belief to Join Your Sect” (*The Journal...*, 1921, No. 3) and some others, which criticize those who frequently shift their beliefs, present themselves as intellectuals, and pledge allegiance to a new party daily. This irony and bitter laughter can be clearly felt in all Tabriz issues of the magazine (*Figure 4; Figure 5; Figure 6*).

S. A. Behzad’s graphic works such as “Girl Child is Sent to Madrasah to Learn to Write a Letter to A Strange Man,” “Bazaar Shop in Tabriz” (*The Journal...*, 1921, No. 3), “No, No, It Is Prohibited to Sit Together!”, “You, Muslim Brother, I Take People to the Doctor,” “Ill-Mannered Phaeton Driver” (*The Journal...*, 1921, No. 6), and “Naming Children” (*The Journal...*, 1921, No. 7) vividly depict scenes from the life of Tabriz. These works address the daily life of Azerbaijanis, highlighting social issues, outdated customs, ignorance, religious fanaticism, and the absurd “decrees” of mullahs and clerics, as well as the unfortunate condition of women in Eastern societies. Each piece stands out for its sharp satire and dark humor (*Figure 7; Figure 8; Figure 9*).

The artist’s highly skilled caricature “The Situation of the Old Vizier (Ministers) in Tehran” (*The Journal...*, 1921, No. 5) portrays a corrupt official focused solely on enriching himself, illustrating his greed and self-interest. In a poster-like style, filled with rebuke, advice, and moral instruction, this caricature shows a government minister being forced to “return” the money he illicitly gained in office. The figure of this rotund man, depicted as indulging in food and luxury, is symbolic of officials who abuse their positions for personal gain. At the top of the cartoon, hands symbolizing truth and justice seize the “hero” by the neck, shaking him to retrieve the wealth he has accumulated. The phrase “People’s money is not your father’s gift” could easily accompany this cartoon, aptly capturing the message and aligning with situations observed in recent times (*Figure 10*).

Mammad Safar Jafarov describes the difference between the Tabriz issues of “Molla Nasreddin” magazine and those published earlier in Tbilisi and Baku as follows: “The spirit of the Tabriz issues does not resemble that of “Molla Nasreddin” published in Tbilisi and Baku. Here, the ‘master of laughter’ barely moves his lips. Mirza Jalil, a person with a broad spirit, cannot view the life of Tabriz without feeling deeply affected. In these issues, serious condemnation, anger, impatience, and heartbreak prevail over humor and satire, as they were written as an appeal to Tabriz.” (*Akbundov*, 1959, p. 215; *Jafarov*, 1946)

Political Cartoons

In addition to satirical drawings criticizing superstition, religious fanaticism, outdated customs, and the greed of fraudulent mullahs, state officials, and the nation’s “fathers” indifferent to the people’s suffering, “Molla Nasreddin” featured caricatures that addressed international events with serious socio-political messages. Notable among these are cartoons like

“You Will Return What You Ate (Stole),” “Where Are You Going?,” and “Turkish-Greek Issues”. The cover cartoon of the magazine’s 8th issue in 1921, titled “Ottoman-Greek War,” addresses the Turkish-Greek conflict. Created by Seyid Ali Behzad, this cartoon portrays the grim reality of two neighboring countries at odds within the global political arena, like the true faces of those who welcome this turmoil. In these multi-figure compositions, Behzad skillfully captures each character’s essence through their facial features and dynamically structured compositions. The movements, gestures, and expressions are effectively highlighted through the use of local color (*Figure 11*).

Seyid Ali Behzad’s cartoon “Where Did This Bloodsucker Cling to My Leg,” published in the 7th issue of “Molla Nasreddin” magazine in 1921, stands out for its sharp satire, topical relevance, and the courage displayed by the artist (*Karimli, 2018, p. 44*). The central male figure has the word “Azerbaijan” written on his chest, symbolizing a generalized representation of Azerbaijan. His clothing and cap suggest he is from South Azerbaijan. With facial muscles strained in pain and fear, he tries to remove a leech-like bloodsucker from his leg using tweezers. The satire intensifies as the bloodsucker, symbolizing Azerbaijan’s suffering, is depicted in the garb of a mullah, sucking blood from the man’s limbs. The character’s form and facial features are rendered with fine, smooth lines, and shadows are created through delicate, dense strokes—demonstrating Behzad’s professional skill. The background, drawn with black ink, is shaded with a reddish-brown pencil, adding depth to the composition. This cartoon, with its strong ideological undertone, brings to light a socially relevant issue. Through the image of an Azerbaijani in traditional attire attempting to fend off a bloodsucker, Behzad portrays Azerbaijan as a land burdened by superstition and backwardness, symbolized by the leech clinging to his leg. Believing in Azerbaijan’s potential for growth and self-determination, the artist identifies fanatical mullahs and uneducated religious followers as the primary obstacles to the nation’s free and prosperous future, highlighting the true source of this tragedy (*Figure 12*).

In the Tabriz issues of “Molla Nasreddin” magazine, several cartoons appear to be the work of non-professional artists. Compared to the cartoons by Seyid Ali Behzad, these drawings reveal a noticeable weakness. This raises the question: “Was there a second artist contributing to the magazine in Tabriz?” According to Ali Minayi and Taghi Shahin, an artist named Seyid Arabzade may have collaborated with “Molla Nasreddin” at the time (*Najafov, 1977, p. 21*). While it is challenging to verify this claim, there is strong evidence that two different artists contributed cartoons to the magazine. Cartoons like “Siyasat Alaminde” (In the World of Politics) (*The Journal..., 1921, No. 1*), “Urmide” (In Urmid), “Sarabdan-Ardabile” (From Sharab to Ardabil) (*The Journal..., 1921, No. 2*), and “Tanzilin bin Rabbul-Alameen” (*The Journal..., 1921, No. 8*) are artistically weaker and noticeably different from Behzad’s works. Although some of these cartoons bear the name “Behzad”, anyone familiar with his style can recognize they were not created by Seyid Ali Behzad (*Figure 13*).

Despite “Molla Nasreddin” being referenced in the encyclopedic dictionary *Danishmandani-Azerbaijan* by South Azerbaijani scholar Muhammad Ali Tarbiat, Seyid Ali Behzad, the magazine’s artist, is not mentioned in the dictionary (*Nahmatova, 2012, p. 52*). Regrettably, little is known about Behzad’s later work or career. However, a closer study of Behzad’s cartoons in “Molla Nasreddin” supports the assertion that this professional artist, who

made invaluable contributions to Azerbaijani satirical press and graphics, merits further scholarly attention.

The Tabriz period of “Molla Nasreddin” magazine, known as the first satirical publication in the Muslim East, marks an important event in the cultural history of the region. Through this magazine, the prominent figures of the time were able to view political events and pressing issues in Iran and the Middle East through the perspectives of respected writers, poets, and artists such as J. Mammadguluzade, M.A. Sabir, and S.A. Behzad. During his time in Tabriz, J. Mammadguluzade not only served as a journalist but also as a public figure and influential intellectual. He frequently spoke at Democratic Party meetings, held discussions with various prominent and progressive individuals, and offered valuable advice.

While Mammadguluzade was in Tabriz, Nariman Narimanov, Chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars of Azerbaijan, repeatedly invited him to return to Soviet Azerbaijan to continue publishing “Molla Nasreddin” in Baku. Ultimately, he returned to Soviet Azerbaijan on May 21, 1921, after printing the magazine’s final, 8th issue in Tabriz. The people of Tabriz bid farewell to Mirza Jalil with great respect. On his journey back, Mammadguluzade stopped in Tiflis for a few days, reuniting with old friends. Upon his arrival in Baku, he immediately began preparations to resume the publication of “Molla Nasreddin.”

Inspired by the rich traditions of the “Molla Nasreddin” literary school, intellectuals, educators, writers, poets, and artists associated with the press in Iran and South Azerbaijan encouraged the public toward education, enlightenment, and progress. They used their talents to strengthen the people’s resolve to resist outdated customs, intellectual darkness, religious fanaticism, and ignorance. The country’s political tensions, social injustices, illiteracy, and religious fanaticism, along with the indifference of civil servants and officials to the suffering of the people, were sharply criticized in the artists’ cartoons published in the press.

Discussion

The theoretical insights from this research can contribute to the study of the history of both the global and Azerbaijani satirical press and fine arts. These findings can be integrated into specialty courses for students studying art and graphics in art-focused educational institutions and can inform the development of relevant teaching materials.

Conclusion

From the above, a general conclusion can be drawn as follows: the scientific and theoretical study of caricature, which has maintained its modernity and relevance across eras, and the accurate assessment of the influence and reputation of the Azerbaijani satirical press and graphics—enhanced by European and Russian artistic techniques—underscore the international recognition of Azerbaijani caricature, particularly in Europe, Russia, Iran, Central Asia, and other regions. This widespread appreciation demonstrates that Azerbaijani caricature possesses international qualities alongside its strong national identity.

References:

Academy of Sciences of the Azerbaijan SSR, the Republican Manuscript Fund. (n.d.). *Inventory*, 8793. Baku.

- Akhundov, N. (1959). *History of publication of "Molla Nasreddin" magazine*. Baku: Azernashr Publishing House.
- Akhundov, N. (1968). *Azerbaijani satirical magazines*. Baku: The Publishing House of the Academy of Sciences of the Azerbaijan SSR.
- Alasgarova, I. (2011). The stages of development of Azerbaijani caricature. *Culture*, 2(50), 64. Baku.
- Bennigsen, A. (1962). "Molla Nasreddin" et la presse satirique musulmane de Russie avant 1917. *Cahiers du Monde Russe et Soviétique*, 3(3), 598. (In Fra.)
- Browne, E. (1914). *The press and poetry of modern Persia*. Cambridge.
- Christoph, K. (2011). *Slavs and Tatars presents "Molla Nasreddin": the magazine that would've, could've, should've*. Belgium.
- Hajizade, B. (2008). *Development of caricature in Azerbaijan*. Baku: Seda Publishing House.
- Hajizade, B. (2019). *The world caricature*. Baku: Azeri-design Publishing House.
- Jafarov, M. C. (1946, April 23). "Molla Nasreddin" in Tabriz. "Edebiyyat" Newspaper (# 11). Baku.
- Javanshir, H. (2023). *My memoirs*. Baku: Ganun Publishing House.
- Karimli, T. (2018). *Molla Nasreddin* (10 vols; vol. VI). Baku: Sharq-Garb Publishing House.
- Mammadguluzade, H. (1967). *My memoirs about Mirza Jalil*. Baku: Azerbaijan State Publishing House.
- Mustafayeva, K. (2019). Organization, development and sphere of influence of the Azerbaijani caricature art. *Nakbchivan: Academic Collection of Findings*, 3(33). Tusi Publishing House.
- Nahmatova, K. (2012). *Muhammadali Tarbiat. The scholars of Azerbaijan*. Baku: Elm ve Tehsil Publishing House.
- Najafov, M. (1977). *Artist and time*. Baku: Ganjlik Publishing House.
- Newspaper "Basirat", No. 56. (1915, August 8). Baku.
- Slavs and Tartars. (2017). *Molla Nasreddin: Polemics, caricatures, satire*. London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd.
- The Journal "Molla Nasreddin". Baku.
- The journal "Molla Nasreddin" and Its Influence on Political Satire in Revolutionary Persia, 1905–1911. (1960). *Central Asian Review*, 8(1), 24. London.

Appendix



Figure 1. "Freedom in the Caucasus" ("Molla Nasreddin", 1906, No. 7)



Figure 2. "Amara Quarter in Najaf" ("Molla Nasreddin", 1908, No. 3)



Figure 3. "Bikarkhanei-dovlatiyyi-bazari-Shafi" ("Molla Nasreddin", 1921, No. 1)



Figure 4. "Evidence of Mayors' Effort and Anxiety..." ("Molla Nasreddin", 1921, No. 5)

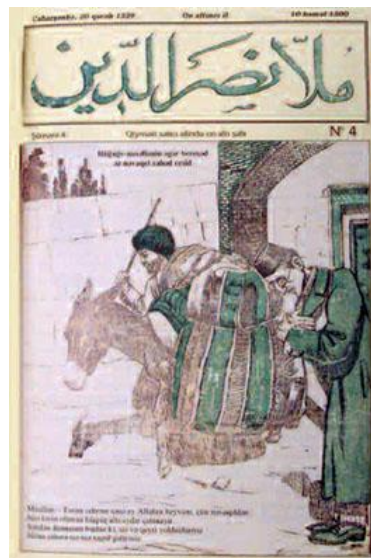


Figure 5. "I Bow to You, Animal of God" ("Molla Nasreddin", 1921, No. 4)

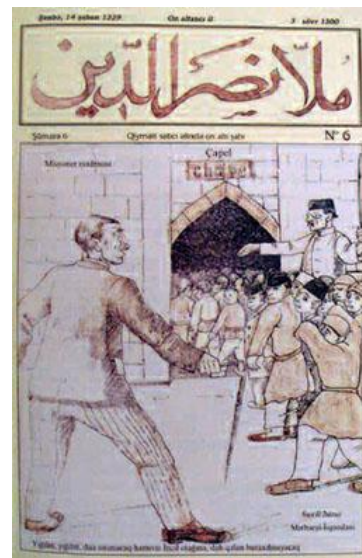


Figure 6. "The Missionary Madrasa" ("Molla Nasreddin", 1921, No. 6)



Figure 7. "No, No, It Is Prohibited to Sit Together!" ("Molla Nasreddin", 1921, No. 7)

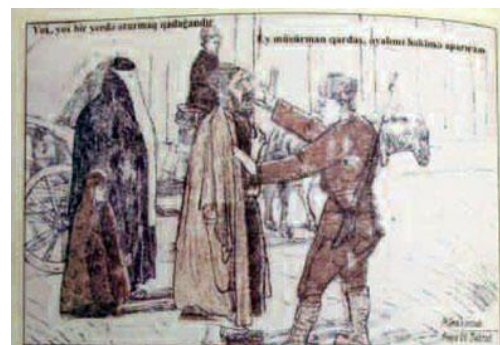


Figure 8. "Naming Children" ("Molla Nasreddin", 1921, No. 7)



Figure 9. "Ill-Mannered Phaeton Driver"
("Molla Nasreddin", 1921, No. 6)



Figure 10. "The Situation of the Old
Vizier (Ministers) in Tehran" ("Molla
Nasreddin", 1921, No. 5)



Figure 11. "Ottoman-Greek War"
("Molla Nasreddin", 1921, No. 8)



Figure 12. "Where Did This
Bloodsucker Cling to My Leg"
("Molla Nasreddin", 1921, No. 7)



Figure 13. "Sarabdan-Ardabile"
(From Sharab to Ardabil) ("Molla
Nasreddin", 1921, No. 2)